

The Web History Center, California

webhistory.org

The Computer History Museum

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New Web History Center Aims to Save Online Heritage

Web's Past in Danger, Important to its Future

MOUNTAIN VIEW, CALIFORNIA – Suppose the records of Gutenberg's historic printing press and the early books he printed were disappearing from sheer neglect. This is what is happening to many of the discoveries and historical records of the World Wide Web, say Marc Weber and William B. Pickett, co-founders of the Web History Center (<http://webhistory.org>). They warn that the Web's disappearing legacy holds valuable untapped innovations, as well as the records of one of the great social and cultural transformations of our time.

Thanks to a recent \$100,000 gift from e-commerce pioneer CommerceNet and support from others the Web History Center just opened an office at the Computer History Museum in California's Silicon Valley, joining its office at Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology in Indiana and representatives in Europe.

Besides these institutions founding members already include Stanford University Libraries, the Internet Archive, the Charles Babbage Institute, and eight others. The Center's first joint effort with the Computer History Museum will focus on the history of e-Commerce.

By using the Web History Center as a hub to bring together archives, museums, Web pioneers, Web companies, and interested others, Pickett and Weber hope to save the Web's collective memory for everybody from students to historians to future innovators.

CommerceNet founder Marty Tenenbaum says, "If we at the heart of Silicon Valley and the commercial Web don't step in to preserve what's been invented up to now, who will?"

The Center's strategy is to collect at-risk oral histories, software, images and documents on varying topics – like the history of e-commerce or the Web's impact on various communities, from nations and ethnic groups to hobbyists – to be preserved as part of a wiki-like multimedia library. This will draw on the collections of all Web History Center members, and make the contents accessible to all, from children doing book reports to documentary filmmakers.

Says Computer History Museum Executive Director and CEO John Toole, "The cycle of creation and loss is faster for Web history than for most everything we've ever seen, and historians are exploring what to save, and how to interpret it. The Museum is dedicated to collaborating with others in a focused way, and the Web History Center is a forum to do so with those who have been engaged in these issues for many years."

Saving the Foundation of Web Science

Many people are surprised to find that the Web is old enough to have a history, much less one with

roots that go back 70 years. This past holds a rich rich backlog of "forgotten" innovations such as micropayments, intelligent links, and combined browser/editors-- many with lessons for today.

“Science and engineering move forward by drawing on the work done before, preserved in published papers and physical objects,” said *Science* magazine editor-in-chief and former Stanford president Donald Kennedy, who is an advisor to the new Center. “But the Web changes so fast and so casually that many basic materials are never even saved.”

Until now, no one has made a broad effort to preserve the core records of this modern revolution, which many agree could rival the rise of the printing press in its eventual impact. Much has already been lost, including only copies of trailblazing programs and historic sites. While the Internet Archive has saved an inestimably important set of Web pages since 1995, the most basic historical records – from correspondence between pioneers, to photos, to historic machines-- are still being thrown out every day. This is what the Web History Center hopes to change.

Such concerns become even more pressing as online communications matures. The Web’s main inventor Sir Tim Berners-Lee recently announced the Web Science Research Initiative as a major step toward establishing a formal field of study for the its various impacts; social, technical, economic, and more. Preserving its past and ongoing history will be a crucial foundation for both the inventors and the researchers of the future.

Web History Center Brings Together “Dream Team”

The Web History Center brings together key people who have helped define and encourage the emerging field of Web history over the past 12 years. Many are Web pioneers in their own right, including Robert Cailliau and Jean-François Groff, who helped Sir Tim Berners-Lee create the Web itself. Others are leaders in the history of technology field, like Henry Lowood of Stanford Libraries and John Toole of the Computer History Museum.

Co-founder Marc Weber is a technology writer who pioneered Web history as a topic starting in 1995, gathering oral histories from over 80 key early sources and co-chairing the first Web history conference track in 1997 with Web pioneer Kevin Hughes. William B. Pickett is a senior historian and author who has taught courses on the history of technology and of the Web and co-chaired a conference on the latter in 2004. Pickett and Weber joined forces in 2005 and launched the seed phase of the Web History Center in March of this year.

About the Web History Center

The Web History Center is a non-profit corporation with offices at the Computer History Museum in Mountain View, California and at Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology in Terre Haute, Indiana. In addition it has three European representatives. Formed in March of 2006, its charters are to collect at-risk historical material including oral histories, to serve as a facilitating organization for Web history as a field, and to encourage public and educational access to the Web’s history. Founding institutional members include Stanford University Libraries, the Internet Archive, the Computer History Museum, the Center for History and New Media, the Charles Babbage institute, the International World Wide Web Conference Committee, the University of Maryland Business Plan and Dot-Com archives, and the Digibarn. Founding sponsors are CommerceNet, Dennis Paustenbach of ChemRisk, Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology, Kirkland & Ellis LLP, and Christian Taylor. The Web History Center’s motto is: “Know the Past. Invent the Future”.