"The View From Behind the Reference Desk"

Michael Chromey, Reference/Instruction Librarian

As a Reference/Instruction Librarian for the Main Library of The American University in Cairo (AUC) it is part of my professional duties to not only stay abreast of the latest developments in reference service delivery, but also to teach patrons, both students and faculty, the skills necessary to effectively access resources in today's increasingly complex information environment. The AUC has made a strong commitment to ensuring that students possess the research skills necessary to succeed as scholars and professionals by requiring all undergraduates to complete a semester-long course in information literacy (LALT 101). However, the university does not currently expect faculty to take a course or attend workshops in information literacy for pedagogical needs. In my humble opinion, this can create a significant disconnect between increasingly technologically savvy students and faculty who may be employing the same research techniques they acquired during graduate school and who expect their students to adhere to these, at times, out-dated research strategies. The following "real-life" Reference Desk encounters help to illustrate this point.

Encounter #1:

Student: *"My professor requested that I find two scholarly articles on robotics."*

Reference Librarian: *"Great. We subscribe to a variety of online journals dealing with robotics research. I would suggest you start by searching* the International Journal of Robotics Research*, which can be accessed through the Library's E-Journal Finder tool on the AUC Library homepage."*

Student: *"Unfortunately, I can't use any articles found online. My professor requested that the articles come from a print journal. He wants the original article."*

First, the "original format" for any print journal is an electronic file (Word document, etc.). All print journals are print copies of electronic files. The online version of any journal article *is* in the "original format." Second, the overwhelming majority of the most recent research, especially in business or science, is increasingly published exclusively in electronic format. Therefore, a professor who limits a student to the print format actually separates the student from the most recent and relevant research available. Additionally, the Library has made a concerted effort to replace print journals with the electronic equivalent in order to increase access and delivery options.

Finally, it seems that some faculty are not aware of the difference between web-published "open" information and subscription databases and online journals that are *delivered* via the Internet. The AUC Library pays substantial sums of money to provide our patrons with access to a variety of scholarly journals that are delivered online. As we all know, the information contained in a scholarly journal article published online and available solely via subscription differs greatly in quality from the information published by an amateur robotics aficionado on her personal blog. In short, it is the *quality* of the content that differentiates the two and not the *format* or *method of delivery*.

Encounter #2:

>**Student**: *"My professor asked that I find some background and statistical information on the African Development Bank Group."*

>**Reference Librarian**: [Goes to Wikipedia to find an entry on the African Development Bank to develop a context for answering the reference question. Finds that Wikipedia has URLs for the African Development Bank home page, the Bank Information Center and other relevant primary sources]. *(Tells the Student), "If you navigate to the Wikipedia entry for the African Development Bank, you can find a nice background article on the history and function of the bank as well as valuable links to the Bank's homepage and reports on the Bank's performance from other banking agencies."*

>**Student**: *"Unfortunately, my professor stated that we couldn't use information from Wikipedia or the Web."*

In the above scenario, the professor's prohibition against Wikipedia or other web 2.0 resources may be grounded in a belief that online information resources are significantly less accurate that the information found in traditional print resources. This is not the case and several recent studies have shown that online encyclopedias are as accurate, and in certain instances more accurate, than their print counterparts.[1] With this in mind, it would *not* be appropriate for a student to only use information gathered from Wikipedia articles to write a research paper on the history of the African Development Bank just as it would not be appropriate for a student to only use information gathered solely from articles in the print edition of *New Encyclopaedia Britannica* to write a paper on the same topic. Wikipedia and other online tools *are* valid "pathfinders" to more relevant and comprehensive information. Furthermore, issues of currency and relevancy are more easily addressed in online encyclopedias due to the fact that they can be updated almost instantly. For instance, the content and quality of the Wikipedia entry for "Kosovo" is more accurate and current than the *New Encyclopaedia Britannica* print version published in early 2007.

In conclusion, I fully understand that the pressures of teaching, publishing, and other professional pursuits may severely restrict the opportunities faculty have to receive instruction on the latest developments in information delivery and scholarly communication. As a Librarian, I do not expect faculty to become "information professionals," for that is my job. However, there exists a need to bridge the widening gap between the information skills possessed by today's average undergraduate student and the faculty who instruct them. By staying abreast of general trends in scholarly communication, faculty can be better prepared to assist students who will have to conduct future research in this new information reality. Librarians and teaching faculty can all agree that it is the success of our students that matters most and we should do everything in our power to ensure that they have the knowledge and research skills necessary for the world of tomorrow.

>*Share with us your experiences by contributing to the New Chalk Talk series, or by simply sending comments/suggestions to: mchromey@aucegypt.edu and/or aellozy@aucegypt.edu*

---

[1] Giles, Jim. 2005. "Internet encyclopaedias go head to head." *Nature* 438, no. 7070: 900-901. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCO*host* (accessed February 13, 2008).