Wandering the Web-To Your Good Health: Health Websites for Parents, Teens and Kids

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I Hear the Train A Comin’
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Does traditional scholarly publishing matter?

There was near unanimity among the group that traditional scholarly publishing still matters. The emphasis, though, was on the function of the publisher, not the form. The publisher serves as a tool to disseminate information, to promote legitimacy on new ideas and arguments, to ensure certain standards of peer review, to collect materials bound together by certain characteristics and make that content discoverable, and so forth. These functions, in turn, inform decisions about tenure and promotion, research funding, hiring, and other essential elements of the research world.

Many of the respondents, however, questioned the traditional forms of scholarly publishing. For example, do monographs still matter? Does subscription-based print distribution still matter? What about the packaging of a traditional article in a traditional journal? On these points, our panel was less certain. The conventional role of the scholarly publisher remains very relevant, in their eyes, even as the means by which that role is fulfilled may be changing.

To quote one of the respondents, “If ‘traditional’ means publishers certifying trustworthy content and maintaining and stewarding the scholarly record, then it’s more important than ever. The Web is awash with junk and there needs to be a filter. Formats will change, data is becoming more important, semantic tagging, blogs, and wikis are all having a huge impact, but nothing looks close to replacing peer review and the idea of the Version of Record as the backbone of our system.”

In one word, how would you describe the future of scholarly communication?

The answers to this question were as follows, listed alphabetically: different, dynamic, exciting (twice), experimental, flux, multi-faceted, necessary, network, reinvention (twice), torrent, and vital.

It is interesting that these one-word responses foresaw an environment that is fertile, interesting, challenging, complex, and unwritten. This is what I will take away from this roundtable exercise. Scholarly communication—driven in part by technology, in part by economics, and in part by the insight and acumen of people like our panelists, and like you in our audience, for that matter—is in a fascinating period of reinvention. This transformation is in part due to the lessons we have learned over a prolonged period of crisis, but it goes beyond that. We have talked about so many of these issues for such a long time, and now the focus seems to be shifting toward action. Innovations in business models and content delivery are here. We are experimenting with better ways to process and make sense of disparate forms of information. We are developing and implementing tools to make every step of the scholarly communications process more efficient. Not all of these efforts will succeed, and even the ones that do will have their trials along the way. But it is terrific to see the enthusiasm with which our collective future is being met. 😊

Wandering the Web — To Your Good Health: Health Websites for Parents, Teens, and Kids
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Who Googles a diagnosis? Dr. Mom, that’s who! Parents are more likely than non-parents to look for health information online, and women with children under 18 are the most frequent online seekers of medical information. According to a 2002 survey, 72% of online mothers and 57% of online fathers had searched for health information on the Web.1 Many parents look for disease or health conditions affecting their children. 31% of teens also say they look for health information online; they search for health, dieting, fitness, and “sensitive health topics.”9 Health information searches begin more often with a search engine (66%) than with a health-related Website (27%); many admit they don’t check the source and date of the information they find.3

How can kids (and their parents) separate the good from the bad? The Medical Library Association has produced “A User’s Guide to Finding and Evaluating Health Information on the Web,” available free online at http://www.mlanet.org/resources/userguide.html. Another source of information is the Healthline the Net Foundation (http://www.hon.ch/home1.html), which curates health and medical Websites with the “HONcode” designation for reliability and trustworthiness. However, not all credible sites participate, and HONcode sites may not contain the needed information on an age-appropriate level. In general, ask: who sponsors or pays for the Website and why? What are the authors’ credentials, where did they get their information, and when was it written? Do expert editors review the content? If they link to other sites, how are these sites selected? Is information on our industry appropriate? Is each piece of content clearly separated from other content? Are users asked to buy anything; if they must register, how is personal information used? Other “red flags” are unsolicited emails, “miracle” or “secret” cures, and “diet supplements” for complex conditions such as autism, hyperactivity, cancer, or obesity. Even high-quality health Websites require critical thinking; they supplement rather than replace face-to-face visits to health professionals.

Child/teen health Websites fall into two groups (1) those targeted mainly to adults and (2) sites meant for kids/teens. Kids’ Websites such as ToxTown and BAM! are becoming more visually appealing and are utilizing the unique capabilities of the Web rather than trying to copy print encyclopedias. Some teen sites are suited to school and library settings; others are designed for recreational use and/or contain controversial or sexually explicit materials.

The U.S. government is a top producer of quality kids’ health information (.gov sites); so are universities (.edu) and professional organizations (.org). Not all .org sites are nonprofit or high-quality; some commercial sites (.com) are subtle or not-so-subtle sales pitches, while others are highly-regarded.

Sites for Parents and School Assignments
MedlinePlus — http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ — The most comprehensive of all consumer health Websites, the U.S. National Library of Medicine’s MedlinePlus has something for kids of all ages. If you only use one consumer health site, MedlinePlus should be the one — information is reviewed for quality and numerous links to other carefully-selected Website are provided. Articles are information-dense; except for those designated “easy to read,” most are suited to educated adults. MedlinePlus has an A-Z encyclopedia, drug and supplement index, dictionary, doctor/dentist/facility finders, news, patient handouts, slideshows, videos, quizzes for kids and adults, Spanish and ASL materials, and more. “Evaluating health information—continued on page 14
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“healthy lifestyle choices” targeted to kids 9 to 13. Created by educators of the CDC, the site includes exercise, health issues, safety, and careers information. Songs, games, and stories are available for grades K-5, grades 6-8, and educators. Links to other sites for fitness and health. "Family Physicians Online" of high-quality physician-reviewed sites run by the pediatrician-led NOAH (New York Online Access to Health) Children’s Health Center. The site is produced by a physician/journalist editorial team and reviewed by medical experts. The site offers many entertaining features to engage users, such as quizzes, games, videos, slideshows, point-and-click menus, online discussions, and links to social media. Advertising content is clearly marked and placed separately on the page. The site’s search function allows users to search by keyword, category, and topic. A children’s health news feed is available. The site is published by the American Academy of Family Physicians, FamilyDoctor.org is a subscription website produced by Rosen Publishing Online, a publisher of self-help materials. Library Journal chose this site as one of its “Best Reference Sites for Teens”. "Teen Health & Wellness is oriented toward educational use by teens in grades 6 through 12, and materials support curricular guidelines. The site is written in language appropriate for adults in conjunction with a teen advisory board and reviewed by an expert medical team. Articles are short, readable, and presentedin a clean, attractive layout. Topics include diseases, mental health, and related issues of common interest to teens; subjects such as internet privacy are also included.

Go Ask Alice! — The oldest major health website, “Go Ask Alice!” began in October 1993 (a month after the advent of the World Wide Web) as a Q&A site for Columbia University students. On this immensely popular site, the staff of counselors, social workers, and other specialists at the Alice! Health Promotion Program at Columbia University, a.k.a. “Alice,” answer questions about sexuality, personal relationships, drugs, fitness, and general health. Targeted to older teens and young adults “Alice” is a health Q&A Internet resource that works to provide readers with reliable, accurate, accessible, culturally competent information so that they can make informed decisions” (from the site’s Facebook page). “Alice” is lively, youth-oriented, and contains sexually explicit and controversial material.

Planned Parenthood Teen Talk — http://www.plannedparenthood.org/teen-talk/ — “Teen Talk” is the teen-oriented portion of Planned Parenthood, an international nonprofit organization. It provides English/Spanish information about birth control, abortion, sexual health, and women’s health. Health care providers and services are also listed. “Teen Talk” also has pages on Facebook and MySpace. “Teen Talk” also links to parents’ and educators’ pages.

Sex, Etc. — http://www.sexetc.org/ — Based at Rutgers University, Sex, Etc. is subtitled “Sex Education for Teens, for Teens!” It is sponsored by Answer, (formerly the Network for Family Life Education), begun in 1981 by a member of the New Jersey Board of Education and now nationwide. Sex, Etc. is a long-running site focusing on sexual health written by teens and reviewed by medical experts. Sex, Etc. contains sexually explicit material.

TeenHealthFX — http://www.teenhealthfx.com/ — Colorful, popular site begun in 1999 and co-produced by adults and teens for Atlantic Health. Includes local information for northern New Jersey (some for-profit) but also general interest. Links to other teen Websites, including health sites. Questions and answers by category (health and illness, emotional health, etc.) with searchable archives. Includes sexually explicit material.

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**Endnotes**