

Dan Cohen's Digital Humanities Blog » Blog Archive » Using AJAX Wisely

Since its name was coined on February 18, 2005^[1], AJAX (for Asynchronous JavaScript and XML) has been a much-discussed new web technology. For those not involved in web production, essentially AJAX is a method for dynamically changing parts of a web page without reloading the entire thing; like other dynamic technologies such as Flash, it makes the web browser seem more like a desktop application than a passive window for reading documents. Unlike Flash, however, AJAX applications have generally focused less on interactive graphics (and the often cartoony elements that are now associated with Flash) and more on advanced presentation of text and data, making it attractive to those in academia, libraries, and museums. It's easy to imagine, for instance, an AJAX-based online library catalog that would allow for an easy refinement of a book search (reordering or adding new possibilities) without a new query submission for each iteration. Despite such promise, or perhaps because of the natural lag between commercial and noncommercial implementations of web technologies, AJAX has not been widely used in academia. That's fine. Unlike the dot-coms, we should first be asking: What are appropriate uses for AJAX?

As with all technologies, it's important that AJAX be used in a way that advances the pedagogical, archival, or analytical goals of a project, and with a recognition of its advantages and disadvantages. Such sober assessment is often difficult, however, in the face of hype. Let me put one prick in the AJAX bubble, though, which can help us orient the technology properly: **AJAX often scrubs away useful URLs**—the critical web addresses students, teachers, and scholars rely on to find and cite web pages and digital objects. For some, the ability to reference documents accurately over time is less of a concern compared to functionality and fancy design—but the lack of URLs for specific “documents” (in the broad sense of the word) on some AJAX sites make

it troubling for academic use. Brewster Kahle, the founder of the Internet Archive, surmised that his archive may hold the blog of a future president; if she's using some of the latest AJAX-based websites, we historians will have a very hard time finding her early thoughts because they won't have a fixed (and indexable) address.

If not implemented carefully, AJAX (like Flash) could end up like the lamentable 1990s web technology "frames," which could, for instance, hide the exact address of a scanned medieval folio in a window distinct from the site's navigation, as in the [Koninklijke Bibliotheek's Medieval Illuminated Manuscripts site](#)^[2]—watch how the URL at the top of your browser never changes as you click on different folios, frustrating anyone who wants to reference a specific page. Accurate citations are a core requirement for academic work. We need to be able to reference URLs that aren't simply a constantly changing, fluid environment.

At the [Center for History and New Media](#)^[3], our fantastic web developers [Jim Safley](#)^[4] and [Nate Agrin](#)^[5] have implemented AJAX in the right way, I believe, for our [Hurricane Digital Memory Bank](#)^[6]. In prior projects that gathered recollections and digital objects like photographs for future researchers, such as the [September 11 Digital Archive](#)^[7], we worried about making the contribution form too long. We wanted as many people as possible to contribute, but we also knew that itchy web surfers are often put off by multi-page forms to fill out.

Jim and Nate solved this tension brilliantly by making [the contribution form](#)^[8] for the Hurricane Digital Memory Bank dynamic using AJAX. The form is relatively short but certain sections can change or expand to accept different kinds of objects, text, or geographical information depending on the interactions of the user with the form and accompanying map. It is simultaneously rich and unimposing. When you click on a link that says "Provide More Information" a new section of the form extends beyond the original.

Please consider providing more information about yourself. Doing so will help future historians understand the events of the summer of 2005 better.

...materials understand the stories of the summer of 2005 better?

[Provide More Information](#) OR



4. Provide more information about yourself

In what year were you born?
 (optional)

What is your gender?
 (optional)

What is your race?
 (optional)

If other, please specify:
 (optional)

What is your occupation?
 (optional)

What city & state or zipcode were you in *during* the hurricane?
A zipcode is sufficient, but a complete address or cross street (with city and state) is preferable.
 (optional)

What city & state or zipcode were you in *after* the hurricane?
A zipcode is sufficient, but a complete address or cross street (with city and state) is preferable.
 (optional)

Once a contribution has been accepted, however, it's assigned a useful, permanent web address that can be referenced easily. Each digital object in the archive, from video to audio to text, has its own unique identifier, which is made explicit at the bottom of the window for that object (e.g., "Cite as: Object #139, Hurricane Digital Memory Bank: Preserving the Stories of Katrina, Rita, and Wilma, 17 November 2005, <<http://www.hurricanearchive.org/details.php?id=139>^[9]>").

Image Details

Image contributed by: Lisa-Marie Ricca
Contributed on: 17 November 2005

Image:




Image Type: image/jpeg

Image Caption:
Garden District homes were set ablaze.

 [Download original image file \(5.56 KB\)](#)

Cite as:
Object #139, *Hurricane Digital Memory Bank: Preserving the Stories of Katrina, Rita, and Wilma*, 17 November 2005, <<http://www.hurricanearchive.org/details.php?id=139>>

AJAX will likely have a place in academic digital projects—just a more narrow place than out on the wild web.

This entry was posted on Tuesday, May 2nd, 2006 at 11:49 am and is filed under [Programming^{\[10\]}](#), [Web Design^{\[11\]}](#). You can follow any responses to this entry through the [RSS 2.0^{\[12\]}](#) feed. You can [leave a response^{\[13\]}](#), or [trackback^{\[14\]}](#) from your own site.

References

1. [^ its name was coined on February 18, 2005 \(www.adaptivepath.com\)](#)
2. [^ Koninklijke Bibliotheek's Medieval Illuminated Manuscripts site \(www.kb.nl\)](#)
3. [^ Center for History and New Media \(chnm.gmu.edu\)](#)
4. [^ Jim Safley \(www.jimsafley.com\)](#)
5. [^ Nate Agrin \(www.exposed.com\)](#)
6. [^ Hurricane Digital Memory Bank \(hurricanearchive.org\)](#)
7. [^ September 11 Digital Archive \(911digitalarchive.org\)](#)
8. [^ the contribution form \(www.hurricanearchive.org\)](#)
9. [^ http://www.hurricanearchive.org/details.php?id=139 \(www.hurricanearchive.org\)](#)

10. [^ View all posts in Programming \(www.dancohen.org\)](#)
11. [^ View all posts in Web Design \(www.dancohen.org\)](#)
12. [^ RSS 2.0 \(www.dancohen.org\)](#)
13. [^ leave a response \(www.dancohen.org\)](#)
14. [^ trackback \(www.dancohen.org\)](#)

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<http://www.dancohen.org/2006/05/02/using-ajax-wisely/>

READABILITY — An Arc90 Laboratory Experiment

<http://lab.arc90.com/experiments/readability>