Using the Internet for Reference:
Two Points of View

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"Once reference librarians get mobilized,
they are an irresistible force and cannot be stopped"
– Margaret Mitchell

Using the Internet for reference is a daily part of our jobs, a fascinating, complex, riveting part of our jobs. When we first began to use the Internet very regularly, it would have greatly assisted us to have practical tips. The objective of this article is to organize practical information on using the Internet for reference, for beginning to moderate users of the Internet, regardless of what type of library they work in. What we share with you is a combination of experience and research from the perspective of two librarians. Maxwell is the reference librarian at the Bloomington Indiana Cooperative Library Services Authority (INCOLSA) office and handles reference questions of a diverse nature from regional libraries. Morrison is a government publications librarian at Indiana University Bloomington, and handles reference questions particularly on the U.S. Federal Government and on statistics. When we refer to the Internet in this article, we are referring to the World Wide Web, although we recognize that the Internet is more broadly interpreted than just the Web.

The Internet has permanently expanded your library's budget and horizons. Many libraries find they no longer need to purchase print reference tools, particularly when they only need access to the latest edition. The most important thing to remember when using a reference resource on the Internet is that you must evaluate it based on the criteria of good reference sources.

Evaluating Internet Sites

Using the Internet for reference allows you to expand on the skills you already possess. When you use print reference sources in your reference collection, the decision has already been made that the source is a valuable and useful resource. Daily Internet reference requires active evaluation of the Internet site you choose to use until you are confident of the site, and it is an important, required element of providing Internet reference. The same criteria that is used to evaluate print reference tools, even CD-ROM-based reference tools, can also be used to evaluate the appropriateness of Internet sites for reference use: authority, viewpoint and objectivity, currency, ease of use, indexing and searchability, and organization. Here is a breakdown of how you can evaluate Internet sites to enable you to select the best sites for your library's reference.

Authority

Who wrote the site? Who sponsors it? What do they know about the subject? Anyone who can design and mount a Web page can have a presence on the World Wide Web. In this way, the Internet is like a vanity press—anyone who really wants to be published can be published. As Supreme Court Justice John Paul Stevens said in the decision on *Reno v. ACLU*, the Communications Decency Act case, "Any person or organization with a computer connected to the Internet can "publish" information. Publishers include government agencies, educational institutions, commercial entities, advocacy groups, and individuals."[1]

Viewpoint / Objectivity

Who is the Internet site likely to please or offend? Many sites are objective, but librarians should be aware that others have less balanced points of view. Fan clubs, people who have axes to grind, and people who really don't know what they're talking about can all legitimately post information on the World Wide Web. We can't necessarily assume that everything they post is accurate.

Currency

How up-to-date is the site? A good Web site will indicate when it was updated. Just because the Internet is a relatively new medium for reference work does not mean that everything on it is up-to-date or even the latest version available. For example, *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations* is on the Internet, but it's the 1901 version, thus not useful if you want a quotation from the past century.[2]

Ease of Use

Considering the comfort level that comes with the relatively more familiar print medium, ease of use can be a major factor. This involves not only the abilities of the user and the accessibility of the computer, but also how well-designed the Internet site is. What would this site look like if it was printed out?

Indexing / Searchability

Is the Web site indexed? Does it provide a search tool to help you search within it? Is it indexed in such a way that a search engine will help get you to an appropriate place within the site?

Organization

Is the information within the Internet site arranged in a way that is logical and that makes the needed reference information easy to find? Is there a table of contents? Does that table of contents refer you quickly to a place within the Web site with the information you need?

An area of practical concern when using the Internet for reference is defining characteristics of the medium that is the Internet and how that affects the librarian and the patron. Although materials can be updated incredibly fast, a reference librarian will still need to consider whether or not it is even appropriate to use the Internet on a question by question basis. In some cases, using a print source—a book—will simply be better and faster in answering the patron's needs. The reference librarian will also need to consider whether they and the patron they are helping, are both comfortable using the Internet. It may not be appropriate to use it if either has a phobia about using it or if either has time constraints. Are both parties comfortable using a mouse? Can they successfully navigate an Internet site using a Web browser like Netscape or Microsoft Internet Explorer? A quick review of the following points for the beginner or moderate user of the Internet will assist in making the decision to use the Internet.

Is Using the Internet Appropriate for Your Question? A Checklist
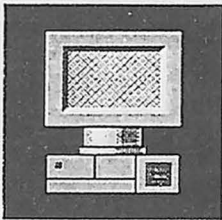
- Are you and the patron comfortable with using the Internet to answer this particular questions? Are there physical restrictions?
- Would a book be faster or better?
- Do either of you have a phobia about using the Internet?
- Do you both have the time?
- Once you find the patron a site, is there a place where they can sit awhile to browse it, especially if they need detailed information you don't have time to get for them.
- Can they use a Web browser? Are they comfortable using a mouse? Navigating the site? How much computer training do you need to give?
- Will the patron need a printout of the results? Can you provide this, or do you have a specific policy? Is there a fee?
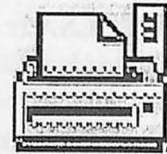
Serving patrons with Internet information involves more than finding the information on the Internet. Once information has been located on the Internet, is there a place where the patron can work comfortably to browse it? Can a patron make a printout of the results, and do you have a good

printer that can make copies in a reasonable amount of time? Do you want patrons to be able to do so? Do you let them print for free or do you charge? Libraries are formulating policies and guidelines to answer these questions because they are finding a high demand for Internet information once they begin to provide it.

Professional Development For
Reference Librarians Using the Internet

Continuing professional development of Internet skills is invaluable to librarians. Because the Internet represents the future of information in our society, librarians and all library staff need to learn as much about this valuable resource as they can. It is not necessary to become an expert in using it immediately because you constantly build on your skills, but we predict that the Internet will be available in all libraries in Indiana, no matter how small. Librarians would do well to find some time to practice using it.

There are a variety of ways you can improve your Internet skills: you can take classes through e-mail or through the Internet itself. You can attend librarian conferences, or continuing education classes in an educational setting. Many people can improve their skills with a few classes and then use the Internet at work as much as possible to become familiar with their Web browser. Constant use and experience, as well as asking your colleagues questions, will satisfactorily upgrade your skills. If you are isolated in your library, don't hesitate to sign onto a library listserv and ask your questions. INCOLSA is a great resource for upgrading skills and their calendar of classes is now on the Internet.[3]

You must be comfortable to a certain extent with the Internet to answer questions, but you do not need to know every tool available on your browser, or even most functions. Librarians have experienced receiving tips from patrons. That's no problem. After all, librarians know the resources, and we understand the organization of knowledge. Patrons will often have the technical knowledge of how the Internet works, but not how to find the information they need. As the Internet is taught to a greater extent in public schools, our patrons are learning computer skills at a younger and younger age. When librarians combine technological skill with reference knowledge when using the Internet, we are learning a new and very powerful tool to put that knowledge to work to serve our patrons and move reference librarianship into the 21st century.

Practical Skills For Using the Internet For Reference

Learn the components on the main screen of whatever Web browser(s) the library uses. Learn how to scroll up and down on a page and to move back and forth between pages. Learn how to type URLs to go directly to Internet sites. Learn how to make, use, and delete bookmarks—a way of programming a Web browser to go to Web sites immediately without going through other menus or links.[4] Get help from others. Attend hands-on workshops. Get help from colleagues, friends, and children even, who know more about it than you do. A study by Chuck Koutnik found that with greater searching experience on the Internet, it took less time to answer questions using it. Learning to use browsers and accumulating bookmarks contributed greatly to this increase in speed, as well as to knowing when the Internet was not likely to yield an answer.[5]

Once you become comfortable using the Internet, learn how to get it to work for you. Learn how to use at least one search engine well and acquaint yourself with others. Search engines are ways of looking for specific information within the World Wide Web, like finding a needle in a haystack. Some search engines have compiled a subject list of places for you to look, arranged like the table of contents of a book. Examples of these kinds of engines are Excite, Lycos, and Yahoo! Other search engines use a keyword search to compile a list of specific Web sites for you to look at. Examples are AltaVista, Excite, InfoSeek, WebCrawler, Cyber 411, and All-in-One Search Page.[6]

(Re)acquaint yourself with Boolean logic. Search engines often use it—in various ways—to locate information. Boolean logic is the process of including or excluding information using the operators "and", "or", "not". Learn how to perform truncation, etc.

Once you have gained experience searching the Internet, you'll realize that you can't necessarily just type a word and get great results. Temper your expectations and learn to critically evaluate the results you get.

Recognize some of the idiosyncrasies of the Internet. Check your typing. Retry a URL when you don't succeed in getting to the site the first time. If a site is slow to load, hit the "refresh" (or similar button) to get it to load again. Go to another site if necessary. Some sites are quicker to load than others. The network connections may be slow. A site that is huge and unorganized may take more time than you have and may not be useful. Learning to use the Internet for reference involves a new kind of collection

development. Through the process of using the Internet and practicing with it, you will begin to see Internet sites that you find useful and that you use often. Learn how to bookmark those sites on the computer(s) that you use to browse the Internet. Look at other libraries' Web sites and their collections of Web links. Develop a list of links for your library's Web site—or—for use at your public service desk(s).

Learning How to Get the Internet to Work For You

> Cut and Paste
> Move and save files
> Bookmark
> Use at least one Search
> Engine
> Boolean Logic
> Reload/Refresh
> Find several favorite Web

The Internet allows each library to develop a new kind of collection through use and practice. Many library Web pages have highly developed Internet reference collections. A library can develop its own, or depend on other excellent library Web pages. Many libraries include bibliographic records with Web addresses in their on-line catalogs and some allow the patron immediate access to the Internet through their catalog. Ready reference sources on Internet sites are highly valuable, particularly to the beginning Internet reference librarians.

Copyright and Fair-use Questions

The full-text of an article is not going to be on the Internet unless someone has put it there (with or without copyright permission) or unless someone is paying for your access. This access is via a paid subscription to one or more databases or by paying for access on an article-by-article basis. The Inspire (Indiana SPectrum of Information REsources) service, managed and operated by INCOLSA, has provided access for Indiana residents to several EBSCO bibliographic databases since the beginning of 1998.[7]

We do have free access to government information under the law, previously only through the Federal Depository Library Program, but now also electronically. Many government publications are available free and in full-text on the Internet, for example census statistics and legislative publications. The Library of Congress has begun a National Digital Library project which includes making historical documents available on the Internet to the public.[8]

Useful Internet Sites for Library Reference

Several subject areas lend themselves best, to reference via the Internet.

Current Events / News / Hot Topics

The Internet is a great place to find information about news stories as they are breaking. This is news that won't be in the newspaper until the next day or in news magazines until the next week. Many print and broadcast media have Web sites that post news stories on the Web as soon as they can get them. This is also a good place to find current weather reports.

Business Information

Current stock market reports, company information, and information for job seekers are easily located and updated often on the Internet.

Government Information

Congress has directed the Government Printing Office to make a transition to the electronic environment by providing United States citizens with free access to government information. *GPO ACCESS* which includes the *U.S. Budget*, the *Congressional Record*, other legislative publications, and regulatory information is only one type of government information that is available through the Internet[9]; legislative documents are also available at the Web site *THOMAS*.[10] Most federal, state, and many local government agencies are now on the Internet, and these sites offer substantial information about the agencies and their work. There are specific search engines that search only on government sites, which can quickly link you to an agency. Many government sites have e-mail addresses for your questions.

There are also specific tutorials on finding government information on the Web such as Marilyn K. Moody's at http://ublib.buffalo.edu/libraries/units/sel/mkm/special/; Sally Lawler's "Finding Government Information What's the Difference" at http://www.libraries.wayne.edu/purdy/govtrain.html; and Patricia Cruse and Sherry DeDecker's "How to Effectively Locate Federal Government Information on the Web" at http://gort.ucsd.edu/pcruse/universe/intro.html. For government information for kids see "Uncle Sam for Kids!" at http://www.win.org/library/matls/govdocs/main.htm.

Popular Culture (Movies, TV, Books, Music)

Not only can information about popular culture be found on the Internet, but libraries can also use the information for their own collection development purposes. Sites tend to lean toward the sales and reviews of

books, sound recordings, and videos. The catalogs of other libraries fit within this category and can be useful to consult for various reasons.

Sports Information

Like news, sports information can be updated and posted on the Internet on a more timely basis than it can be via newspapers and magazines. Lots of information is readily available on the Internet, from that about major sports teams and leagues, to that about more obscure sports and sports popular in other parts of the world.

Medical Information

Due to the absolute need for medical information to be as current as possible, the Internet is a good place to disseminate it as well as to look for it. This information tends to be highly specialized, rather than basic knowledge.[11]

Travel Information

Information about ever-shifting airline and rental car fares, hotels, tourist sites is easily found and frequently updated on the Internet.

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Endnotes

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