Librarians' Articles   Librarians' Publications

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The Pajama Way of Research

Mary Whisner
University of Washington School of Law

Practicing Reference . . .

The Pajama Way of Research[*]

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While acknowledging the attractions of being able to conduct legal research in the comfort of one's home—in your pajamas no less—Ms. Whisner notes what a student misses by relying solely on computer-assisted legal research systems. She encourages librarians to engage in outreach efforts that will not only alert patrons to services they might be missing but also persuade them the services would be helpful.

¶1 "No," said the bright first-year student, "I never used the library for my research assignments. I did them all at home on Westlaw, in my pajamas."

¶2 What's attractive about this research setting? Whether or not the student literally was in her pajamas when working on her assignments, the pajamas evoke comfort, privacy, and flexibility. Casually as students dress day to day, pajamas are even more informal. Wearing pajamas signals that the student is in a private place—home, not the law school (or even the local coffee shop). And pajamas signal freedom from the traditional constraints of time: the student's pajama-clad research could have been carried out in the middle of the night, at dawn, or at mid-day—not necessarily during library hours.

¶3 We librarians know that not everything is available online. But much is. Very often, when I work on a question, I begin and end online, and I don't think the quality of my research suffers for it. Yet there might be a problem with the student doing the same thing. Unlike the student, I have years of experience, so when I do a project entirely online, I'm still aware of the sources I'm not using. I know when to get up from my desk and go to a print source (and which one to go to). So it might benefit the student's research education to venture into the library at least sometimes.[1]

¶4 It's not just the books the student missed by being home in her jammies. She also missed some interactions—which can be both a gain and a loss. Many students have reported that working at home is good for their emotional health

1. Nancy Unger, a history professor, told me that she noticed no real difference in her students' papers after her university's library moved most of its collection to storage (to be ordered online and retrieved mechanically).

because when they're among their classmates too much they absorb others' stress. Avoiding that is a benefit to researching at home. Yet not all interactions with classmates are negative. Often classmates provide support, friendship, and even a welcome break. Moreover—assuming the student was not with classmates when she was home in her pajamas and that the assignment allowed students to discuss it with one another—she missed learning with them and from them: "What did you find?" "Why did you look there?" "How did you get to that screen?" "What's going wrong with my search?"

¶5 The student also missed out on reference service. And my colleagues and I missed the opportunity to serve her. In our case, I mean both senses of "miss"— absence and regret about the absence. We take so seriously our mission of serving our primary patrons that we really do miss seeing law students.

¶6 They haven't disappeared altogether though. Last January, when all first-year students and upper-class students in two advanced legal research classes were working on assignments, the reference office was hopping, with shifts one of our interns described as "crazy busy." Not everyone was home in pajamas.

¶7 Still, the students aren't as tied to the physical library as they once were. In the early days of LexisNexis and Westlaw, students had to use them in the library (on dedicated terminals, with shared passwords). And, remarkable as the systems were, they just didn't have some of the sources needed for even routine projects—treatises, encyclopedias, many states' statutes, law review articles more than a few years old. Now most such limitations have disappeared. Moreover, we have complemented the ever-expanding resources on LexisNexis and Westlaw by subscribing to other electronic tools, notably HeinOnline for journal coverage. And universities are no longer the only places with zippy Internet connections. So a student at home in her pajamas has quick, reliable access to primary and secondary legal materials, current and not-so-current. Often the print version of sources is only needed when it comes time to cite them, because *The Bluebook* requires their dates.[2]

¶8 Since we can't count on students becoming aware of us and our services simply by walking past the reference desk, we need to present ourselves to them in other ways. Of course, outreach is not new. Librarians have known for a long time that students are more likely to seek out a reference librarian if they have seen one in class. And what libraries haven't used newsletters, flyers, guides, and bulletin boards to promote their services?

¶9 In the past, most outreach efforts sought to bring the patrons in to use services in the library. (Maybe the efforts should be called "inbring" rather than

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2. We may read statutory codes, treatises, and *A.L.R.* annotations online, but we cite the dates of the printed versions. *See* THE BLUEBOOK: A UNIFORM SYSTEM OF CITATION R. 12.3.2 (codes), at 105; R. 15.4 (books), at 132; R. 16.6.6 (annotations), at 145 (Columbia Law Review Ass'n et al. eds., 18th ed. 2005). In fact, another source we must use in print is the *Bluebook* itself.

"outreach.") To reach the pajama researcher, though, we might need to reach out and stay out—or let the researcher stay out. Even if a student wants to stay home, she can still get help from us via e-mail, chat, or telephone.

¶10 Like pajamas, e-mail reference (or chat) can represent comfort, privacy, and flexibility. We reference librarians like to think of ourselves as friendly and welcoming, but some patrons are—despite our best efforts—uncomfortable asking questions face to face. Maybe they feel awkward, embarrassed, or shy, or maybe they find one of the librarians annoying (who, me?). Whatever the reason, e-mail alleviates those discomforts: patrons can ask a question, phrased just the way they want, without having to stand in the reference office in front of a librarian. It's private, too: their classmates needn't know they're asking questions, and no one will overhear them saying something dumb. And e-mail is flexible, since it can be sent from anywhere: home, the classroom, or the beach (with a "smart phone").[3]

¶11 But there's a limit to the flexibility: A pajama-clad researcher can send us a question at midnight or 3:00 A.M., but we won't reply until we open the reference office in the morning. We don't have the traffic to justify a 24/7 call center—nor do we have librarians clamoring to cover the middle of the night.[4]

¶12 This leads me to *librarians'* pajamas. Like the student, I sometimes work at home, in pajamas (or sweats), appreciating the comfort, privacy, and flexibility. There's a danger, though. Work can seep into too many of the areas of life that should be comfortably free of work, private from patrons and coworkers, and flexible for things other than work. Librarians can check work e-mail before breakfast, but should we? We can take home a draft document to edit, but is it a good idea? My answer: yes, but only sometimes, and within limits. Even though I can read legal blogs on my laptop while lounging in my recliner, I know it's important for my well-being to turn off the laptop and read something else. So, while the students can send e-mail at midnight, I don't plan to answer it then. We librarians have a right to be wearing our pajamas in bed, sound asleep.

¶13 The challenge of outreach is twofold: to let the patrons know the service is available and to persuade them that the service might be helpful. Last summer we

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3. They can even send messages from the library. In one study, "[t]wo users asked their chat and e-mail questions while physically located in the library in line of sight of the reference desks, but they did not approach the desks to talk to librarians face-to-face, nor did they access physical printed resources (one was advised to use print resources, but declined to do so." Lorri Mon, User Perceptions of Digital Reference Services 172 (June 22, 2006) (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Washington) (on file with Suzzallo Library, University of Washington). Why didn't they go to the reference desk? As I recall from her dissertation defense, Mon said that one student hadn't wanted to pack up all his possessions (backpack, laptop, etc.) to go to the desk, and the other had noticed that the librarian on duty was working with other patrons.

4. Through a cooperative arrangement, the chat service Mon observed was staffed by librarians at other universities during some hours, in order to provide round-the-clock coverage. The problem was that most of the chat questions asked for help with access to specific resources or help with library policy. All nine of the users who used chat and were served by an outside librarian "found the initial response from the chat librarian to be lacking in some way, and several found that they achieved better results after receiving a follow-up e-mail response from a local university librarian." *Id.* at 144.

saw a sharp increase in e-mail reference questions from law students as soon as my colleague Ann Hemmens sent them a message saying we could answer questions they encountered in their summer jobs. Many of the students who used e-mail reference in the summer continued to use it during the school year. They'd tried it when they had a strong need (nothing like work to make you care about finding the right stuff), got help, and were convinced of its utility. We need to keep looking for opportunities like that.

¶14 In fact, the student whose comment opened this essay has been reached. The quarter after she did all her research assignments at home, she took a one-credit class in which students collaborated on a public-interest project. Anticipating that the students would need to draw on diverse materials, the professor asked a reference librarian (Cheryl Nyberg) to sit in on the class as a research consultant. The student later told us that that really showed her the value of a librarian, since Cheryl told them about great social science databases they never would have known about. I think we'll see (or get e-mail from) this student again. She says she has some ideas for articles she'd like to write—and now she knows how we can help. Cheryl's presence in the class not only helped the students with that quarter's project, it was also great outreach for reference services generally.

¶15 Instead of lamenting students' decisions to work at home in their pajamas, I suggest that we acknowledge the advantages of the pajama way of research. After all, we like it too (within healthy limits). That acknowledgement might make it easier to reach out to the students, serving them at a distance and perhaps getting them to come in once in a while (I do like chatting with students and helping them in person).