

# “Acquiring” the Internet

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The Internet, and its subset, the World Wide Web, host billions of web pages and experience millions of information transactions daily. E-mail, blogging, “tweets,” social networks, uploading and downloading: at any moment new information comes into being and adds to an already unwieldy mass of data not even the most capable search engines can hope to penetrate, much less help to *clarify*. At the same time, information disappears or gets lost amid the noise.

This is a largely unspoken *global crisis* in the making. Middletown Thrall Library has, along with other libraries, attempted to address this situation through the creation of Internet resource guides as well as a variety of public education efforts. More libraries need to join the cause so we can all help to relieve – or perhaps *rescue* – researchers from this informational chaos. Before we consider *why this needs to be done*, let us consider *how* such efforts might even begin to become possible.

Libraries consist of resource collections and services. Librarians engaged in “regular” collection development – such as books, videos, and traditional reference materials – have at their disposal numerous tools and parameters to help them consider which materials they might like to incorporate into their collections.

Among these tools and parameters are book reviews, library-oriented and publishing news periodicals, American Library Association (ALA) recommendations, *Core Collections* guides, bestseller lists, patron requests, as well as potential limits in shelf space and library budgets. Each acquisition can enable a library to meet specific interests or informational needs.

Once you acquire an item, you assign it a call number or label it in some manner, have it processed and shelved, possibly promote it in some way, such as through your library newsletter or a rotating book display. From there, the acquired item becomes something someone can find through your library’s catalog or by browsing your library’s shelves.

Internet resources do not compare easily with traditional library materials. In fact, the very nature of Internet resources presents some very interesting collection development considerations and challenges which go to the heart of librarianship.

Organizations such as the ALA or [ipl2.org](http://ipl2.org) (as well as websites such as [ResourceShelf.com](http://ResourceShelf.com)) offer website suggestions for various subjects, but, beyond that, website reviews (except where businesses, products, or services are concerned) can be difficult to find – or nonexistent. Linking to publicly available information usually involves *no cost*, and physical space is no longer a constraint or a concern with electronic resources.

Now that you could, *in theory*, establish hyperlinks to virtually *any public website in the world*, how do you decide *what* to include? How might you begin to “acquire” Internet resources and somehow tie them into your existing collections? How do you *arrange* such materials and make them simpler for patrons to find?

There are several ways libraries can facilitate or improve to access to Internet resources, including:

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| <b>Public Access Computers</b>  | Provide free access to electronic resources, article databases, and the Internet.  |
| <b>Computer Classes</b>         | Encourage technological literacy and teach basic computer and Internet usage.  |
| <b>Critical Thinking</b>        | Educate (or remind) people how important it is to evaluate information in all forms and to choose wisely when navigating or sifting through sources.<br>* Please see these publications of ours for specific criteria and approaches:<br><i>Critical Thinking Skills, Web Checklist, Why Search?</i> |
| <b>Search Strategies</b>        | Promote more effective search habits and advanced search engine techniques.<br>* Related documents: <i>Diversify Your Search, Advanced Searches, Search Smarter</i>  |
| <b>Internet Resource Guides</b> | Develop guides to key Internet sources and library materials on any number of topics so authoritative, useful information can be found quickly and reliably.<br>* Related document: <i>Internet Resource Guide Development: A Concise Primer</i>   |
| <b>Library Catalogs</b>         | Incorporate key Internet resources (such as government documents or electronic or “virtual” editions of reference works) into your library’s catalog.<br>Also highlight “offline” access to print materials and other items within your library.   |
| <b>Blogs</b>                    | Highlight websites and library resources on various topics (e.g. <a href="http://thrall.org/blogs">thrall.org/blogs</a> )  |

\* Referenced documents can be freely downloaded and printed from [www.thrall.org/docs](http://www.thrall.org/docs)

(continued)

## *Apparent Ease versus Real Responsibility*

Considering the enormity of the Internet, its ever-changing nature, and its incessant flow of information, would it not be *easier* for libraries simply to *teach people how to search* and let them “fend for themselves,” so to speak, rather than attempting to “acquire” any Internet resources at all?

Continuous patron and staff education will *always* be necessary, and yet we know *it will never be enough*: even the most aware and skilled information specialist can quickly become inundated with information overload (e.g. thousands or millions of search results), frustrated, or even *fail to find something* online. It depends on the topic being researched as well as the *quality* of information to be found online.

Other factors include *what tools are being used* and what *counterproductive habits* even some colleagues and library professionals tend to exercise while conducting searches (e.g. opting for the “quick” search engine keyword query instead of consulting a known, but perhaps more involved set of sources, such as databases, specialized reference works in print).

Sadly, so many researchers and library professionals have become utterly reliant on general search engines, and the overall state of research and information exchanges becomes increasingly *imperiled* as more people conduct *less disciplined inquiries* and tolerate and rely on *less relevant and authoritative results*.

Search engines (most of which, we should remember, are *commercial enterprises*) do not necessarily have in their hearts the purest desire to help people find the “best information” possible. Some search engines might produce the *appearance* of such intent through marketing ploys, or indirectly through seemingly “relevant” orderings of search results, even as other engines are far more direct about their “sponsored links” and profit motives. In the end, these *are* mostly *businesses* whose *very earnings rely on searches and followed links*.

Libraries are non-profit entities and are motivated by far more ideal and noble goals: public service, preserving and promoting open and equitable information access for all, among others. This thinking can and must extend *out and beyond the Internet*, so that libraries continue to demonstrate devotion to these principles and a commitment to higher standards of information.

In doing so, libraries can work to fulfill their respective service missions *independently of any medium* and concentrate on the perennial tasks of gathering, cataloging, and alleviating access to information.

So, while it might *seem* easier, at least in terms of having to perform *less steps*, to have someone *search* for something rather than you providing convenient starting points or more complete guides to information, the truth is that such a choice could *easily* produce *new and unprecedented difficulties* for researchers.

At best, researchers will remain inconvenienced by having to conduct a search *every time* they want to find a topic. Had you provided a hyperlink to one or more reputable sources, or at least to a directory where such information might be found elsewhere online, you might have helped to prevent wasted time and repetitive searches (which, by the way, could be costly and counterproductive issues if staff members are the persons searching).

Under far more sinister circumstances, unassisted researchers might errantly encounter disinformation or fail to recognize alternate or superior avenues to information sought and suffer consequently in minor or major ways. A percentage of such mishaps will remain beyond a librarian’s control, but just think of *how many people you could help*.

The library catalog, a “search engine” in its own right, benefits from preexisting structures: classification systems (e.g. DDC), standardized subject headings, cross-references, and orderly bibliographical records. Such disciplined data and descriptors tend to disappear once you opt to consult a general Internet search engine instead.

Now, Internet searching might ultimately be *what the inquiry at hand calls for*, but to initiate *every single inquiry in a search engine*, even when you know there are *better sources elsewhere*, can be seen as being *very irresponsible* and run contrary to the spirit of service many librarians recommit themselves to daily. Librarians owe their profession a much better effort.

If there is to be any talk of “ease,” perhaps it would be better framed in terms of how a library might “ease” access to commonly sought or make difficult-to-find informational items “easier” to track down. Librarians do this for all other media.

The Internet, just like eBooks, DVDs, VHS tapes, CDs, microfilm, and other preceding media, all, at some time, posed a central question to collection developers: **will you adapt?** The answer has always been a reliable “yes” up until the Internet and search engines began to dominate modern research. Libraries must continue to adapt and lead the way.

The risk of saying “no” carries with it nothing less than the very dark prospect of *institutional obsolescence*. For the sake of librarianship, say “yes” – and mean it – and then let the very hard yet rewarding work of Internet resource acquisition begin! Only then can libraries hope to face a more certain future as more researchers go online, with or without us.

Let us meet and anticipate these researchers there, greeting them with smiles (or virtual “smilies”) and helping them wherever we can. Let us inspire in them a new informational awareness. Let them know we care, that we have *not* given up on them *or* the Internet. Finally, *let no one forget* all that librarians can do even when facing informational chaos of global magnitude. Librarians managed *the full sum of human knowledge for centuries*. The Internet is only our latest challenge. Let us meet the task of Internet resource cataloging, not fearfully, but with *purpose, enthusiasm, creativity*, and a very firm sense that this is both our *shared responsibility and our best opportunity* ever to connect people and ideas in refreshing and significant ways.