

# The Time Has Come for Electronic Cite-Checking

by Karen Beck

About a year ago, reference and circulation staff members at the Boston College Law Library decided to reexamine our policies and procedures for law review cite-checking and interlibrary loan. Our practice had been to check out materials to cite-check tables, where the items sometimes sat unused for weeks, and to use interlibrary loan to borrow vast quantities of materials for our student cite-checkers. We wanted to change our procedures in a way that would encourage our students to rely on electronic sources for cite verification whenever those sources were available. Before doing anything drastic, however, we decided to ask our colleagues in academic libraries how they handled cite-checking and interlibrary borrowing by student journal members.

I posted a query to the ALL-SIS discussion list and received responses from colleagues at academic libraries throughout the country. This is what we learned:

## Electronic Cite Verification: A Tough Sell

Despite the fact that almost all librarians strongly encourage their students to use electronic materials to verify citations, most student editors resist relying on electronic materials even when they are readily available and their print counterparts are not. Not surprisingly, journal staff members who actually have to do the cite-checking are much more amenable to our suggestions than their editors. Also, it appears that editors of prestigious journals are more tradition-bound and consequently more reluctant to use electronic sources, while editors of specialized journals are more willing to accept authoritative electronic sources if star pagination is available and the print source cannot be borrowed in time.

The proliferation of electronic sources has given rise to a vast array of editorial policies and practices. One journal

publishes articles that cite to numerous United Nations documents—most of which are available on the Web—but the editors will not accept the Web versions. By contrast, student editors of other journals will not accept LEXIS or WESTLAW documents, but will accept the Web version if it can be determined that the document comes from the same datafile as the hard copy source. Generally, students find electronic sources

inadequate because often they are checking for italics, which are not reflected on LEXIS or WESTLAW. Right or wrong, students also believe that the two services contain many pagination errors.

Nevertheless, student editors occasionally can be swayed by logic. Lee Ryan (University of San Francisco) sometimes has persuaded students

to rely on electronic sources by reminding them that a major purpose of footnotes is to enable readers to locate the supporting sources. Therefore, as fewer materials are being published in print form, readers actually may be better served by giving them the electronic cite. Moreover, an electronic cite provides sufficient information to enable readers to find the source in either electronic or print form, which provides a “safety valve” in the event that a print version of the source is difficult to obtain, or an electronic version of the source disappears from WESTLAW, LEXIS, or a Web site. She closes the sale by explaining why librarians have confidence in stable electronic sources such as LEXIS, WESTLAW, and certain Web sites, especially those that end in .edu or .gov. Ryan’s experience shows that it can be easier to work out reasonable cite-checking procedures if a law library advisor is willing to engage in a little friendly persuasion.

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## Interlibrary Loan: How Much Is Too Much?

The consensus opinion from library colleagues throughout the country is that almost all of us believe that we borrow too much material in print that is readily available in electronic form. Some of us try to stem the tide by urging journal editors to agree that an item is “difficult to obtain” in print, and it always helps to remind students that borrowing non-legal materials may take a long time and cost the journal money. But the bottom line seems to be that libraries are willing—reluctantly—to borrow almost anything for student journal members.

## Student Editors: Bound by Tradition

It comes as no surprise that law student journal editors do not want to rock the boat during their yearlong tenure in charge. Since leadership changes every year, most editorial boards have to start almost from square one, so they look to longstanding traditions and practices as guideposts — even when those traditions no longer serve the journal or its readers. One grim little incident that took place at Boston College a few years ago illustrates the point. The Editor-In-Chief of one of our journals formerly had been a representative for one of the two largest vendors of electronic information. She knew how reliable electronic versions of documents were, she knew how easy it was to retrieve information online, and how difficult it was to obtain some

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materials in print, and she knew that the vast majority of people who read scholarly law review articles had access to electronic sources in the event they wished to look up a source cited in a footnote. My colleague Joan Shear figured that this was her golden opportunity to convince the editor to do more of the journal's cite-checking using electronic sources. The editor's immediate reply: "Not MY journal!" Granted, this happened a few years ago, and the same editor might have given a different response today. Nevertheless, the story is a cautionary

tale that shows how reluctant students are to be the first to break free of tradition.

### What to Do?

Given that editors hesitate to embrace electronic cite verification without the *Bluebook's* blessing, many librarians think that real change is going to be difficult until the *Bluebook* catches up with today's realities by permitting electronic cite verification and citation. According to Ray Lytle (Tulane University), the entire cite-checking procedure is "horribly antiquated and does not reflect the wide

range of topics now being researched and written about. It may have worked okay when most articles were essentially about US case law, but now it is a fiasco." Academic law librarians around the country have sounded a call to action: it's time for the *Bluebook* to adopt cite-checking requirements that are in line with current technologies and the research habits of journal readers.

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