

Do Online Resources Destroy Student Research Papers?

David Rothenberg wrote a fascinating article, entitled “How the Web Destroys Student Research Papers,” that appeared in the February 1998 issue of *The Education Digest*. Rothenberg was an associate professor of philosophy at the New Jersey Institute of Technology, and saw the growing presence of the Internet as a very mixed blessing to the academic community. While acknowledging the presence of good academic Internet sites and the vast potential for online academic materials in the future, he argued that the Internet as a whole was damaging to the entire student research process. He noted that student papers he had received in the past year, which used numerous internet sites as resources, were far less creative and

reflected less independent thinking than ones from previous semesters; he attributed this to the Internet’s influence on the students’ research processes.

Rothenberg expressed these ideas with funny, creative phrases and statements. Here are a few: “Search engines, with their halfbaked algorithms, are closer to slot machines than library catalogues.”¹ “...a paper consisting of summaries of summaries is bound to be fragmented and superficial, and to demonstrate more of a random montage than an ability to sustain an argument through 10 or 15 doublespaced pages.”² “The placelessness of the Web leads to an ethereal randomness of thought...chance holds sway, and it more often misses than hits.”³

Rothenberg’s insights came in 1998, when the Internet was a vital presence, but when online databases were still in their early stages. He may well have had online databases partly in mind when he wrote, but I doubt he could have imagined the way full text online resources would grow, covering newspapers, journals, and collections of books. Back in 1998, Union had one newspaper database (Newsbank) and one journal database (Proquest). Now, we have not only Proquest and Newsbank, but also two other journal databases (Tennessee Electronic Library and Wilsonweb), a huge E-Book collection (NetLibrary), two large business databases (Standard and Poor’s and Value Line), a large education resources

database (ERIC Documents Online), and a massive literature database (Gale Literature Resource Center). Larger institutions, such as the University of Illinois, may well have twenty or forty such full-text resources. What might Rothenberg say now in 2001, with the proliferation of all these full-text electronic tools that come through the Internet? He would probably see this development as one more nail (or several nails) driven into the coffin of the student research paper.

Online Resources as Destructive?

Rothenberg, as a teaching faculty, early on offered some significant concerns, and numerous librarians have raised arguments along these very lines

in library-related journal articles. One area of problems concerning online resources relates to the search process. In the old days, one had a topic in mind and then had to dig through numerous volumes of bound journal indexes to find relevant articles. After you found the potentially good article citations, you then had to find the bound (or microfiche) journal volumes, examine the content, and then print out the good articles page by page. Finding books beyond the scope of the library involved this same kind of searching through large bound volumes. This very process made the searcher more mentally involved in searching and more familiar with the material being searched. With the advent of online indexes and online full-text collections, searching for information is now so much easier and faster. One has almost immediate access, onscreen, to large amounts of information.

This ease of access makes it tempting to take “shortcuts” in research. One type of shortcut is in locating articles—students can simply choose the first items they come across rather than carefully examine everything available. Likewise, since the electronic articles and books allow students to find specific material that relates to their paper topics, there is no absolute necessity of reading through large portions of those articles or books. A major temptation is to view this electronic material as a vast data stream from which students simply draw from (cut and paste) without any concern about the original sources or about arguments presented in those sources. The ultimate shortcut

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From the Director's Desk

Setting the Pace?

In recent years, much has been made about benchmarking as a quantitative tool in the assessment process. At Union we frequently hear of comparisons with our peer and aspiration schools. Administrators utilize comparative data from these institutions in the process of evaluating operational aspects of the University. In the future we are likely to hear even more of such benchmarking as SACS moves to a streamlined accrediting process that mandates this type of quantitative analysis.

In the midst of this emphasis on objective quantification there is a need for careful examination of the subjective. Failure to place all our data into its institutional context runs the danger of being misled by the sheer weight of numbers. To illustrate this point, consider the following comparison of our library hours with those of our benchmark schools:

The library rightfully takes great pride in this comparison. It clearly reflects a significant effort to accommodate student need for access to library services. Can we justifiably consider our library to be a pacesetter? After all, that is what the numbers seem to suggest. Before answering that question

there are other subjective factors that must be considered. The number of hours alone does not reveal contextual differences in operation that surely must be considered. Take for instance, the issue of proximity to a major research university. Several of our benchmark schools are located near such institutions. Their students may make fewer demands for longer hours because needs are being met by other schools. The same might be said about those schools that are overwhelmingly residential and liberal arts. They may not feel the impact of non-traditional students who typically need the convenience of longer hours. Still another factor would be the availability of a 24/7 library lab. Only a few provide such service. This would undoubtedly decrease the need for extending regular library hours.

So, is Union's library a pacesetter? Yes and no would seem to be the best answer. Purely in terms of numbers alone, yes. In total hours of regular library service per week Union's library sets the standard for both its peer and aspiration schools. However, when you consider such differences as geographical location, alternative service models, and makeup of student body one must be more circumspect. Some of our benchmark schools have options that we can only dream about. All the schools have needs unique to their particular situation. So, it can never be as simple as comparing raw numbers. Only by looking through the numbers, and beyond, to the context of all our benchmark institutions can a true comparison be made.

It would be presumptive to say that Union's library is the pacesetter among the fine institutions represented in this study. In too many ways, we lack the facilities and resources to make such a claim. Library hours at Union must remain for us just one aim as we point the path toward excellence.

UCITA: What Does it Mean For Libraries?

The Uniform Computer Information Transactions Act (UCITA) is a proposed state contract law designed to standardize the law regarding the licensing of software and all other forms of digital information.

It is a complex law that will adversely affect libraries, individual consumers, schools and universities and anyone using software or any kind of digital information. This proposed law has been lurking around since 1999.

UCITA was proposed following a failed attempt to propose many of its terms and provisions as a new article

for inclusion in the Uniform Commercial Code (UCC). The UCC is generally recognized as the most successful and universally adopted uniform laws by the various states. UCITA must be adopted by each state's legislature before it becomes law in that state.

To date, UCITA has become law in only Virginia and Maryland, and it is expected to be introduced in the legislatures of all states over a period of a year or more.

Why is UCITA controversial in education and libraries? UCITA applies to computer information only. Licenses with software vendors will incur higher

administrative cost, and the kinds of library services now permissible under law, such as inter-library loan, distance learning programs, archiving, preservation, online databases and digitalizing will be threatened.

It is likely that you will see UCITA activity in the Tennessee Legislature. Watch for it and try to alert your state legislators as to the controversial aspects of the proposed legislation.

To find out more about UCITA, go to www.org/washoff/ucita or www.affect.ucita.com.

Students awarded scholarships

Jennifer Boyd and Andrea Tatum received the Ruth Gibbons Library Student Worker Scholarships at the annual Library Open House, April 2, 2001.

Andrea has worked in the library for two years at the circulation desk performing a number of tasks including assisting patrons to use library resources. She said that she enjoys being able to help

students and faculty benefit from these resources. Andrea believes that working in the library has exposed her to new resources and given her the skill to discover new things.

Jennifer has worked in the library for two years at the circulation desk as well. This spring she also has assisted John Jaeger, Reference Librarian.

Jennifer said as a library worker she has gained a "greater respect for the resources it holds." Further, working in the library has helped her studies and encouraged her to keep up with technology.

The Ruth Gibbons Library Student Worker Scholarships are provided by the generosity of Ruth Gibbons, former Union Library Director.

These Scholarships are awarded annually to Library student workers based on need and performance.



Andrea Tatum and Jennifer Boyd

New Book List Unveiled

The library recently unveiled an interactive new book list (vision.uu.edu/newbooks.html) in an effort to keep faculty apprised of new additions to the library's collection. Our library systems administrator, Curt Parish, designed this new service to meet particular needs. With this service faculty can easily get a listing of new items available in the collection that can be generated for several pre-selected categories of books and media and sorted by author, title, or call number. It is also possible to search for a specific author or title among the recent acquisitions. In addition, the lists can be limited to items from the most recent 1, 2, 3, or 4 week period. If you have questions or comments about this service you may direct them to Pat Morris x5426 or Curt Parish x5427.

Librarians share in new ideas, online features

Librarians Mary Platt and Pat Morris attended the 10th National Conference of the Association of College and Research Libraries in Denver, CO, March 15-18, 2001.

This gathering of more than 1700 librarians from academic libraries of all sizes, from community colleges to large research universities, gave them the opportunity to compare notes with other librarians, to share successes, to ask questions, and to observe exhibits providing information about the newest products and services.

They heard two speakers who challenged and informed them in very different types of thinking. Michael Hawley, Dreyfoos Assistant Professor of Media Technology, MIT Media Lab, spoke on cutting edge technology and its uses in society today. Patricia Limerick, Chair, Center of the American West, University of Colorado, Boulder, discussed the contributions the American West has made to United States history and life, and of the diversity of Native American culture.

They attended receptions sponsored by two vendors where they viewed new products. OCLC hosted a breakfast in which they were updated on new programs from the Library's bibliographic services provider. Pat saw a demonstration of ILLIAD, an inter-library loan product that would enable the user to request materials online. This program would immediately inform the patron if the material were available in our library, make it possible for the patron to track the progress of the request, and perhaps even to receive an article by email. It would enable the library to keep accurate copyright compliance records and to order materials from a copyright clearance provider when the library is out of compliance.

CORC, another OCLC service, allows for creation of bibliographic records that represent electronic resources. Mary was able to get a better understanding of this service so she could begin implementing one of her department's goals.

Endeavor Information Systems, Union's library management systems provider, unveiled ENCompass, a new

module that would provide seamless access to all library resources via the online catalog, whether the material be in book, video, journal, or online format. This product would make access to full-text database material and monographs in the same search, displaying the most useful and best responses first. Currently this product is available only with citation server, which Union's Library does not have, but by the end of this year it will be available as a stand-alone product.

They were able to attend sessions and roundtables on many topics relating to libraries and higher education in general. A few are listed below:

- Library management using the collegial model rather than the hierarchical one
- *eBlack Studies, Bridging the Digital Divide*
- *Merging academic libraries and computing services*
- *Budgeting practices for journals*
- Information literacy as it relates to the core curriculum

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temptation is outright plagiarism. After all, if one is simply lifting information without concern for its larger context in an author's work, why the necessity to cite the material at all? Online resources make it easy and tempting to plagiarize; the abundance of online materials makes it harder for the one plagiarizing to be caught doing so.

Other problems with electronic resources are also very real. The library computer "workstations" often seem more like "social stations." There is as much talking at the library computers as there is at the library tables, probably in part resulting from the freedom from rigorous thinking that the databases provide. Also, the electronic resources can make students dependent, rather than independent researchers. If the Internet is running very slowly or is down entirely, they do not know how to do research through the bound volumes. Likewise, having become used to instantaneous information online, some students do not have a high level of patience when searching for specific, harder-to-find material. I often get reference questions from students who gave up searching after only a few minutes of effort. This academic laziness fostered partly by the electronic resources probably carries over into the actual student paper writing process; having become accustomed to instantaneous access in research, they probably are tempted to write their papers without long reflection and care.

Online Resources Used in Conjunction with Other Resources

Some of the problems and concerns mentioned above are simply part of academic life in the 2000s and not easily remedied. Online resources are certainly not going away anytime soon, and the instantaneous access they provide is also part of modern research. Plagiarism is a greater threat now than it was in times past, before the development of full-text online resources and especially online research paper download sites.

There are, however, several things that teaching faculty can do to help the student research process and, in the process, probably receive better papers.

As noted in the above heading, online resources need to be "used in conjunction with other resources." I offer four suggestions that help ensure online resources are used properly and in balance with other resources. First, having students include several bound books as sources for their research papers is important. While online books can be particularly helpful in searching for specific data within a book, they are not so helpful for reading in large blocks of material. Students need the experience of reading and evaluating significant sections of text and then gleaning from that material good ideas for their papers. Until the e-books are made downloadable onto Rocket E-Books or other such devices, only bound books can provide this reading experience.

Second, having students use material from reference books can also be helpful. Finding material in this collection requires more effort and thinking skill than is shown in punching up a few words on a computer screen. Reference books, with their organized, logical arrangement and their massive amount of information, require the researcher to analyze material in a thorough manner. Reference books also teach patience, because while the truth may be out there, it often takes time to find it.

Third, having students use journal articles from online databases in a rigorous manner is almost essential. Most of our online resources are in the form of journal articles, and this is probably where the most abuse can take place. One important element to periodical database requirements is to accept only articles from peer-reviewed journals. Each of our journal databases has a feature by which searching can be restricted only to these quality journals. Also, it is important that students give some indication of having read the articles listed as sources in their papers. One way to do this is to ask that they include highlighted or annotated photocopies of all articles used—another way is to ask that citations from the articles have annotations giving some indication that they are familiar with the material discussed in them.

Fourth, having students supplement online databases articles with those from

journals the library carries in microfiche or in bound formats is important. While the journals from the online databases may be very good and are easily accessible, there are other journals not on the databases that the library carries in bound or microfiche that are as good or even better. To illustrate this best, consider the field of chemistry. The online databases, in order to carry 2,000 journals, cannot spend more than a few hundred dollars on any one title or it would make their database prohibitively expensive. The better chemistry journals, though, cost between \$1,000 and \$6,000 a year. When chemistry students do research on the databases, they find some helpful material; if they limit their searching to these, though, they miss all the best material available in our reasonably large bound chemistry collection. This is true not only of chemistry, but also of all other disciplines. Sometimes the better journals, such as *The William and Mary Quarterly* in history, simply choose not to provide access through electronic means. By requiring students to use the better materials the library continues to carry in non-electronic formats, professors are encouraging academic excellence in research papers.

So, is Rothenberg right? Are the Internet, and online resources available through it, destructive to student research papers? My answer is that they are *potentially* very destructive. However, when used properly, they are much more helpful than harmful. Online resources open access to thousands more journals and books than were previously available in the library. They allow precision searching that makes finding specific, necessary material much easier. The stipulation, "used properly," though, is an important one. They should be used alongside excellent resources in bound and microform formats. They should be used to search through as many resources as possible and selecting the best quality articles available.

Broadly stated, online resources "used properly" means in a manner that is appropriate to good research, and thus that requires careful reading, stimulates creative thinking, and demands intellectual rigor.

*John Jaeger
Reference Librarian*