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*The Internet has revolutionised communication between students and academics around the world, but this has been a mixed blessing. The sources students find for their work are of very varied quality, and a British lecturer may discover that students are handing in suspiciously well-written and knowledgeable essays with American spelling. In this paper, Gary Bunt, LTSN Project Officer at Lampeter and Lecturer in Islamic Studies in Lampeter's Theology and Religious Studies Department, discusses some of these opportunities and problems, and the ways in which the LTSN and other bodies are trying to help teachers keep on top of this rapidly changing scene.*

Religious studies practitioners in Britain, as in the U.S., will be familiar with the growing trend toward URLs (Uniform Resource Locators, or Web addresses) appearing in essays as students integrate Internet resources into their work. A batch of essays may range from densely hand written "traditional" scripts with no reference to the Internet, to word-processed essays containing substantial material drawn from Web sites. These Web sources may augment or supersede conventional textual resources as research for essays transforms from library and book-based work to the "cut-and-paste" world of the Web.

Questions are often raised as to whether an essay that demonstrates skill in using search engines is academically as respectable as an essay of comparable content utilising traditional sources. The assumption that the more conventional essay is somehow worthier may not be valid. Books are expensive, and many students have limited resources. Students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds may make greater use of Web resources as a means of researching specific types of essays. University libraries may themselves have limited religious studies holdings, with key texts being available only via restricted access. The Internet, even when it does not provide key texts online, can offer a range of specialist materials that are easy to locate and are inexpensive or free to use.[1] Such resources, when appropriately applied, offer new dimensions in the study of religion that can only improve a student's learning experience. [2]

Cost is particularly relevant for those students using free Internet access via their academic institutions. The Internet is a means of widening access and academic participation in higher education, especially for students with limited financial resources.[3] A student may be stimulated, through reading religious studies related material online, to study a particular subject in more depth or to search out a printed resource. Such access is particularly important for the growing number of part-time students in access courses, further education, or higher education, where local resources are inadequate to study a religious studies subject in depth. The Internet

can also open up religious studies resources for people with physical impairments that act as barriers to learning. [4]

Training and guidance for students employing computer-mediated materials is essential. Comparative textual resources are particularly important in order to highlight translations, commentaries, and nuances of detail.[5] Simply providing a student with a long list of subject-related URLs without explanation of their relevance is not constructive. It may be useful to integrate Web research into teaching by examining, within a lecture room discussion, the relevance (or lack thereof) of certain sites. This gives training in key learning skills. Institutional support, technical infrastructures, and training can assist in developing this aspect of pedagogy.

Not all religious studies students necessarily want to employ the Internet as a resource for their studies, and in some cases a "backlash" against the medium has been noted. The majority of entrants coming from high school directly to religious studies undergraduate courses in Britain will have some familiarity with the Internet, however, whilst mature entrants can gain training in the medium if they attend the Access courses offered by various colleges. The widespread availability of the Internet in public libraries, further education institutions, and even Internet cafés indicates a likelihood of Internet awareness among all students. Higher education institutions also offer training in the technical aspects of using the Web.

A balance must be drawn between what is lost and what is gained through reading hypertext. Many Internet users simply print out any material they need. This may be practical for individual pages, but becomes less realistic with Scriptures and primary texts in religious studies. Some religious studies courses lend themselves more to the medium than do others. The study of contemporary religious movements or world religions, for instance, have a wealth of constantly updated material available online.

There is a danger that students may become overly reliant on hypertext, ignoring other key subject sources. This can have a negative impact when traditional academic skills are completely subsumed by technology. Patterns of student work can be influenced by the Internet, given the distractions available online and the illusion that simply surfing and searching for material on a subject is the equivalent of writing an essay! Poor management of research time and Internet fatigue can lead to missed essay deadlines. External and internal factors, including computer breakdowns, viruses, and network problems also influence the patterns of work and the reliability of the Internet as a research tool.

Online documents are not read in the same way as conventional printed sources. A text may be searched for key terms, and other material ignored. A page may link in unconventional ways to other sections of the same site or to external sites. These transitions can be confusing, especially when little information is given as to the linked page's origins. The quality of a hypertext may differ from a printed source that has been proofread and validated by academic referees. Mistakes occur in typing, and these are not always picked up before a site goes online. The variation in commentaries and motivations for putting a site online need to be considered when evaluating resources.[6]

Consideration needs to be given to the quality of external resources available for students online. Lecturers may find that their role increasingly includes being a guide to academically credible religious studies Internet resources. Through its involvement with the Virtual Training Suite project funded by Britain's Resource Development network, PRS-LTSN has developed resources for theology and religious studies lecturers and students designed to guide them through the Internet maze whilst learning about approaches toward hypertext sources. This is not simply another compendium of links, but provides training for lecturers and students in the opportunities and pitfalls of Internet use. It includes interactive material, with quizzes and self-help sections.[7] There is potential to build courses — especially at access and introductory levels — around analysis, discussion, and evaluation of religious studies related Web materials. This can develop transferable skills of student critical thinking, which can in turn be applied in other academic areas. [8]

Drawing on shared experience, lecturers can present lists of "approved" online resources. This is a particularly important issue in the fields of theology and religious studies, where numerous polemical and propagandist religious Web sites are made available as "official" resources, often with sophisticated presentation and considerable funding. With critical appraisal, such sites can provide an excellent means of discovering and analysing the diverse views of those who adhere to or oppose a particular religion. Issues of representation can be addressed as well, since most worldviews have some form of presence on the World Wide Web.[9]

If students are not equipped to analyse or deconstruct religion on the Internet, however, the quality of their work may suffer accordingly. Some religious groups with an online presence have focused on student readers as a means of recruitment and propaganda, leading to ideological "cyberwars" that can spill over into a class setting. Such distractions can damage a class and distract students and staff from academic work. The writer has received anecdotal evidence from British academics that sites presenting polemical views against a particular faith perspective have, in their view, negatively influenced the academic environment.

The Internet seems to have great advantages not only in terms of diversity, but also in terms of currency. The Internet can offer regularly updated resources, including information that previously may have taken a long time to filter into the academic arena. On the other hand, the danger of information overload must be considered for students as well as lecturers. Sites can change regularly, requiring lecturers to monitor any key subject sites closely. URLs can also vanish without a trace! In extreme circumstances, hacking can also alter a site's appearance and content. I had the unfortunate experience of recommending a URL on an online course listing for Islamic Studies, unaware that the URL's contents had been hacked and replaced with pornographic content. Keeping up with such developments can dramatically increase an academic's workload.

For the reasons outlined above, the Web may be considered by some as an "unacademic" resource. It must to be recognised, however, that use of the medium is increasing. New means of access are opening up (e.g., WAP Phones, PlayStations, and digital television), which may also lead to increased application of the Internet.[10] If lecturers wish to deny the application and validity of the Internet as a resource for their students, how do institutions guarantee equivalent quality resource availability? This has serious financial implications. If socially  disadvantaged students are utilising the Web as a primary source out of necessity, then denial of its relevance could be seen as inhibiting access to higher education.

A more serious issue arises over the use students make of work downloaded from the Internet. John Slater, chairman of the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) is responsible for oversight of Web related resources in British education. He notes:

"The problem is that there is a blossoming business in Web sites offering students essays on all sorts of things...I want to stress I am not saying plagiarism has increased — it's that the opportunities for plagiarism have increased."[11]

Several companies, located primarily in the United States, offer essays in religious studies. The influence of  American scholarship on British students using such resources is an interesting phenomenon, especially when little effort is made to transform American English into British English! The essays are written by postgraduates and other academics, and are "graded" according to the quality of content. This ensures that a C-average student does not arouse suspicion by submitting A+- grade essays drawn from the Internet. The availability of subject specific commentaries and other free materials — which can be cut, pasted, and adjusted by students into "original" work — also needs to be considered. One popular company, Cyber Essays, has a "Religion" category that is subdivided into thirteen categories, ranging from "Religions of the World" to "Superstition and Cults."[12] The former category  contains 78 pages,

each with descriptions of at least eight essays. The latter category contains six pages of titles. Essays can be paid for by credit card, and the company also offers a customized essay service. I cannot vouch for the quality of the essays contained in the service, but the range of titles is certainly comprehensive. The issue of commercial essays has been raised by religious studies lecturers in PRS-LTSN colloquia, together with the feasibility of introducing plagiarism detection software such as that produced by iParadigms. [13]

Questions that PRS-LTSN seeks to tackle in the future include whether Internet resources damage religious studies disciplines in Britain, and what coping mechanisms relating to pedagogy need to be implemented for the medium to be better accommodated within the academic framework. JISC has launched a series of projects and workshops in Britain to make staff aware of plagiarism issues and solutions.[14] Discussing the related experiences of colleagues in the United States on these issues would be a welcome development for PRS-LTSN.

## Endnotes

[1] See: Gary Bunt. *The Good Web Guide to World Religions*. London: Good Web Guide, 2001.

[2] For example, during the 2001 Kumbh Mela, a documentary Web site filmed pilgrims' experiences and presented daily diaries of activities. For students of Hinduism, this opens up this significant event, and facilitates a detailed study that could augment "traditional" materials. See   Kumbh Mela — Channel Four Television .

[3] Private Internet access can be expensive in Britain, since it is charged per minute on a call-by-call basis. Internet access is generally free for students, via facilities located in higher educational institutions.

[4] These issues are discussed by the writer in the   PRS-LTSN Web site .

[5] For examples of searchable TRS-related texts, see   Bible Gateway   and the   Qur'an Comparative Browser

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[6] This is discussed in Gary Bunt.   Virtually Islamic: Computer-mediated Communication and Cyber Islamic Environments                                          . Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2000.

[7] See   RDN Virtual Training Suite , PRS-LTSN.

[8] The University of Wales, Lampeter, has run an undergraduate module on this subject.

[9] See, for example, the   Religious Movements home page , for their A-Z listing of beliefs; and   Sacred Texts web site

 for an extensive collection of online religious manuscripts.

[10] See Gary Bunt. "  From Tomb Raider to Tome Reader: Computer-Mediated Learning, Mobile Learning, and Widening Access                       ." PRS, PRS-LTSN.

[11] BBC News Online, "  Anti-cheat software to hit UK students ." 5 April, 2000.

[12]   Cyber Essays . Criticism of the quality of online essays can be found in the article "  Downloa

d your workload

" by Lisa Rivera. Also see Theresa Gillis and Janeanne Rockwell-Kincannon, "
From Download your Workload to the Evil House of Cheat: Cybercheating, Plagiarism, and
Intellectual Property Theft
," Online Northwest 2000.

13  iParadigm .

14  JISC Electronic Plagiarism Detection .

d your workload

" by Lisa Rivera. Also see Theresa Gillis and Janeanne Rockwell-Kincannon, "