

Chris is a sixth-grader whose history class is studying the westward expansion of the United States. Arriving home with an assignment to write a report on the role of the railroad in the westward expansion, Chris heads straight for the home computer. After navigating to [www.google.com](http://www.google.com), the young student types the following words into the search box: *expansion of the railroad*. Chris uses no quote marks, no connectors, and certainly no advanced search features. Chris hits enter, scans the first 10 returned hits, goes to a few of the Web sites, prints the first page of each one, and says, “All done! Time for soccer practice!” and flees the bonds of rigorous academic research.

## How We Work the Web

### *Information professionals must deal with public perception that everything's online*

by Elizabeth Greenfield

Again and again, research has shown that this is also how most adults search, too. The vast majority does little or no refining of search terms, uses very general terms, and does not question the sources of the records returned from searches. The Internet, or more specifically the Web, has become such an integral part of life that any information published on a Web site must be true. Twice in the past few days I have heard someone say, “Well, I saw it on a Web site!” when questioned about statements they were making. People's search techniques reflect this blind faith.

How do we, as information professionals, use the Web? Do we ever find ourselves in the midst of a random, disorganized search, like young Chris? If you look back several years, or even a few decades, you'll see a time when online searches were restricted to dial-up services, such as Dialog, which required thoroughly organized, thoughtful, well-planned search strings, thanks to the complexity and expense of the systems. No sane layperson would have dared try those searches—as if they would ever be given such an opportunity. People needed training and experience to do online research, and so it remained squarely the domain of librarians and professional researchers.

#### A New Era of Research

Things certainly have changed. We no longer need all that clunky, megabyte-hogging software or, even worse, dedicated terminals. With so many systems now Web-based, it all seems to come from one place. Sometimes, in a wide-ranging search, it's easy to move from one resource to another and another, almost without realizing it. Sure we still need and use Dialog and other database services, but with so much information now freely available, why should we?

Sometimes, it seems that the rest of the world agrees with that last sentence: everything is on the Internet, it's all free, and anyone can do it. All you need is Google—not an advanced degree—to find information.



photo by Elizabeth Farina

*Susan Vaughn, reference librarian at Suffolk University Law Library, uses the computer at the reference desk. The Internet has become an integral part of reference work.*

We know that's not true. But how has this misperception affected our roles, image, and the way we do our jobs? There have been times when I've found the answer to a requestor's question simply by running a well-constructed query through [www.vivisimo.com](http://www.vivisimo.com), my metasearch engine of choice. How does using a freely available search tool, such as [vivisimo](http://www.vivisimo.com) or Google, affect our image?

#### When Librarians Google

Lyonette Louis-Jacques, foreign, comparative, and international librarian and lecturer in law at the University of

Chicago Law School, doesn't feel that using free resources affects our credibility. But, she says, using Google while the library user is at your elbow might be problematic; the user might question whether you really do know more about finding the information. On the other hand, she points out, we know search techniques and capabilities in ways our users do not, whether we're talking about LexisNexis, Westlaw, or Google. As Louis-Jacques points out, it's our expertise



and knowledge of the resources, whether high-priced or free, that sets us apart.

Sometimes, starting on the Web is both time- and cost-efficient. Quoting a truism, Kay Collins, head librarian at the U.S. Railroad Retirement Board in Chicago, says that time is money and there's no point in spending more than three minutes trying to find a case on the Web when she knows she can find it on a subscription service. For those of us who bill our time, this is especially true; excessive time spent fumbling on the Web in search of a document can't be justified when one-tenth of an hour and a well-crafted search on a for-fee service will yield the desired result.

What about those subscription services? They can be expensive, and you actually have to learn how to use them. Andrew

Larrick, reference librarian at the Columbia University Law Library, points out what many of us have found: the free Web is by no means a substitute for even a small amount of the traditional U.S.-based legal research process or for any meaningful research in foreign law. All those organizational, searching, formatting, and delivery options that the vendors tout do have value in terms of making our work processes more efficient and productive.

Nevertheless, the free Web is an integral part of Larrick's reference work, and I imagine the same holds true for many of us. How is our use of free Web-based resources different from other people's? Genie Tyburski, Web manager of The Virtual Chase, says a key difference lies in the way we search for information; this distinguishes us from someone without our background. An important issue is whether and how people find information and whether they'll recognize the value of the information when (or if) they do find it. As Tyburski says, we have the persistence, attention to detail, training and education, and subject experience and expertise. Even if we're using a free resource, something that anyone could use, it's *how* we use it that matters.

Sabrina Pacifici, a law firm librarian with a global 50 firm, agrees. "Important factors regarding online research, be it on the free or fee-based Web or commercial databases, encompass a relentlessness in pursuit of the facts, data, and information that fulfill the mandate of the assignment," Pacifici says. "This requires focus, skill, knowledge of the scope, content, reliability and applicability of sources for each assignment, analysis of the relevant data, effective use of time to minimize cost while maximizing results, and flexibility in moving seamlessly among sources." Free or fee, our characteristics and skills make the difference.

### A Blessing and a Curse

How has this affected our work? Kay Collins says her work has become both easier and more difficult—easier because of the amount of information more freely available, but more difficult because her users' expectations have been raised so high. Dan Campbell, head of reference and computer research services at the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit, agrees. "The availability of Web-based information has significantly reduced the quantity of questions I receive and has thereby made my life a bit less hectic," Campbell says. "The product of this, however, is that the more difficult and in-depth questions are passed to the library. This has resulted in [different] responsibilities, moving me from information facilitator to researcher."



photo by Elizabeth Faima

Students at the Suffolk University Law Library use their computers in the reading room. Most students turn to the Web first for research.

What's interesting in all of this is that the resources change and how we use them changes, yet still our users need us. Collins refers to users' heightened expectations; Campbell finds his role is changing. Is it all just a matter of changing with the times? That's really the least of it. If there are resources out there that "anyone" can use, we have to know how to use them better. If there's a for-fee service that will get us what we need in a fraction of a free search on the Web, then it's probably worth the fee. If there's a skill or technique that will help us search better, we have to know it.

As time goes on, more and more entities, particularly governmental units, are making information freely available on the Web, allowing us to bypass the proprietary services and their costly searches. As illustration, I always caution summer clerks, fall associates, and lateral hires to come to me for public record and corporate information, not to use for-fee services; it's my role to know how to get this information freely or at low cost. As information professionals, our knowledge of such resources justifies both our use of the free Web—and our jobs. How those proprietary services will deal with this is the subject of another article.

While we use the for-fee services for the hard-to-find research materials, their highly refined capabilities, and their delivery options, we use the free Web, too. And we use it in careful, thoughtful searches, as well as in random, free-ranging searches, much like Chris, the young student described above. We may be professionals, but we're also human. ■

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