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Instructional Technology at Brown and University Library Resources

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The Web! Confused about its contents? Are you a bit anxious about how to fully utilize its potential for research and teaching? You are not alone! The electronic revolution in information gathering, and its impact on teaching and scholarship, is a reality and fact of academic life. Statistics, news, governmental/non-governmental sites, literary criticism, scientific data, and much more, are available on the Web. Faculty, students, and research librarians are using this information at Brown and at educational institutions around the world. The electronic globalization of information is profoundly affecting social, political, economic, cultural, and educational relations and institutions - and instructional technology.

Yet, as wonderful as this tool is, teaching faculty cannot avoid troubling elements associated with the Internet as a pedagogical tool. Clifford Stoll, an admitted computer junkie, warns that while the Web provides ample information, it rarely provides analysis of how accurate the information is, let alone leads its users onto the path to knowledge and wisdom. Is the information biased? Is it objective? How can one tell? Are there standards of quality control presented along with the information?

The truth? Standards in the world of the Internet are rare. Anarchy reigns. Abundant stories of hoaxes, fraud, bias and misrepresentation can be found. For example, one site from the "University of Santa Anita" offers "true" but little known "Facts" about women with AIDS. Under the section "The Facts," such gems are offered as "New evidence from John Hopkins: Married women can reduce their risk from AIDS by 73.8% if they do

not share their toothbrushes with their husbands.” Another Web site presents detailed “information” about feline “reactions” to bearded men: abstract, prior investigatory findings, methodology, results/tables, interpretations, acknowledgements, bibliography (complete with citations such as “Boone, Patrick, “Cat Reactions to Clean-Shaven Men” in *Western Musicology Journal*, March/April 1958, vol. 11, no. 2. Pp. 4-21”). To the unwary, these sites can look legitimate.

Clearly, these sites are frauds (the AIDS site has a small disclaimer that, with difficulty, you have to scroll down to the bottom to find). Many instructors are probably confident that their students are sophisticated enough to recognize that these sites are bogus or distorted. After all, they ARE Brown students.

Yet, from the perspective of a research librarian and faculty member, the assumption that most students are fully competent Internet searchers, much less experienced with conducting either print or electronic research, is a very risky one. I cannot tell you the number of students who have come into the Rockefeller Library ready to start their research assignments and quickly realize they do not have a clue as to where to begin: how to formulate their research question(s), what sources (print and/or electronic) are relevant to their papers, how to interpret the reams of bibliographic citations they print off in quantity, how to distinguish “Scholarly” from “Popular” sources, how to evaluate the Web sites. These are questions for which students frequently turn to research librarians for help.

Research librarians are not the only ones who recognize the problems, including basic library research, which students are facing with the Web. In the *New York Times*, Nov. 2, 1997 Prof. Charles H. Franklin, University of Wisconsin at Madison, observed that without expert assistance, students find it very difficult to find Web sites that are really useful. He wrote “One of the things you’re missing on the Web is a reference librarian to guide and organize information.” Like many educators, Prof. Franklin is worried that students, because of the ease in printing, cutting and pasting material from the Web, are turning in “superficial” research papers, filled with lots of data, but lacking thoughtful analysis. Free, public, domain sites, in particular, are seldom adequately edited or peer reviewed.

While students have excellent computing skills (they tend to be very good with the technical aspects of programming or creating Web sites), they have little

background or context with which to evaluate and think “critically” about the information they are researching, especially Web sources.

What can Brown teaching faculty do to alleviate this problem? Constraints certainly exist. With teaching responsibilities, advising, office hours, and keeping up with their fields, many faculty and TAs have little time to provide detailed instruction in the methods of bibliographic research or Web evaluation. All too often, faculty and TAs assume research skills that students, in fact, are lacking, or that a couple of minutes of help at the Reference Desk will get them properly started.

Brown research librarians are uniquely qualified to work with faculty in making research an effective part of the curriculum. Many Brown librarians are subject specialists in the social sciences, humanities or sciences. Our librarians have Ph.D.s in Political Science, Anthropology, American History and other disciplines; two different M. A. degrees; and technical expertise in Web products, multimedia, and instructional technology. Many regularly publish monographs, articles, and textbooks that are peer-reviewed.

Brown research librarians teach students about the techniques of “critical thinking” associated with Internet searching and research. And, wonderful as the world of the Internet is, we also remind students about the vast amount of information available in print and microform. To conduct top-quality research, we teach students the techniques of synthesizing traditional print sources with electronic sources. In fact, only a very small portion of scholarship is available electronically and students need to understand that not ALL information is on the Web. What are some of the ways that research librarians can help Brown faculty and TAs?

- *Present detailed and subject-specific research talks, seminars, workshops, on how to conduct good research and use “critical thinking” when evaluating information that separates the “junk” from the “scholarly.” Students can be taught to ask themselves what the credentials of the authors are; to distinguish between content which is objective and open to alternative interpretations versus that characterized by emotion, advocacy, or propaganda; to determine which sites are current and up to date.*
- *Help faculty create electronic syllabi, subject “pathfinders” with links to relevant electronic sources.*

- *Assist faculty with instructional technology and multimedia to utilize the full potential of electronic materials.*
- *Offer individual, customized research consultations to their students when the instructor refers them.*
- *Show students how to properly cite electronic sources in their footnotes and bibliographies.*
- *Set up a URL on the Library home page with links to Web evaluation and critical thinking Internet sites.*

Research librarians offer a wealth of experience and subject expertise to assist faculty with the challenge presented by the Web. For example, including the name and address of the research librarian whose speciality is relevant to the course on the syllabus would be enormously beneficial to students. Based on our experience, student inhibitions about asking for research help are greatly eased if they have a specific NAME to contact, with the expectation that there is someone at the Library who can regularly assist them with their papers, reports, and senior theses.

Brown research librarians stand ready to assist faculty and TAs in teaching students about how to conduct research critically and effectively. Our research librarians are seasoned veterans with issues such as bias on the Internet, misinformation, student confusion about research, plagiarism (a constant temptation with the abundant sources available electronically), and electronic utilization of educational materials. Contact us - before classes begin!

List of research librarians:

e-mail addresses, phone numbers, and subject specialties....