

# Integrating Internet into reference: Policy issues

By Julie Still and Jan Alexander

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## *Making Internet resources available in the Reference Department*

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**T**he introduction of electronic networks, such as Bitnet and Internet, has given librarians an opportunity to play a leadership role on campus. Librarians with access to Bitnet or Internet are, by this time, aware of some of the things these networks can do. Most are probably using electronic mail and browsing discussion groups. Some may be telnetting into other systems or retrieving materials via File Transfer Protocol (FTP).

This is the case at Wolfgarm Library, Widener University. Two basic in-house presentations, given by one of the library's more advanced users, had led to an increase in usage and experimentation by the library staff. Having reached some level of personal comfort with the system, several of the reference librarians began to discuss how to integrate this new tool into their daily work. The library is often referred to as the "heart of the university." This was perceived as an opportunity to be some of the brains as well.

### **What to do . . .**

The question becomes what to do and how to do it. One problem is the sheer mass of material available on the network, sometimes described as "drinking from a firehose." It is as if someone said, "There are hundreds of CD-ROMs out there and if you can find them you can use them." There are some standard sources available, such as lists of Internet-accessible OPACs compiled by Billy Barron (University of North Texas), and Art St. George (Univer-

sity of New Mexico) with Ron Larsen (University of Maryland), but others are more ephemeral and difficult to locate. Often information is posted on a discussion group. However, one person can only monitor so many of these. The first decision at Widener was to try to collect all the information each librarian had and keep a copy of it in a central location. Thus, an Internet Notebook was started and kept at the Reference Desk.

### **. . . and how to do it**

The next step was to draw up a plan of action. The department needed some guidelines and the director needed to be made aware of the department's intentions. Some of the reference librarians had already started to use Internet resources to answer reference questions such as: "Does Library X on the other side of town have this volume of this journal?" and "I need a book and I know this word is in the title but I don't know the exact title." This last question came when the OCLC terminal was already in use. The librarian at the desk dialed into the OPAC of a larger library in the area and did a keyword search on the known word. The desired title appeared on the screen, along with other related but unknown titles. The patron was duly impressed.

Since levels of skill vary in the department, one of the more active users volunteered to write a proposal with a selection of options for the Reference Department to review. The department decided to start with the first option, the least involved, and see how it impacted the department and what demands were made on the staff. A formal proposal was developed and submitted to the director. It included the following factors:

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- Since librarians have been experimenting with Internet it is likely that others on campus have as well. They may be looking for explanatory, instructional, or bibliographic materials on the networks. The library is a logical place to house those materials.

- Printed books such as *Zen and the Art of the Internet* by Brendan Kehoe and *Crossing the Internet Threshold* by Roy Tennant will be purchased as part of the collection.

- Printed copies of lists of library catalogs accessible over the Internet will be kept at the reference desk.

- Other guides and lists will be kept in printed form at the desk. These include John Chew's guide to sending mail from one network to another and Diane Kovac's subject guide to discussion groups and the directory of electronic journals and newsletters. Published or posted lists of Internet resources will also be kept at the desk.

- Notices of individual items available over the Internet will also be kept. An example of this would be the Supreme Court decision on abortion, which is available full-text.

- Since all full-time reference librarians have liaison relationships with academic departments, all librarians will attempt to keep track of items relevant to their disciplines. This information will be shared with others in the department. Librarians in other departments also browse discussion groups and have been very generous in bringing relevant items to the attention of the Reference Department. We hope that this will continue.

## Working with Computing Services

This proposal was submitted to the director who gave her go-ahead. The next step was to meet with representatives of Computing Services to see if this would mesh well with their goals and objectives. Librarians had checked to see if such materials were already available in Computing Services and discovered that they were not. Computing Services had not been formally contacted before this point to allow the library time to come up with a formal proposal and to get the director's approval. The following points were included in the proposal to help bolster the library's position.

- The academic community is accustomed to thinking of the library as a central information point.

- The reference desk is already answering queries on where to find information on specific topics, what materials exist on a subject, and what is the address of a certain library. Many Internet questions fall into these categories.

- The reference desk is reliably staffed all hours that it is open and the library is open for long hours. Thus, materials kept at the reference desk would be available on evenings and weekends.

- Since librarians are already keeping track of relevant Internet materials it would seem a shame not to make this information available to others on campus.

Computing Services had no objections to the library advertising the availability of Internet materials at the reference desk. Thus, a note was placed in the fall library newsletter. On an individual basis reference librarians have already begun to include mention of Internet resources when talking with students and faculty.

The library plans to monitor the use of Internet resources in reference work to see what materials are used frequently. This will help the department decide what kinds of materials to focus on. If the university community begins to view the library as a resource for Internet resources, extra copies of popular items will be kept on reserve. If it is warranted, the library may consult with Computing Services on the possibility of holding workshops for faculty and students on library-related uses of the networks.

In any case, the library would have demonstrated a willingness to investigate new information sources and to share that knowledge with the university at large. ■

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