

Dr. NoNet and Dr. YesNet On the Internet

A student at the Hunter Library Reference Desk asks for help locating information for writing a report. Her professor, Dr. NoNet, told the class they could not use anything from "the Internet." Now, what does Dr. NoNet mean? If taken literally, this prohibition means:

- The student can use the paper set of Encyclopedia Britannica but cannot use Britannica Online available on the Internet.
- The student can only use the paper periodical indexes on the tables and shelves of the library but cannot use the online versions of these indexes available through the library on the Internet.
- The student can only use books and journals available on paper or microform in the library but not a full-text printout of an article from an online index on the Internet.
- The student can use paper reserve materials but cannot use any items put on electronic reserves by the professor because the library has put them on the Internet.
- The student can use books on the library Reference shelves but cannot use the library homepage and any of its Web links to access full-text dictionaries, biographies, almanacs, book reviews, directories, encyclopedias, style sheets, newspapers, journals, and other peer reviewed Web sites because these resources are on the Internet.
- The student cannot use any source on the Internet that was found using the Netscape search button or an Internet search engine, regardless of its source (even the Census Bureau, World Health Organization, the Louvre, PBS or Yale University).

In an attempt to sort out the meaning of NoNet's research parameters we might consider the professor's possible intent. Is he trying to introduce students to good reliable print materials? Is he trying to avoid unreliable Web references? Or perhaps he is trying to help limit the amount of information available to students so that their work is more manageable? Without explanation, students (as well as Reference Librarians) are stumped, and it affects the quality of their work.

Granted, in the changing and expanding computer world, everyone is trying to make information available on the Internet. However, it's not only Tom, Dick and Harry publishing on the Internet. Databases, journals, government agencies, libraries, and museums also appear there. Information

resources that were once only available in paper are now available in a variety of formats via the Web. Cutting Internet resources completely out of the research process eliminates the opportunity for students to use a "fun and easy" format to examine and critically evaluate information. No course of study, especially in higher education, is adequate unless it helps to develop the students' ability to deal with the burgeoning information in their fields. Educators in all disciplines need to work together to ensure that students become information literate. When they graduate, students must be able to recognize and solve information problems and learn from the most current, reliable information resources.

If your students use Yahoo, InfoSeek, Lycos, or Excite exclusively, they will certainly encounter lots of garbage and may use some of this as the basis of their papers. Students don't have the experience to recognize inaccurate or biased information. What are you doing to help them evaluate and limit this volume of information? Just telling them not to use the Internet is not enough! Teaching students how to limit and evaluate data is the answer.

Dr. NoNet's colleague, Dr. YesNet, talks in class about the importance of finding and using good information and discusses the evaluation of all information resources as she makes assignments. She knows students love to use Web sites so she uses the WWW to help them develop critical thinking skills. YesNet leads students to appropriate paper and electronic sources as a springboard and by the end of the course allows them to explore freely. She:

- Encourages students to use encyclopedias for an introduction to a subject. Britannica Online is on her list of appropriate encyclopedias, but so is The Encyclopedia of Religion and Encyclopedia of Bioethics, among others found in the Reference collection.
- Encourages students to find articles using both paper indexes and the databases available through the library's homepage (<http://www.wcu.edu/library>). She takes the class to the library to get advanced instruction and practice on the databases appropriate to upcoming assignments.
- Warns students not to be lazy, but to choose the BEST articles, not merely the full-text articles furnished by databases. She provides instruction on Boolean searching and other techniques for refining searches that have resulted in large numbers of citations.
- Provides electronic reserve readings for students, so that they can access them from their dorm rooms. Often these short stories and articles are the basis of assignments and she expects students to quote them in papers.
- Considers the Research Tools links on the library's home page, though currently limited in number, to be equal in quality to reference books. However, she also includes the library's Reference Desk phone number on her syllabus.
- Provides guidelines to evaluate web sites. John Henderson's "T is For Thinking" (<http://www.ithaca.edu/library/Training/hott.html>) is her current favorite web guide. Occasionally she requires that the students explain the search process they used to find their references and requires that students defend a Web site's credibility for their papers.

Before giving your students another research assignment, is it time to "go back to school" and learn more about what's on the Internet and how to manage it? Hunter librarians offer instruction to faculty groups and often work with individuals as well. Simply restricting students' use of the Internet as Dr. NoNet does has no practical or educational value. The criteria for evaluating Internet sites are similar to those for evaluating books and journals, and many writing and style guides provide excellent evaluation guidelines. For starters check out the Teaching Tip attached to this page and let us know how it works with your students.

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