

### 16.3.1: Defining “The Library” and “The Internet-” An Introduction

You might think the answers to the questions “what is a library?” and “what is the Internet?” are pretty obvious. But actually, it is easy to get them confused, and there are a number of research resources that are a bit of both: library materials available over the Internet or Internet resources available in the library.

Understanding the differences between the library and the Internet and knowing where your research comes from is crucial in the process of research writing because **research that is available from libraries (either in print or electronic form) is generally considered more reliable and credible than research available only over the Internet.** Most of the publications in libraries (particularly in academic libraries) have gone through some sort of review process. They have been read and examined by editors, other writers, critics, experts in the field, and librarians.

In contrast, anyone with appropriate access to the Internet can put up a Web page about almost anything without anyone else being involved in the process: no editors, other writers, critics, experts, or anyone else review the credibility or reliability of the evidence.

However, the line between what counts as library research and what counts as Internet research is becoming blurred. Plenty of reliable and credible Internet-based research resources are available: online academic and popular journals, Web-based versions of online newspapers, the homepages of experts in a particular field, and so forth.

Let’s begin with the basics of understanding the differences between libraries and the Internet.

**Libraries** are buildings that house and catalog books, magazines, journals, microfilm, maps, government documents, and other resources. It would be surprising if you attended a community college, college, or university that did not have a library, and it would be equally surprising if your school’s library wasn’t a prominent and important building on campus.

As you might expect, libraries at community colleges, colleges, and universities tend to specialize in scholarly materials, while public libraries tend to specialize in non-scholarly materials. You are more likely to find *People* magazine or the latest best-selling novels in a public library and a journal like *College English* and scholarly books in a college library.

Many universities have different libraries based on distinctions like who tends to use them (“graduate” or “undergraduate” libraries) or based on specific subject matter collected within that particular library (education, social work, law, or medicine). Almost all college and university libraries also have collections of “special items,” which include items like rare books, maps, and government documents.

While we tend to see the library as a “place,” most people see the **Internet** as something less physically tangible (though still somehow a “place”). Basically, the Internet is the international network of computers that makes things like email, the World Wide Web, blogs, and online chat possible. In the early 1970s, the beginnings of the Internet (then known as “ARPANET”) consisted of about a half-dozen computers located at research universities in the United States. Today, the Internet is made up of tens of millions of computers in almost every part of the world. The World Wide Web appeared in the mid-1990s and has dramatically changed the Internet. The Web and the Web-reading software called “browsers” (Internet Explorer and Netscape, for example) have made it possible for users to view or “surf” a rich mix of Web pages with text, graphics, animations, and video.

Almost all universities, colleges, and community colleges in the United States provide students and faculty with access to the Internet so they can use email and the World Wide Web, or even so they can publish Web pages. Millions of people both in and out of school have access to the Internet through “Internet Service Providers,” which are companies both large and small that provide customers access to the ‘net for a monthly fee.

An enormous variety of information, text, and media are available to almost anyone via the Internet: discussion groups, books available for download or for online reading, journal and magazine articles, music and video clips, virtual “rooms” for live “chats.”

In the simplest sense, the differences between libraries and the Internet is clear: buildings, books, magazines, and other physical materials, versus computers everywhere connected via networks, the World Wide Web, and other electronic, digitized, or “virtual” materials.

However, in practice, these differences are not always so clear.

**First, almost all university, college, and community college libraries provide patrons access to the Internet on their campuses.** Being able to access almost anything that is available on the Internet at computers in your library has the effect of blurring the border between library and non-library resources. And just because you happened to find your research on a Web page

while you were physically in the library obviously doesn't make your Web-based research as credible as the materials housed within the library.

**Second, many libraries use the Internet or the World Wide Web to provide access to electronic databases, some of which even contain "full text" versions of print publications.** This will be covered in more detail in the next section of this chapter, "Finding Research in the Library: An Overview;" however, generally speaking, the research from these resources (even though it *looks* a lot like what you might find on a variety of Internet-based Web pages) is considered as reliable and credible as more traditional print sources.

**Third, most libraries allow for patrons to search their collections via the Internet.** With an adequate Internet connection, you don't have to actually go to the library to use the library.

The point is that while some obvious differences still exist between research you find in the library versus research you find on the Internet, there are many interesting similarities and points where the library and the Internet are actually one in the same.

Libraries, The Internet, and Somewhere In-between

Libraries	Somewhere In-between	The Internet
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Traditional books</li> <li>• Traditional academic journals and popular magazines</li> <li>• Newspapers</li> <li>• Microfilm and microfiche documents</li> <li>• Government documents</li> <li>• Rare books and materials</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Electronically reproduced books</li> <li>• Digitized articles from journals or magazines found in a library database</li> <li>• Database search tools</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Email between friends</li> <li>• Newsgroups</li> <li>• Personal homepages</li> <li>• Internet Search Engines</li> <li>• Web versions of printed newspapers</li> <li>• Web-based academic journals or popular "magazines"</li> <li>• Web pages for groups or organizations</li> </ul>

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