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He@lth Information on the Internet

Editorial: Web dependency – plagiarism

Sue Childs, Editor
He@lth Information on the Internet

sue.childs@unn.ac.uk

Students' Web dependency was one of the findings from the first year of the JUBILEE Project at the University of Northumbria¹. This project is studying user behaviour and electronic information services. Academics were concerned that students, particularly the weaker ones, were using Web sites as sources of information in an indiscriminate and uncritical fashion. The Web was often their first, and only, source of information. More academic, high quality sources such as on-line databases were less used. Students use of the Internet is concentrated on email and search engines. And these search engines are often used in a simplistic, ineffective manner. Some academics felt that because of this use of Web sources plagiarism would soon become a problem. Skills' training (IT literacy, information searching, critical appraisal) is vital.

Library staff at Cornell University have analysed undergraduate term papers written between 1996 and 1999². Students are increasingly citing Internet sites as sources of information rather than traditional academic sources. 'Book citations decreased from 30% to 19%, newspaper citations increased from 7% to 19%,

and Web citations increased from 9% to 21%.' In addition, when these Internet sites were checked many of the URLs were incorrect or inactive: 'only 18% of URLs cited in 1996 led to the correct Internet document. For 1999 bibliographies, only 55% of URLs led to the correct document'. The authors recommended: '(i) setting stricter guidelines for acceptable citations in course assignments; (ii) creating and maintaining scholarly portals for authoritative Web sites with a commitment to long term access; and (iii) continuing to instruct students how to critically evaluate resources'. In a press release

<<http://www.news.cornell.edu/releases/Dec00/WebCites.bpf.html>>

the authors noted that: 'a URL that doesn't work means the professor has no way to check the original document for plagiarism. A viable link – whether in print or electronic form ... is absolutely necessary in order to preserve scholarly communication'.

Plagiarism.org from the US <<http://www.plagiarism.org/>> provides information for educators worried about plagiarism. It defines plagiarism as: 'the improper use, or failure to attribute, another person's writing or ideas (intellectual property).

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It can be as subtle as the inadvertent neglect to include quotes or references when citing another source or as blatantly unethical as knowingly copying an entire paper verbatim and claiming it as your own work'. Another useful, general source is <<http://www.edu-cyberpg.com/Teachers/plagiarism.html>>.

Plagiarism has always been a problem. However, the existence of the Internet makes this problem much more acute as it is so easy to copy material off a Web site. Such copying is not unethical as long as the source is correctly cited and verbatim use of words are clearly signalled by the use of quote marks. Universities can provide guidance for students on plagiarism and how to avoid it, e.g. <<http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/wts/plagiarism.html>>. Proper referencing of electronic information sources should be encouraged, e.g. <<http://www.unn.ac.uk/central/isd/cite/elec.htm>>, <<http://www.shef.ac.uk/~lib/libdocs/hsl-dvc2.html>>.

There are many commercial paper-mills where students can buy copies of essays or commission custom-written essays. e.g. <<http://www.essay.org>>, <<http://www.essaymill.com>>, <<http://www.paperstore.net/essayorg.htm>>, <<http://www.revise.it/reviseit/default.asp>>, <<http://www.zarr.com/student/default.asp>>.

Combating this are commercial

sites that offer plagiarism detectors. Document analysis tools compare an essay against an archive of digital material and look for matching passages, e.g. <<http://www.canexus.com/eve/index.shtml>>, <<http://www.digital-integrity.com/>> (free demo at <<http://findsame.com>>), <<http://www.integriguard.com>>, <<http://www.turnitin.com>>.

JISC is looking at the issue of plagiarism <<http://www.jisc.ac.uk/jciel/plagiarism/>>: *'although there was no evidence to suggest a rise in plagiarism, the Internet is making it easier to copy other peoples work and with little or no alteration students can pass off unoriginal material as their own.'* (i) Five sites (University of Aberdeen, Dudley College, Liverpool Hope University, University of Staffordshire, University of Wales, Newport) are running a 'Plagiarism Detection Pilot Project', <<http://www.jisc.ac.uk/jciel/plagiarism/strandone.html>>. (ii) The University of Luton is undertaking a 'Technical Review of Free Text Plagiarism Detection Software' <<http://www.jisc.ac.uk/jciel/plagiarism/strandtwo.html>>. (iii) South Bank University is studying 'Source Code Plagiarism Detection - Current and Future Practice' <<http://www.jisc.ac.uk/jciel/plagiarism/strandthree.html>>. (iv) Oxford Brookes University is producing a

guide for institutions on good practice and policy.

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1. Banwell L et al. *JUBILEE (JISC User Behaviour in Information Seeking: Longitudinal Evaluation of EIS) Project. First Annual Report*. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: University of Northumbria, June 2000 <<http://is.unn.ac.uk/imri/CurrentResearch/JUBILEE/jubilee%20annual%20report.htm>> [Accessed 22 April 2001]
2. Davis PM et al. The effect of the Web on undergraduate citation behavior 1996-1999. *JASIST*; 15 Feb 2001. 52(4):309-314 <<http://people.cornell.edu/pages/pmd8/>> [Accessed 22 April 2001]

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Contributions

Articles and editorial correspondence should be sent to: Susan Childs, Information Management Research Institute, School of Information Studies, Lipman Building, University of Northumbria at Newcastle, Newcastle upon Tyne NE1 8ST, UK. Tel: +44 (0)191 227 3723. Fax: +44 (0)191 227 3671. Email: sue.childs@northumbria.ac.uk

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