



Can You Really Do Research on the Internet?

While working recently with a library user I encountered what is becoming an increasing problem when one tries to conduct research on the Internet. The user was conducting research on vessel departures from American ports using our Early American Newspapers online database. The researcher reported that the list of newspapers available varied from day to day. For example papers he consulted on Monday would vanish from the database on Tuesday and new ones not previously there would appear. Sad to say his experience varied again on other days of the week. What implication does this phenomena have on the ability of scholars to conduct “research” on the Internet?

Unfortunately this was not the first time someone reported a vanishing electronic resource to me. In fact just this morning I was looking for the 1729 edition of William Dampier’s *Voyages*. I located the title in our ILS, clicked on the link “Full Text Online” and promptly got the message “You do not have access to this product. Please contact our online sales specialist at 1-800 blah, blah, blah.” Further research turned up the fact that we had purchased the e-book collection containing this title outright in 2007 and there was no known annual fee, so we should have access right? Wrong. Latest news from the vendor is that “the

collection may have expired for us.” So who in the library gets the fun task of taking all of these entries out of the ILS for items that have “expired” access? Or do we just have a new link to a page for these titles that reads “Sorry, access to this title is no longer available due to budget cutbacks by [insert the name of your favorite] administration? How do we even find out what we have lost access to unless a user complains? A number of times when I request articles recently through our e-journal portal, I will click on the pdf file link and receive a blank page. So why do the vendors say they have the pdf image when in fact they don’t? Or is it a glitch in the system, a problem with my computer, or who knows. Or maybe not. Recently a colleague sent me an email:

“We all need to be more vigilant and proactive in assuring that our library users have access to the resources that we purchased.”

“Ralph do you know your “Wired to the World Columns” have disappeared?” Well, no I didn’t, but a quick check showed that in fact for several years my column had in fact vanished from the *North Carolina Libraries* server. All the other articles in the journal seem ok, but for some reason the “Wired” column had simply vanished. I guess one of the advantages of

being cited in the literature (this was my column on Tablets in Libraries) is that people do look for your publications on the web. Actually this is not the first time an author has asked about their article in *NCL* and why it was missing from the journal. Since it has happened to others I’m not excessively paranoid about my articles missing, but we may never know what happened. A quick restore from a backup file and we were good again. But what happened? Software glitch, someone hit the wrong button? Again we may never know.

According to a 2008 study by historians Edmund Reed and Jennifer Kane, thirty-eight percent of history articles published more than seven years ago had vanished.¹ Some forty-three percent of these

missing articles could not be located using archiving sites such as the “Wayback Machine” (<https://www.archive.org>) and seem to have disappeared forever. The authors see this as a major problem and it restricts the ability of future historians to conduct research in their field. *Science* magazine has determined that thirteen percent of internet citations in three leading

journals vanished within twenty-seven months.² Similar issues plague the medical journal field.³ Some 4.4 percent of leading medical citations had gone away within three months of publication and 33 percent of citations to six leading oncology journals could not be found twenty-nine months later. Maybe that feeling that you have in the back of your head, that the Internet is not a very safe place for your stuff, is true after all?

What I thought was an isolated annoying problem turns out to be a real concern with electronic databases. Never mind the fact that you have worry if you will have the

funds to access all these collections twenty-five years from now, you can't even access what you paid for life time access to seven years ago! What are scholars and librarians going to do? One possible solution would be for associations to divide up resources and assign monitors to check at frequent intervals for access to resources. Another idea would be to write some sort of script or program that would check automatically for access to owned databases. (Computers are supposed to make things easier right?). Vendors could actually step up to the plate and make sure that the products that they sell and we

depend on, are actually available on a constant basis. It's nice to have all these sales people talking around at conferences, but it's the staff in the back rooms that maintain the day-to-day operation of the servers that provide access. How about spending a little money in the delivery of product as well as the selling of it. Things change, servers are swapped out, vendors merge, staff leaves, stuff vanishes. We all need to be more vigilant and proactive in assuring that our library users have access to the resources that we purchased.

References

- ¹ Edmund Russell and Jennifer Kane, "The Missing Link: Assessing the Reliability of Internet Citations in History Journals," *Technology and Culture*, v. 49, no.2 (April 2008), pp. 420-429 (accessed through JSTOR).
 - ² Robert P. Dellavalle, "Going, Going, Gone: Lost Internet References," *Science*, 302, (31 October 2003), pp. 787-788.
 - ³ Renee Chrichlow and Nicole Winbush, "Accessibility and Accuracy of Web Page References in 5 Major Medical Journals" *JAMA*, 292 (2004), pp. 2723-2724; Eric J. Hester, "Internet Citations in Oncology Journals: A Vanishing Resource?" *Journal of the National Cancer Institute*, v. 96, (2004), pp. 969-971.
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