WWW: Enticed, Ensnarled, & Enriched...

By Judith Arnold and Elaine Jayne

Media reports often present the Internet and the World Wide Web as the answer to anything and everything. Scarcely a television program or advertisement appears without a Web address prominently displayed. As a result, students expect the WWW to provide them with instant and reliable information for their assignments. Unfortunately, not all information found through use of this enticing new medium can be trusted.

Bill Gates is the Devil!

Imagine, first, a search for information on Microsoft's CEO, Bill Gates. A bright red screen may be found that proclaims Bill Gates is the devil. The page, presumably written in fun, converts the name, “Bill Gates,” plus III (3) into ASCII values that add up to 666, the number of the beast [devil] according to the book of Revelations in the New Testament of the Bible. (http://aurora.engr.LaTech.edu/~tburga/billgate.htm). Or consider the Web page entitled “Feline Reactions to Bearded Men,” a spoof written as if it were a scholarly study. This discussion, with bogus bibliography, cites a series of experiments in the Journal of Feline Forensic Studies in which 26% of cats exposed to photographs of Robert Bork exhibited paralysis of the legs and necks. (http://www.improb.com/airchives/cat.html). Both examples are misleading, albeit humorous and outrageous. Students must be taught how to tell the difference between information that is dubious at best and false at worst, and that which is reliable and valid.

Teaching the Web to Freshmen

During the fall semester, 1996, two faculty members from the College of Business asked us, Waldo Library Instruction Faculty, to add the WWW to the other resources covered in their business writing classes (BIS 142) We were excited to include the use of the Web, since it was a perfect opportunity to include critical thinking and evaluation to the learning process. As suggested above, the quality of information on the Web ranges from garbage to true resource gems. We prepared carefully, using demonstrations, class discussions, worksheets, and hands-on searching. Regardless, the freshmen often wandered off-track into the glitter-paved, hypertext-linked pathways of the Web.

We discovered that this “wandering syndrome” was one of several recurring problems that occur in teaching the Web. Another was the difficulty that many students have in judging the “quality” of information since, to them, Web inclusion implied “authority.” Few were aware that the Web lacks behind-the-scenes review and selection that typically occurs with formal print or other media publication found in libraries. Moreover, the Web appeared much more simple to use since any word or idea “filled in” on a search line, brought something back immediately. In contrast, the regular library search process involved finding an article in a periodical database, locating a call number of the journal in the local catalog, actually going to the shelves and retrieving the article, and photocopying the article. Then too, many students buy into the myth about the superiority of information that comes from computers, and the Web, with its graphics and multimedia, has added appeal for the MTV generation.

Other problems came from the unique
nature of the Web itself. For example, there is no controlled vocabulary, or standard list of subject headings. Instead, search engines, which have different (and often unstated) rules for entering terms, perform the equivalent of a giant keyword search of a huge, full-text database. Since freshmen normally have no subject parameters or prior knowledge of the topical hierarchy, they enter any term or phrase that occurs to them. The result is an overwhelming number of hits on whatever broad topic that each considers to be "the" assignment.

Finally, the anonymity of the Web has produced a new variant in an old bugbear—the specter of plagiarism. Students can cut-and-paste parts of articles, or go to sites such as "The Evil House of Cheat" or "School Sucks" to download student papers on a particular subject. Professors have considerable difficulty verifying sources even if identified by the student using electronic citation guidelines.

As these problems emerged, we, the instructors, began to ask a question: Why would any librarian, in her right mind, want to introduce such complexity into a class already overloaded with content?

The Strengths of the Web

Despite its shortcomings, the WWW can be a valuable and even unique resource. One of its principal assets is the current information that is found there. Many of the nation’s most-read newspapers, such as The New York Times, The Washington Post, and USA Today, as well as many regional newspapers, have Web pages offering the latest news. CNN hosts a site that outdoes today's published news such as the latest photos from Mars or the most recent update on the lead story of the hour. International students on WMU’s campus can read newspapers from their home countries, or listen to foreign broadcasts via the Web. The weather, the population count for the U.S., stock quotations, and currency exchange rates are only a few of the types of data available with the right URL.

Besides the most current data, unique resources are open to the researcher. Major art museums (e.g., San Francisco at http://www.thinker.org) host home sites with images of items found in their collections; they can be searched by artist, date, medium, country of origin, or individual words. Archives such as The Virginia Military Institute Archives permit history students to study the Civil War as seen in the diaries and letters of those involved in that tragic period. (http://www.vmi.edu/~archtml/index.html). Oral histories and photographs from our nation’s history are found in the “American Memory Collection” of the Library of Congress (http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/ammem home.html). Another strength of the Web as a resource is its ability to enhance access to materials. The full text of Shakespeare’s works, Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein, or any of the texts in the "Bartleby Library," Columbia University is not only available to read or download, but is computer searchable—the student can use keywords to locate relevant passages, a feat that would take many hours of skimming the print version. (http://www.gsb.cs.usyd.edu.au/~matty/Shakespeare; http://www.georgetown.edu/irvinemj/english/16/franken/franken.html; http://www.cc.columbia.edu/acis/bartleby/)

Web access also allows users to reach across distance and time. A student in desperate need of a Newsweek article after the library has closed can access it in her dorm room using the Web. Company annual reports not in the library could take days to obtain by mail, yet can often be found quickly at a company’s Web site. The latest government reports, U.S. and state codes, and Supreme Court decisions are accessible to students whose libraries do not own the paper or microform copies.

“Can the Devil Speak True?”

The issue, however, is not whether these and a multitude of other sources found on the Web are valuable for many research projects. The problem is that the Web is not placed in context with other electronic resources and the more traditional print materials. And, to be enriched by the Web, its strengths and weaknesses, effective search strategies, and evaluation techniques must be learned by the student. Often, to be ensnarled, searcher. The freshmen in BIS 142 taught us this lesson that we have now described in an article accepted for publication. At the same time, we had such difficulty preparing the article with the use of computers—the file would mysteriously freeze after a few minute's work—that even calls to Microsoft led to frustration and often more problems. By the time the final version of “Dangling by a Slender Thread: The Lessons and Implications of Teaching the World Wide Web to Freshmen” was completed, we were beginning to wonder whether, after all, there was some truth in the devilish Web site about Bill Gates.

Devious Derivations

By David Isaacson

[This is the first of an “occasional” book review prepared by members of the Friends of the University Libraries who have chosen something of interest to them.]

A side from garbled quotations, one of the most intriguing—and troublesome—inquiries that comes to librarians is the question asking about word origins, or etymologies. It may be of surprise to the readers of Gatherings that there are individuals who actually “make up” or create their own etymologies. The result is called folk-etymology. As with all “folk” traditions, if something is used long enough, it may achieve the sanction of at least semi-legitimate usage by being recorded in a standard reference source. Then, even professional etymologists may be fooled into thinking that the origin of these words is accurate and authorized. One well-versed author has recently published a collection of disclaimers about the folk-etymologies. Hugh Rawson’s title explains it all: Devious Derivations: Popular Misconceptions and More Than 1,000 True Origins of Common Words and Phrases (Crown: 1994).

Rawson, in his introduction, suggests a number of reasons why people make up etymologies. Some may believe that words are derived from a historical figure with a similar name as, for example, chauvinism, which is truly derived from an overly zealous follower of Napoleon named Nicholas Chauvin. On the other hand, “hooker,” commonly used as a synonym for prostitute, does not originate with Civil War General Joseph Hooker. Although Hooker’s military headquarters were notorious for such liaisons, the term existed before the Civil War. While its origin is still uncertain, it may refer to a woman “hooking” a man as a fisherman hooks a fish.

Another source of false word origins is spurious acronyms. Although someone may have once suggested that the word “news” is taken from north, east, west, and south, there is no evidence that supports that argument. “News” is undoubtedly—and simply—the plural of the word new. In the same vein of illogical reasoning would fall the idea that geographical place names serve as a source of words. But, tobacco does not come from the island of Tobago. Still for every rule, there may be an exception and albeit a bit farfetched, there is evidence that jeans do come from Genoa! Then, of course, scholars are occasionally guilty of being shrewd. “Bear garden” would seem to