

# The Evolution of Internet Training in a Corporate Library

Jack Styczynski

**SUMMARY.** In the last six years, training corporate employees how to use the Internet for business purposes has changed dramatically. The emphasis has shifted primarily to the World Wide Web, and more on how to use it most effectively, rather than on just the basics of how to use it from square one. This article describes how Internet training sessions given by librarians at the National Broadcasting Company have evolved since 1995, and details the lessons of today, while looking toward the ones of tomorrow. [Article copies available for a fee from *The Haworth Document Delivery Service*: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2001 by *The Haworth Press, Inc.* All rights reserved.]

**KEYWORDS.** Internet, World Wide Web, teaching, training, bibliographic instruction, corporate library, news library

## INTRODUCTION

As the person who was originally hired in May 1995 to teach employees at the National Broadcasting Company how to use the Internet, I've seen a great

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[Haworth co-indexing entry note]: "The Evolution of Internet Training in a Corporate Library." Styczynski, Jack. Co-published simultaneously in *The Reference Librarian* (The Haworth Information Press, an imprint of The Haworth Press, Inc.) No. 74, 2001, pp. 49-53; and: *Evolution in Reference and Information Services: The Impact of the Internet* (ed: Di Su) The Haworth Information Press, an imprint of The Haworth Press, Inc., 2001, pp. 49-53. Single or multiple copies of this article are available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service [1-800-342-9678, 9:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m. (EST). E-mail address: getinfo@haworthpressinc.com].

change in the focus of training sessions over the past six years. When I began, the mission was to give complete novices some understanding of the Internet, what it could do for them, how they could get access to it, and how to navigate it in the most basic fashion. Training was actually done on a DOS-based browser at that time, and it was very rudimentary. Essentially outdated utilities such as Gopher and Telnet were still significant, and that was evident in the day's literature on how to teach the Internet.<sup>1</sup> Soon, as graphical browsers and the World Wide Web became dominant, the focus changed. In most cases, NBC employees were still Internet novices, but the emphasis shifted to teaching them how to use the Web *only*. Even e-mail and discussion forums—still used today, but once the staple of many an Internet lesson<sup>2</sup>—had seen their impact greatly diminished as similar offerings morphed onto the Web. The Web had become by far the most useful utility, and access was easily available. Yet as recently as November 1998, Internet training literature still rightfully included topics as basic as “Introducing Terminology and Important Concepts.”<sup>3</sup> Today, most people already know the lingo and how to “surf” the Web when they come into a lesson, so librarians in the NBC Information Resource Center have essentially moved past teaching such basics, and have evolved to teaching employees which Web sites will help them most, and how to find them quickly. In other words, the focus is less on how to use the Internet, and more on how to use it *efficiently*.

The introduction to my training sessions has changed dramatically since the early days. Back then, I often began with a 15-minute lecture, which included a brief history of the Internet, an explanation of the difference between a “provider” (such as America Online) and a “browser” (such as Netscape), and another explanation of how utilities such as Gopher, Telnet, FTP, Usenet News, and the World Wide Web differed (and how they were all *parts* of the Internet as a whole). Many of the basics I taught then remain true now, but are far less significant, and have thus been eliminated from the lessons of today. I do still make it clear that there is more to the Internet than just the Web, and that the two terms are not synonymous, but I don't go into much detail.

#### ***AT THE NATIONAL BROADCASTING COMPANY***

It should be mentioned that the vast majority of NBC employees who seek Internet training are in the deadline-driven News Division. Rarely can they arrange their schedules to allow for large group lessons, or to spend more than an hour or two in training. Typically, two or three people are able to attend a 90-minute lesson. Everyone gets a computer, and is able to see what I am doing on mine as well. I find such groups to be ideal, because lessons can still be tai-

lored to individuals, while at the same time allowing for questions from others that a single trainee may not have thought to ask. These days, most NBC employees have already used the Internet quite a bit, so to make the best use of the available time, I generally dispense with any “lecture.” You don’t want trainees to leave your lesson suffering from information overload anyway. After telling them that the Web can give them access to proprietary fee-based databases such as Nexis and Dow Jones, and asking what sites they have already used and what type of information they need for their jobs, we move right into the “hands on” portion of the lesson.

It should also be mentioned that this “hands on” portion of any Internet lesson at NBC *does not* include training on the aforementioned fee-based databases. Training for those is done in completely separate sessions, often taught by someone from the database companies themselves. In fact, our recently developed subject-specific Internet lessons place an emphasis on the fact that there are free alternatives for some of the information available in these fee-based databases. Of course, we stress *reliable* alternatives, which has always been an important point in our lessons. Many Web sites are reliable, and many Web sites are not, and we tell trainees that it will be up to them to determine which is which.

### ***FINDING AND EVALUATING WEB SITES***

For the “less experienced” Internet users who still come to our library for general Web lessons, one way we help them determine reliability is by teaching the concept of domains, which allow you to both find and evaluate sites. This is usually the first part of the “hands on” portion of any general lesson we give. Web domains are formulaic, and as many trainers will tell you, can often be correctly guessed for a given entity.<sup>4</sup> The domain for the FBI Web page is *www.fbi.gov*, and the domain for the New York Times Web page is *www.nytimes.com*. And as much as you can trust the FBI for a list of the nation’s Top 10 Most Wanted Criminals, or the New York Times for the latest news from Gotham, you can trust their useful Web sites too. Web site domains typically begin with a “www.” Those letters are then followed by the name (or its abbreviated version) of an entity, and an applicable domain suffix. Common domain suffixes are “.com” for commercial concerns, “.org” for non-profit organizations, “.gov” for government agencies, and “.edu” for educational institutions.<sup>5</sup> There are others as well, such as “.net” and various country codes, and as users begin to discover them all, they tend to get better at correctly guessing an entity’s Web domain. This is easily the quickest and *most efficient* way of finding information on the Web. It’s also a great way to *evaluate reliability*, because if a domain includes an entity you recognize followed by the appropriate suffix, it’s prob-

ably legitimate. (One example of an *inappropriate* suffix is in the domain *www.whitehouse.com*, which is a pornographic site, rather than *www.whitehouse.gov*, which is the site of our government's executive branch.)

Of course, correctly guessing domains is not always possible, nor is it always the most appropriate way of finding information on the World Wide Web. For example, many times a user wants to find numerous sites about a given *subject*, rather than just the site of a given *entity*. So in our general lessons, we also teach trainees how to use keyword search engines and subject catalogs.<sup>6</sup> Even experienced Web users rarely know the difference between them, and once they do, they become better searchers. In fact, the only similarity between the two is that they both allow you to find information by keyword. But the search engines allow you to search for a keyword *anywhere* on a *computer-indexed* Web page, and list results in order of *relevancy*, which a computer formula determines by evaluating things such as keyword placement and frequency. Conversely, a subject catalog is maintained by *people*, and keywords may be searched only in the *titles* and *brief descriptions* that they index and list under appropriate subject headings. The significance to this is that search engines tend to be better updated, more complete, and preferable for searches on *narrow* topics, while subject catalogs tend to be more intuitive, and preferable for searches on *broad* topics. It's also important to let trainees know that no search engine nor subject catalog indexes anywhere near the entirety (or even the majority) of the Web, so becoming familiar with several is a good practice, so that if one doesn't find what you seek, you can try others. And that most of the popular search engines allow for more advanced phrase or Boolean searching as well. Each is a little different in that regard, but most provide fairly easy-to-understand advanced search instructions. There have been quite a few favored search engines since I first began giving Internet lessons, but *www.google.com* seems to be a hot one these days. As for subject catalogs, *www.yahoo.com* has remained the most popular from the moment I started my training sessions, right up through now. But being indexed in either hardly guarantees a site's reliability. Evaluating the domain of any pages retrieved will usually still be the best way to determine that, although exceptions may occur when schools or normally reliable businesses host personal home pages.

### ***SPECIFICALLY RECOMMENDED SITES***

Most NBC employees are also interested in learning about more specific subject-oriented Internet resources. News folks in particular usually want to know the best sites for reference, news (of course), business, government, and politics. General lessons targeted to less-experienced Web users normally conclude by going over a few of the most useful and reliable, such

as *www.anywho.com*, *www.mapquest.com*, *www.newspaperlinks.com*, and *fullcoverage.yahoo.com*. I've listed these and several others on an annotated page of Internet essentials that I use as a basis for my general lessons, as well my own research. That page can currently be found at *members.nbc.com/hotsheet*.

For anyone who wants to get even deeper into subject-specific sites, our library has developed a more comprehensive Intranet page that lists reliable resources from a wider variety of categories, and an accompanying annotated "Journalist's Guide to Internet Resources" in Microsoft Word format to appease those who prefer having a printed listing of useful sites. All trainees are made aware of both resources. And as mentioned previously, we are also now offering follow-up subject-specific Internet lessons, which detail free alternatives for some of the information available in fee-based databases. Some of the sites in those lessons include *us.imdb.com*, *thomas.loc.gov*, *www.infoplease.com*, *www.britannica.com*, *www.biography.com*, and *www.bartleby.com*. When trainees come across a site during *any* lesson that they think they might use in the future, they are encouraged to save it in their browser list of "favorites," so that they won't have to remember and type the site's address every time they want to visit. Many already know how to do this, but if not, they are shown.

### CONCLUSION

Thinking back a mere six years, the Internet seems like a totally different animal than the one I first began training people how to use. I knew it well then, but almost everything I teach now has been learned since. The job of librarians will be to stay on top of all the changes, so that they can effectively train the users of the future. In the year 2007, I'm sure this article on Internet training will be as outdated as the ones from the mid-1990s are now. Amazing.

### NOTES

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