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## Public-Access Provocations: An Informal Column

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Effective public access requires skeptical users, a point that the previous two Public-Access Provocations tried to make indirectly. Just because something comes from "the computer," there is no reason to believe that it's correct--and, although library cataloging represents one of the treasures of the profession, catalogs aren't always completely trustworthy either. But at least library catalogs represent sincere efforts to provide useful, validated, even authority-controlled information. Similarly, although commercial online databases are rife with typos and other errors, it is still true that the databases available on Eureka, FirstSearch, Dialog and the like represent reasonable attempts to organize data into useful information with good levels of correctness. Then there's the Internet, the nascent Information Superhighway according to some, where everything's up to date and the hottest information is available by clicking away at Mosaic or using WAIS to find out everything you could ever want to know, magically arranged so that the first thing you get is the most useful! And, with disintermediation and direct usage from every home (and a cardboard box under the freeway?), tomorrow's super-Internet will offer this wonderland to everyone, all the time, making everyone potentially an up-to-date expert on whatever. Skeptical? Why? It's hot, it's happening, it's now--it's on the Internet!

## Seventy Elements: More Than Enough!

Thus we can expect to have fledgling scientists learning the new and improved seventy-element periodic table with innovative new element symbols. It must be right--it's on the Internet. I could go on with hundreds of examples; as one version of that famous cartoon goes, "On the Internet, nobody knows you're a fraud." Of course, truly up-to-date users may be wary of something that's just boring old ASCII. If they can't chew up bandwidth with neat color pictures or (preferably) important live video--such as vital visual information on how the coffee maker at some university lab is doing right now--why would they want to be bothered? The newest and most correct information will all be graphical, accessed through Mosaic or some replacement. Traditionally, well-done presentations have added weight to content: there was an assumption that anyone with the resources to do high-quality graphics and good text layout would probably pay attention to the content. That was never a good assumption, of course, but at least it separated well-funded frauds from casual cranks and those who simply couldn't be bothered to check their facts. That's all changed. It doesn't take much to build truly impressive

World-Wide Web servers. Anyone with an Internet connection and a decent graphics toolkit can create pages just as impressive as anything from the Library of Congress or NASA--but without any regard for factuality or meaning. You don't even need good taste to build impressive presentations; modern software will provide professional defaults so that you just add your erroneous or misleading text and graphics. Knowing the Source The anarchic nature of the Internet and the leveling effect of today's software raises the importance of cultivating appropriate skepticism among users, which must begin with appropriate skepticism among librarians and other library staff. For starters, Internet searchers must be trained to look for (and understand) the source of stuff that comes over the Net, but they must also learn to go beyond simple source awareness.

+ Page 29 +

Some Internet navigation tools tend to mask sources, and that can be dangerous. There are thousands of cranks on the Internet now, and there will be even more in the future. Given a few thousand dollars and a few weeks of time, I could prepare a Library of Regress server that could be seen as a serious competitor to the Library of Congress--never mind that everything at the Library of Regress was at least half wrong, or at best meaningless. A neo-Marxist crank could create an impressive news bureau and be taken quite as seriously as a major news agency, even if that crank made up the supposed news flashes and wildly misinterpreted real events. A few MIT students with good software could provide a steady stream of Rubble Telescope (or Hobbled Telescope?) discoveries based on creatively modified clip art--and they would probably even have a ".mit.edu" suffix, assuring credibility. (To the best of my knowledge, all of these examples are hypothetical.

I use MIT as an example because of its reputation for ingenious pranks.) What's the solution? Certainly not to restrict Internet access to a few hallowed and licensed information providers. That would be even more dangerous to our society than having huge gobs of erroneous material on the Net and is, I believe, an impossibility as things stand. Rather, if there is a solution, it is to inculcate caution and healthy skepticism among users of the Internet and other immediate resources: to make them understand that being online and apparently up-to-date confers no authority or even probability of correctness on the information they see. One way to start may be to use a different name for the Internet. It's not the Information Superhighway; it's the Stuff Swamp. There is a lot of good stuff out there, to be sure--but it's still a swamp, and a heavily polluted one at that. Wear your hip boots when you go out on the Internet; the stuff can get pretty thick at times. About the Author Walt Crawford, Senior Analyst, The Research Libraries Group, Inc., 1200 Villa Street, Mountain View, CA 94041-1100. Internet: br.wcc@rlg.stanford.edu.

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