

Library of Congress Portals to the World:

Selected Internet Resources for Latin America, the Caribbean, and Iberia

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Introduction

The Library of Congress Area Studies reading rooms serve as gateways to its international collections. In this sense, Portals to the World is conceived as an online project that supports the area studies reading rooms' goal by providing access to selected high-quality electronic resources.

Portals to the World is an online guide to Internet resources dealing with countries and regions of the world. It offers links to selective and authoritative electronic resources, arranged by country or geographic regions with the links for each sorted in a wide range of broad categories. This project is designed by area specialists, reference librarians, and webmasters in the Area Studies Directorate of the Library of Congress. The project was officially made available to the public in November 2001 with the launch of about 30 country pages. As of May 2003, 148 country portals have been included. Forty of them have been created by the Hispanic Division. In designing these country portals, Area Studies staff members have attempted to include topics of interest to scholars, researchers, librarians, and the general public.

Access

Access to Portals to the World is available through various LC web pages. One of them is through the LC home page by clicking on *Global Gateway* which directs you to the link to *Portals to the World*. This page contains an alphabetical listing of links to country portals to the nations of the world. Another way is through the *Hispanic Reading Room Home Page* that provides links to the portal page for *Iberia, the Caribbean and Latin America*.

Concept of portal and pathfinder

As a result of the enormous amount of information available on the Internet, and the lack of time to search for information the need arose to create internet-based services to help users locate Internet high-quality resources. These services have been defined using different terminology depending on various cultural, geographical, and professional contexts. For our project, we adopted the term *Portal* in one of its early definitions, conceived as a directory of links to web resources. Nowadays, portals include other features such as search engines, news, services, and customization technology. We focus on what is considered the core of a portal, a selection of organized links to electronic resources.

How do we structure Portals to the World?

Portals to the World is envisioned as a 4-level pyramid-like structure (see Figure 1), organized by country portals and subject pathfinders. The first level for the area studies divisions consists mainly of a general menu of the countries covered by that particular division. Each country has its own portal page (second level) divided into various pathfinders representing subject categories (third level.) We follow the concept of pathfinder accepted by OCLC Connexion, the system we use to create pathfinders, that defines them as “electronic subject bibliographies.”² Finally, a pathfinder mainly consists of an annotated list of electronic resources (fourth level).

Let us illustrate this structure by way of exploring the country portal page for Mexico.

The first level of the Portals for the Hispanic Division features Latin American & Caribbean countries, Spain, Portugal and resources in Spanish in the United States. This page also links to resources of special interest such as a section devoted to *Selected Web Resources on Terrorism*. In order to allow for public input, a *Suggest a link* feature is included in this page as well as a link to *QuestionPoint*, LC’s digital reference service.

By clicking on the link for Mexico, we are connected to the portal page devoted to this country. All the Luso-Hispanic country portals contain a clickable map of the nation linking to the World Fact Book entry for that particular country and a list of up to twenty-one standard subject categories such as general resources, business, commerce, economy and culture.

Each subject category links to a pathfinder. For example, the pathfinder for Mexican culture includes the following elements (see Figure 2):

- An introduction that presents the scope of the pathfinder along with a brief explanation of its contents. Depending on the subject of the pathfinder, the introduction may also include the following elements:

- Links to LC materials and services such as the online catalog and the Hispanic Reading Room, allowing users to conduct their own research. Therefore, the introduction functions as a means to promote the use of resources available at the Library of Congress.

- US government sites such as the National Archives and the National Library of Medicine.

- Major electronic resources about Latin America (HLAS, HAPI, and LANIC)

- Specialized resources such as official web sites created by institutions and organizations.

- Subject-specific sections which allow users to easily navigate through the pathfinder. This is especially useful when a pathfinder contains a considerable amount of topics.

- A list of electronic resources along with a descriptive annotation.

The countries covered by the Hispanic Division are rich in culture and this is reflected on the Internet with a large presence of web sites focused on this topic. In this way, we produce sub-pathfinders to facilitate the navigation due to the quantity and complexity of information available for a particular subject. For example, under Mexico, we have divided the pathfinder *culture* into several *sub-pathfinders*.

This structure accommodates growth in the future (scalability). The pathfinder for Mexican culture includes sub-pathfinders to cinema, folk culture, museums, music, performing arts, and visual arts. The descriptive annotations that accompany every resource help users assess its content, nature, and language enabling them to decide if it is worth investigating further. Both the introductions and the annotations are the greatest value that LC can add to Portals to the World.

Process of Selecting and Cataloging Electronic Resources

Now that the basics of the Portals to the World project, its structure and contents have been discussed, it is useful to explain the process of selecting and cataloging electronic resources for the portals.

First, reference librarians identify, select and annotate the electronic resources. They are also responsible for creating pathfinders and preliminary cataloging records for these resources. Secondly, the web master in the Hispanic Division examines the overall editing, maintains the links included in the portal pages, compiles statistics, and trains the reference librarians. The web master is also in charge of deciding which resources merit full cataloging. This information is sent to the cataloger through the traffic manager known as Electronic Resources Online System (EROS). This system tracks the distribution of electronic resources at the Library of Congress. Once the cataloging is completed, the cataloger notifies the web master that the bibliographic record is available in the online catalog.

Identifying and selecting electronic resources

The design of the Portals merits a closer examination of its various phases. To identify electronic materials, reference librarians search for information in several sources:

- The OCLC Connexion resource catalog and pathfinders created for the portals.
- General and subject-specific electronic reference resources.
- Recommendations from subject experts, librarians, listservs, and the “suggest a link” feature.

The same high standards that the Library uses in selecting print materials are used with respect to the selection of electronic resources. The LC Portals Planning Committee established a set of guidelines that recommend the use of Library of Congress Collection Policy Statements and the selection criteria for internet resources determined by the *BeOnline Plus* project.³ *BeOnline Plus* provides a list of questions designed to help selectors focus on issues related to accessibility, authority, content, and user interface.

Cataloging and organizing electronic resources

In order to catalog and organize the selected electronic resources, reference librarians create cataloging records and pathfinders. These operations are performed by using a combination of the HTML editor Dreamweaver and OCLC Connexion.⁴

Dreamweaver is used to create the web page that includes the countries covered by the Division as well as the pages for each individual country. These are stable HTML files that can be retrieved by search engines. On the other hand, the cataloging records and

pathfinders representing the subject categories within each country portal page are created using Connexion.

Connexion is an OCLC-sponsored metadata creation service which functions as a cooperative union catalog of records. With respect to our project, Connexion serves as a system for supporting the portals. By no means is it a portal, a subject gateway or any other kind of Internet service that provides links to high-quality resources. Rather, it is a tool to create the metadata for cataloging records and pathfinders that make up the Portal. Each participating library is responsible for setting its own criteria for records to add to the Connexion database.⁵

The LC Portals Planning Committee considers that using Connexion provides the following advantages:

- Reference librarians can create pathfinders without needing to learn HTML.
- The maintenance of the URLs for each resource is shared among all the Connexion participants, reducing workload. OCLC software scans the Connexion catalog to identify broken (not found) or redirected URLs (temporarily or permanently moved) and notifies libraries that have created or modified records within Connexion. As soon as one institution corrects a URL, then links on pathfinder pages are also automatically corrected.
- Some web sites that appear in a Connexion pathfinder are, or eventually will be cataloged and become part of the LC online catalog, thus assisting LC's attempts to develop some sort of bibliographic control over internet material.

Cataloging records are created using the resource catalog, which is the main bibliographic database in Connexion. The system allows searching, editing, and sharing the maintenance of the records. When a new record is created, the reference librarian inserts the URL of the web site to be cataloged in the system. The software captures⁶ metadata from the web site and creates a preliminary cataloging record⁷ describing that resource. The MARC record is then edited, ensuring that the title and the URL correspond to the electronic resource. A descriptive annotation in the 520 field is included. The record can now be displayed and added to the pathfinder.

How do we create pathfinders in Connexion?

Pathfinders are constructed using templates known as constant data.⁸ For each country portal, a template is designed to create the pathfinders for that particular country. At this stage, the reference librarian includes an introduction for the pathfinder (in the description field), organizes it into sections (headers), and finally adds *sub-pathfinders* as well as cataloging records (links). End-users of Portals to the World only see the link and description for each record listed in the pathfinder, not the whole MARC record.⁹

Access to records created for the Portals through the Library of Congress Online Catalog

After the reference librarian organizes the resource records in the various pathfinders, the web master selects some of the most valuable resources which are forwarded to the cataloger for full cataloging. Finally, they are exported to Voyager, the Library of Congress catalog system. These records will be accessible through the LC online catalog.

Currently, all the country portal pages and most of the pathfinders representing the various subject categories have been fully cataloged. Nevertheless, only a small portion of the resource records are now accessible through the online catalog. Fortunately, an increase in the number of resources cataloged is expected due to the fact that electronic resources at LC are now given high cataloging priority. Making these resources available through the LC catalog is a good way of promoting Portals to the World. This may be one of the best ways for patrons to find information included in the Portals. If users are not aware of its existence, they may come across country portals, subject pathfinders, and individual resource records while performing a search in the catalog.

Portals to the World as a reference tool

One of the goals of the area studies reading rooms at the Library of Congress is to offer reference assistance on requests related to the nations of the world for which they are responsible. In this context, reference librarians use Portals to the World as a reference tool to find information on a wide variety of topics that make up the LC international collections.

Furthermore, we direct users to the Portals so that they can seek information for their research interests. The LC Ask a Librarian digital reference service, *QuestionPoint*, suggests a list of reference resources that users may want to consult before sending a question. Portals to the World is one of these reference resources provided to find responses to patrons' questions. Should the user not find the information needed, there is always the possibility of getting answers through our Ask a Librarian digital reference service.

Conclusion

To sum up, our ultimate goal is to offer a valuable research tool including high-quality controlled electronic resources that can help potential users in their various information needs.

Figure 1

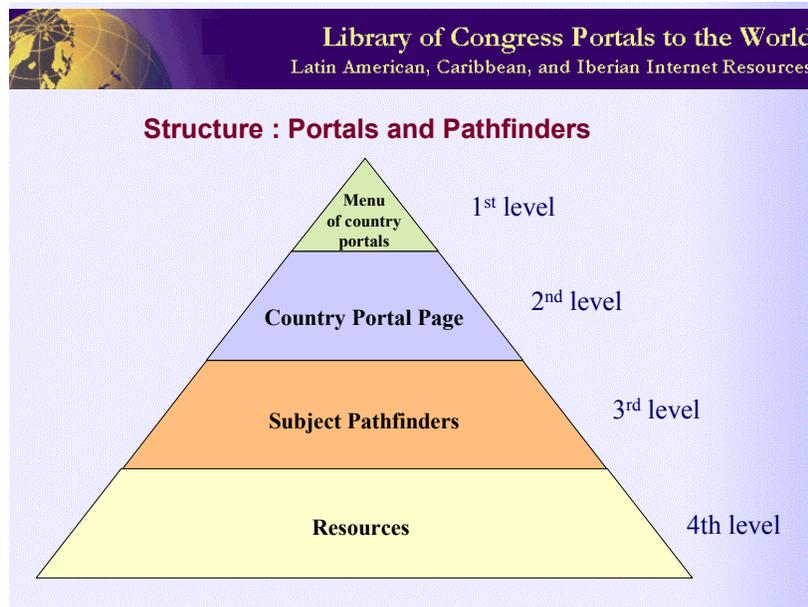


Figure 2

Pathfinder

PORTALS TO THE WORLD
RESOURCES SELECTED BY LIBRARY OF CONGRESS SUBJECT EXPERTS

Introduction → **Culture: Mexico**

This pathfinder includes information about electronic resources on Mexican culture. It is divided into the following sections: [General Reference](#) | [Organizations & Institutions](#) | [Cinema](#) | [Folk Culture](#) | [Museums](#) | [Music](#) | [Performing Arts](#) | [Visual Arts](#)

For information about cultural resources on Mexico at the Library of Congress, consult its [online catalog \(http://catalog.loc.gov\)](http://catalog.loc.gov).

For additional materials at the Library of Congress, consult the [Hispanic Reading Room](#), [Performing Arts Reading Room](#), [Motion Picture & Television Reading Room](#), and [American Folklife Center](#).

The most important source for bibliography of books and articles concerning Mexico is the annual [Handbook of Latin American Studies \(http://lcweb2.loc.gov/hlas/\)](#) produced by over 130 contributing editors under the editorship of the Hispanic Division of the Library of Congress. Additional coverage of journal articles can be found through a subscription to the [Hispanic American Periodical Index \(http://hapi.gesis.ucla.edu/\)](#). Both the Handbook and HAPI are available in selected libraries in book form.

One of the major aggregators for links to a wide variety of subjects relating to regional resources for Latin America is the University of Texas' [LANIC \(http://laric.utexas.edu/la/mexico/\)](http://laric.utexas.edu/la/mexico/).

Section → **General Reference**

Resource → [ART \(MEXICO DESCONOCIDO\)](http://www.mexico desconoico.com.mx/english/cultura_y_sociedad/arte/) (http://www.mexico desconoico.com.mx/english/cultura_y_sociedad/arte/)
Features useful articles on various topics related to Mexican culture: painting, sculpture, architecture, music, literature, photography, lithography, cinema, and theater. Information is illustrated with selected images. This Web page is part of the Mexico Desconocido Web site. In English.

DISCLAIMER

NOTES

¹ Opinions stated in this article are those of the authors and not of the Library of Congress.

² “OCLC Connexion Pathfinders.”

<<http://www.oclc.org/connexion/features/pathfinders/>> (May 2003)

³ BeOnline Plus is an LC project that aims to identify quality Internet resources of reference value to researchers in all disciplines, and explore means of access and bibliographic control for these resources. In order to implement this project, selection criteria were developed. These criteria have been used in other LC projects where electronic resources are selected to create various reference products such as Portals to the World.

⁴ The project began using CORC (Cooperative Online Resource Catalog). In July 2002, all features of this service were integrated into CONNEXION, the new integrated cataloging service provided by OCLC.

⁵ Thomas Hickey, “CORC: a System for Gateway Creation.” *Online Information Review* 24:1 (2000), 50.

⁶ Connexion uses Kilroy, which takes care of both the initial metadata generation and subsequent checking of URLs, alerting participants of potential link problems.

⁷ Defined in Connexion as a “resource record.”

⁸ OCLC Connexion defines constant data as “a set of pathfinder elements that contains data your library uses for creating or modifying pathfinders.” Constant Data records are stored in a pathfinder constant data database shared by users at your library. Use

Pathfinder Constant Data. Document available at:

http://www2.oclc.org/connexion/documentation/pf_use_constant_data.shtm

Last updated: February 14, 2003

⁹ The Hispanic Division has created more than five hundred pathfinders.

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