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Traveling the i-way

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The emergence of the I-Way, the "information superhighway," has brought many changes and challenges to school librarians. Librarians who entered the I-Way as it was being built had no map to guide them, no apparent system for naming and numbering locations, and the information at each address might or might not be relevant to the curriculum. Librarians have had to learn a whole new range of skills, which includes learning to FTP and telnet, to communicate using listservs and newsgroups, when to GIF, TIFF, or PICT, and how to speak HTML.

Traveling the I-Way without a map brings many problems to the school librarian. Many librarians chose the field because libraries offer an organizational scheme for the world's body of knowledge. My first experience trying to find information on the Internet was like walking into a library with all of the books randomly stacked on tables, chairs, shelves, and even the floor. Until gophers—and finally search engines and directories—came along, trying to help others locate information on the internet required a great deal of persistence and luck.

Even now, with well-developed, seemingly easy-to-use directories and search engines available, the school librarian must work with both staff and students to help them learn how to evaluate the information that they locate with their searches. Librarians must continue to emphasize the importance of evaluating information, emphasizing such concepts as authorship, date, bias, and accuracy of facts. Resources are becoming available on the Internet that librarians and teachers can use to help students learn to address these issues. Two excellent sites are *Searching the Net,* **arlo.wilsonhs .pps.k12.or.us/search.html**, and Kathy Schrock's *Guide for Educators,* **www.capecod.net/Wixon/ wixon.htm**. The development of the I-Way as a Web of interconnected sites is both a blessing and curse for school librarians helping students obtain information on the Internet. The advantages are readily apparent. Students can easily progress from one site to another, gathering huge amounts of information along the way. The disadvantage is that students can easily lose the focus and purpose of their investigation and spend huge amounts of time clicking from one fascinating site to another.

Obtaining adequate amounts of information resources has always been difficult for school librarians. The I-Way provides vast amounts of information, but students have access to I-Way information without its being evaluated for suitability to the informational and recreational needs of the school environment. Materials have traditionally entered school libraries based on reviews, professional recommendations, and the library staff's personal knowledge. Once the Internet is available in a school, prior evaluation of materials is no longer possible.

The reputation of the Internet has caused great concern to the school community. Providing students with access to a vast amount of unfiltered information and the ability to communicate with people throughout the world raises concerns that students will be exposed to ideas or material that may be unhealthy or not advance their education. Each school should develop an acceptable use policy (AUP) to ensure that the internet is being used for its intended purpose, which is to extend teaching and learning. Developing and writing these policies has required librarians to research issues such as district disciplinary processes, due process, search and seizure, plagiarism and copyright, and the first amendment issues of speech, access to information, and academic freedom.

Adherence to copyright laws and their legal interpretations has always been important to school librarians, who seem to have become the school conscience on this topic. Copyright issues require more of the librarian's time because it is so easy to copy and paste portions of files or download entire files from the internet. Librarians must stay current with Internet copyright issues while continuing to emphasize to staff and students that the basic principle of protecting the creativity of the author applies to information on the Internet just as it does to print and audiovisual materials.

Listservs have brought so much mail to librarians' e-mail accounts that it seems like a year's worth of mail arrives daily. LM_NET, a listserv of more than 4,000 school library media specialists, provides a forum to discuss issues and ask questions. Perhaps its greatest asset is ending the feeling of isolation and loneliness of media specialists who rarely have daily contact with their peers. The biggest problem is finding time to read one's mail.

School librarians must be ever vigilant to attacks from people who mistakenly believe that the school library and librarian can be retired to the scrap heap once the Internet is available in schools. These misinformed individuals fail to understand that there is more than 1,000 years of written information that is not now, and probably never will be, available on the internet. But even more importantly, the one person in the school who is uniquely qualified to help students and staff learn to be successful on the I-Way is the school librarian. The most important library resource walks out the door every night.

Learning how to drive the I-Way is frightening, challenging, exhilarating, and tiring, but ultimately rewarding when students and staff become traveling companions on the information journey. ▢

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