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# The Wide World of the Web:

*A Liberal Arts Perspective.*

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It is not easy trying to encapsulate in a short article the impact the Internet has had on our library lives. In fact, it is hard to believe that only five years ago we were still laying the initial foundations for connectivity. So much that we take for granted has so recently been put into place. The first wave included e-mail and listservs, which not only began to take up a lot of time, but also began to change the way we communicate. A whole paper could be written addressing this aspect of the Internet alone. The next important wave connected us to other libraries, databases, and resources worldwide. Until then, Linfield College was dependent on the resources of its own small library. This connectivity, along with the Orbis and Portals consortial agreements, expanded our universe almost overnight, and we began humming around the Internet in search of those elusive answers.

But recently it is the World Wide Web that is having the greatest impact on reference and instruction at this library, and it is about this method of accessing the Internet that we will concentrate our impressions in this article. With its graphics, full text documents, and the facility to click into worlds unknown (and come back!), the World Wide Web has captured our imaginations in a way the first waves of the Internet did not. The democratic base and distribution of information on the Web is both energizing and enervating. Questions of content become almost secondary at first as we are dazzled by the possibilities. But over time, intoxication has changed to hangover (Metcalfe, 1996) as we struggle not only to find substance and real answers, but also to absorb this huge amoeba into our repertoire of information tools.

The expectation of a one-stop-shopping information delivery system has been growing steadily in the last decade. The popularity of the Web has probably increased that expectation sharply in the last year. But the Web is not quite ready for prime time. Sites often load slowly or are inaccessible from one moment to the next. They may be unreliable, making a splashy debut but lying unmaintained after that. Many disappear without a trace. It can also take enormous amounts of time to find little of substance. In addition, printing capabilities vary with the local situation. In our library, we provide Web access, but our dot matrix printers cannot support the images. Until we acquire a laser printer, students must download results to disk, e-mail them, or take their URL to a lab where they can print it. Such barriers fly in the face of the notion of push-button information.

At the same time, the Web has provided a unique opportunity for us to teach students about the overall nature of information and how to integrate traditional library resources into their Internet fantasies. After all, most students respond enthusiastically to the Web, which is a rare occurrence in library-land instruction. So it makes for a nice starting point for some of them when they start their research projects.

In general, freshmen and sophomores seem more experienced and at ease with this technology than juniors and seniors, which creates some interesting role reversals on campus. Nevertheless, even many of those who are convinced the Web has all the stuff of libraries and much more come to a point when, after hours of surfing, they bog down while the assignment still stands looming. This turns to our teaching advantage because students are then more amenable to exploring other library resources. In fact, it is possible that exploring the Web has whetted their appetites to pursue information in any format with more determination than they may have ever had before.

Both reference and library instruction have changed incrementally to absorb this new amoeba. We try to integrate Web sites into most of the classes we teach because, after all, it is another important information tool. But it also has become an important teaching tool for several reasons: It's fun for all of us, it gets the students' attention, and since many of them are self-proclaimed Internet jocks, it sets the stage for collaborative learning. If the Web is really relevant to an assignment, we all learn something. When the Web content is only incidental, we can demonstrate its limitations. In addition, the Web is a perfect place to dramatize the need to evaluate content critically, whether electronic or print. It actually seemed harder before the Web became so popular to convince students that not everything they read is gospel. On the democratic Web, however, where literally anything may be published, the need to be selective is more obvious. It is also an opportunity to question the authority of Web sites and point out how difficult it sometimes is to find out who is responsible for content.

Internet resources serve some courses, assignments and disciplines much better than others. In some cases, it provides a variety of information never before attainable in one place. For instance, questions about recent news events, anything in popular culture, medicine, nutrition, health, and alternative points of view may often be more readily answered on the Web. There is also a wealth of government information on the federal, state, and even the local level available full text. Finding information from the federal government alone on such things as recent Supreme Court decisions, economic indicators, census data, house and senate discussions, executive orders, contact information for representatives, and much more is in many ways easier to get at than it was before.

Business students really benefit from using the Web these days. Marketing students can scout out marketing strategies provided by businesses or industries they are studying by consulting the growing

number of company home pages available. We also introduce accounting and finance students to company pages because they often contain the financial data and annual reports the students use in class projects.

The Web is becoming a wonderful place for art history students to find artist and gallery home pages, which often include illustrations unattainable locally. In addition, it might be the quickest place to find biographical information about newer artists.

Researching cultures and countries is often very productive on the Web. Although there is a lot of good information in print reference collections regarding countries, it is often trickier to find sociocultural information. Journals, newspapers, travel information, and much more on regions of the world abound on the Web. In addition, there are opportunities for students to communicate through e-mail with people in different countries.

But finding information on the Web is not as productive in all areas of the liberal arts curriculum. In many areas, Web content is hit or miss, containing patchy bits of what the library, at least at the moment, handles in a better, more uniform way. There are lots of articles and bibliographies, but often not an overall search mechanism to find them. Electronic journals abound and are growing in the social sciences and humanities, and many of them are free. As supplementary material, they are wonderful, and on occasion there will be one devoted to the kinds of material one is searching for.

However, the Internet is not yet a productive first choice in many subject areas. There are plenty of links for sites in history, psychology, sociology, political science, and literature. But it usually takes more time to plow through the department sites, on-line courses, student home pages, and other paraphernalia to find something of substance than it does to use the library's own resources. Nevertheless, it is worth a certain amount of time to try the Web, because it is constantly changing and it is impossible to predict what might be there on any given subject. So the best strategy is to try both traditional and Internet resources.

The Web is the new kid on the block. It expands our notions of what information is, it presents great teaching opportunities, it frustrates, and it excites. But how does it affect faculty research in the humanities? We conclude with some of Susan's musings about humanities research.

It is generally acknowledged that research and publication for humanities faculty (hereafter referred to as humanists) tends to be a more solitary pursuit than for scientists and social scientists (Wiberley). While the Internet presents the beginning of a new, informal way of communicating ideas or brainstorming certain notions, be it research based or pedagogically based<sup>1</sup>, the picture of a humanist performing research tends to be of one person in a room, probably using a word processor, but not likely to be cruising the Web checking out the latest literary criticism. Perhaps as the content in these areas of the humanities grows, this will change.

However, Wiberley (1991) makes an interesting observation that partially explains some of the reluctance on the part of humanists to search on line, either via Web or other electronic means. He points out that, in general, humanists research by pursuing acknowledged experts among their peers. For example, a humanist reads a paper and then looks up a cited reference. Searching a general bibliography by subject is not the norm for humanities research, rather "a reference favorably cited in a monograph or journal article is one that somebody [an expert] sent. If the citing author is a well respected peer, then the humanist will have special reason to read the cited source (Wiberley, 1991, 20)."

Monahan (1994) points out that the scholarship done in this traditional way is top-down in authority structure. Searching the Web, on the other hand, presents to the humanist the spectacle of sorting through undifferentiated information, that no one with authority can be guaranteed to have filtered, evaluated, or critiqued. The innate democratic nature of the Web creates a multitude of textual possibilities such that acceptable quality, in humanist terms, may take more time to find.

On the other hand, for musicians and artists, whose professional lives consist of tinkering with a work of art or lots of practice, searching the Web is not such an alien concept. Playing a phrase over and over again until it is "right" can extrapolate nicely to working one's way through the maze on the Web. This idea of "serious play," which can be applied to practicing an instrument or trying a new brush technique, is more difficult to fit in with the ways of knowing involved in, for example, literary criticism. It is interesting to speculate on how writing with computers is now accepted practice, but the idea of incorporating the rhetoric of computers, of delving into the textuality of hypertext, where worlds can be both words as well as links to other sites, presents new ideas for textual criticism. Imaginative research is a term that has not reached full acceptance. The Web urges this notion of serious play upon us.

At this moment in time, the Internet presents some enticing notions about retrieving, packaging and evaluating information. It also presents a moment for librarians to really facilitate the design, with faculty and media experts, of Web-based courses. Rather than emphasizing the lines between professions, the Internet erases these lines and can motivate new ways of exploring and thinking through the screen to the creation of knowledge. **Q**

<sup>1</sup> See Weedman for an interesting discussion of a humanities-oriented listserv

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(2 May 1996)

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All of this of course implies that students have access to the Internet. In our enthusiasm for this new medium, it is often easy to forget that this is not always the case. Eloise Greene, a participant in a distance program through Syracuse University, commented on a recent CRISTAL-ED listserv discussion: "One of the biggest challenges for my cohort was interconnective service. Most seem unable to connect to the Web, but all have electronic mail and some way of uploading/downloading files. For some it has been an unanticipated financial burden of \$200 to \$300 a month for the home connectivity charges" (Greene, 1995). Even in Oregon, where most areas have Internet service, access can be a problem. Several people in our program simply do not have the resources to purchase a home computer. They are therefore restricted to using Internet connections at libraries, which is not always convenient.

The Internet has not only changed the tangibles of course content and delivery, it also has helped lead to some fundamental changes in the way students approach their educational experience. We are no longer site-bound in our interactions. Students from different institutions can now connect with each other through listservs such as LIS-L (listserv@vmd.cso.uiuc.edu), a global discussion list of issues relating to library and information science students. Peer reviewed e-journals, such as the *Katharine Sharp Review*, [edfu.lis.uiuc.edu/review](http://edfu.lis.uiuc.edu/review), publish articles by library students. In addition, many schools post their syllabi on their Web pages. This allows students to gain a perspective on what is being taught in other schools. At times, it is even possible to read class lectures. All of these contribute to making library students better consumers of information.

## Web

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## Skeptic

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impact on the lives of library users. I am just not sure I like what the cards foretell about its eventual impact on my professional life, and I don't think the crystal ball is clear about the negative consequences for all librarians concerned. **Q**

Clearly, the Internet has made a profound impact on library education. Being a student while these rapid developments take place will no doubt help prepare us as we enter into the changing profession of library and information science. The students who are in library school now can be instrumental in the shaping of this new technology. I and many others like me find that to be a very exciting prospect. **Q**

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## Trapped

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information access. Do we, for instance, want our OPAC terminals used by our customers to send and read their e-mail? The good news is that the problem won't be with us for long. By next Web year, we'll have a different challenge. **Q**

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