

Introduction

What are writers doing with regard to the Internet? That's the simple question this book addresses as it provides a platform for fourteen diverse authors to talk about how they utilize computer technology and online resources for their own research purposes.

Only one writer in this book is also a professional searcher with a library science degree. The others are self-taught—like me and, quite probably, you—with varying degrees of skill. In this regard, *Super Searcher, Author, Scribe* is different from the other books in the “Super Searcher” series published by CyberAge Books and edited by veteran searcher/author Reva Basch. Those books contain Q&A interviews with professional searchers in such fields as medicine, law, business, broadcasting, and stock trading.

On these pages, you'll meet writers whose computer skills will knock your socks off; they're referred to by others, and sometimes by themselves, as computer nerds. One was called an Internet phenom by a fellow writer. Others you'll meet might remind you more of yourself, if you're a beginner. One says she's a baby user, and another referred to himself as a technopeasant.

You'll hear what these working writers have to say about our new technology and how it has changed their lives. They love the Internet and consider it an incredible timesaver, but they haven't abandoned the old-fashioned methods of researching—yet. They can see that a sea change is approaching—one in which digital technology will replace, in many instances, their beloved print pages—and, for the most part, they are facing it calmly, bravely, and with optimism.

I am grateful to the writers for the time they devoted to answering my questions. I used email to contact most of them initially and, yes, even interviewed most of them that way. Hey, they're writers! Let them do what they do best. I admit I'm an inveterate email user. I felt vindicated when author David Weinberger, questioned as to what part email plays in his career, replied, "Most of what I know I learned through email."

Most of the authors balked when I asked them to recreate their searches, claiming it was too hard to recount an action that occurs at lightning speed. With some nudging, they divulged the particulars, including the URLs for Web sites they mentioned. It's always good to hear about other people's favorite Web sites; it helps us to cull from the overwhelming number of sites out there. *Newsday*, my daily newspaper on Long Island, is aware of the benefits of this type of sharing. Each week the paper publishes "My Bookmarks," a column that lists the favorite Web sites of interesting people like playwrights, artists, singers, chefs, and other local celebrities.

Interviewing a hodgepodge of people who write for a living and who are not professional researchers has resulted in a book where the topics under discussion range from the how-tos of straightforward factual research projects to more exotic tasks like viewing prison inmates' photographs or igniting spirited email discussion with a provocative statement on your Web site for the purpose of publishing it in your zine. It's hard to draw generalizations because each author uses the Internet in whichever way works for his or her personality and way of writing. Nevertheless, I'll attempt to draw some general conclusions and observations about the most important of the many topics we discussed.

Usefulness of the Internet

As I said, each author uses the Internet for his or her unique purposes. But most of them go online to grab a quick fact and to obtain leads. Even the most ardent library lovers admit that nothing beats the Internet for its accessibility, number of sources in one place, and speed. In other words, you walk into a room in your own house, type in a word, and—boom—you may have your answer in under a minute!

The writers—mind you, these are writers who are getting published regularly, so they are good—are unanimous in feeling that they can't use the

Internet for the “flavor” or “color” that they like to infuse into their work. They say the Internet is useful because it can connect them with leads—people who will be valuable to them if they can follow up with a phone call or an in-person interview. It’s this closer interaction that gives their writing a feel of authenticity. Novelist Jodi Picoult says she cultivated a source she found in an online discussion forum to the point where she was finally invited to an Amish dairy farm to milk cows in the wee hours of the morning. It was of enormous help in the writing of *Plain Truth*.

Search Engines

Hands down, Google is the winner. Who wouldn’t like a search engine that delivers just about all the time? That said, some of the writers are still using whatever search engine they started with a few years ago. Others, more sophisticated in their computer use, turn to different search engines for different purposes. Alfred Glossbrenner, who has written personal computer books since the early days of the technology, says you have to pick the best tool for the job. His advice: “It pays to read the online help and search tips provided at the search site.” That’s true, and ideally we should all strive to do that. But some of the writers say they can’t be bothered reading documentation. They just plunge right in and learn as they go.

When I asked for search tips, the answer I got most often was that, assuming you are using an appropriate search engine, you have to learn how to phrase your search query so that the most relevant hits pop to the top of your results list. Who wants to face a list of literally thousands of items and have to paw through them all for the good stuff? It’s not only a daunting prospect that might make you want to run for the hills instead of complete your writing project, but it’s a waste of your valuable time.

Accuracy

I asked the authors how comfortable they felt using the information they found on the Internet. I found they all wanted reliable information, but it was the nonfiction writers, naturally, rather than the novelists and poets, who felt that accuracy was absolutely crucial in their line of work.

The way the writers approach the accuracy concern is to be wary of personal Web sites—fan sites, that sort of thing—and to be more trusting of

information coming from an established organization's Web site. They also agree that you can trust a fact if you visit two or three other trustworthy sites and find the same answer.

Reference Resources

Some of the writers still like the kind of reference resources that are heavy to lift and sit somewhere in the vicinity of their desks. They don't mind thumbing through those well-worn pages; it's simply what they're used to. Bonnie Remsberg, nonfiction writer and playwright, swears by her copy of *Webster's New World Word Book*, which includes spellings of about 30,000 most-used words.

Others are venturesome and have figured out where to go online for word definitions, synonyms, foreign words, and the like. Nonfiction writer and editor David Fryxell found an online reference resource that provides clichés, listed by subject matter. The much-maligned cliché, he says, actually can be useful when trying to craft a witty headline.

All of the writers say they use the dictionary installed in their word processor some or all of the time. And many turn to the Encyclopaedia Britannica Web site for fact checking, but not for in-depth research.

Finding Articles Online

Again, some of the writers like to find newspaper and magazine articles the old-fashioned way—by visiting a bricks-and-mortar library. Others enjoy logging onto the Web sites of the country's major newspapers. Here they can find the full text of current articles for free, and archived ones for a fee.

Some of the writers don't mind paying a fee to a commercial service like LexisNexis, Dialog, or Dow Jones. Detective/crime writer Ridley Pearson turned to LexisNexis for information on illegal organ harvesting and received fifty articles from around the world dealing with probable cases of that particular crime. It was enough for him to get started on his novel *The Angel Maker*.

But cost is a factor for these writers, and if they can get the facts or the articles somewhere for free, naturally that's what they'll do. Paula Berinstein, who writes books and articles while working as a professional researcher,

implied that if money were of no concern, then Dialog would be number one. Says Paula, “Dialog has about the best content you’ll find anywhere. The array of databases is staggering.”

Communication

Email: Where would these writers be without it? That’s the feeling I got from the interviews. Online communication is invaluable to them. It’s a timesaver; jot a quick note, get a quick note back. It’s an expander; it opens up contacts to a universe of people they might not otherwise have met. It’s a social avenue; writing is a lonely profession and emailing fills a need they have for contact with other people, even if it’s just silliness and banter about nonessential topics.

A few of the writers expressed concern that we may be getting so tuned into the digital word that we forget to go out and meet people face to face. But all of them agree that the benefits of email outweigh that type of concern. “Writing a book without email would take years longer. It’s so hard to get in touch with people otherwise,” says Paula Berinstein.

Gary Gach, a poet and nonfiction writer who is working on a book about China, says that email is indispensable for his career. He says, “I’ve emailed chapters and sections to experts for a critique, which has often come back in another color or as ongoing email dialogue. Email is terrific for collaborative work in a short period of time across various time zones.”

Discussion groups: Gary also says that online discussion groups, in which members post questions and answers, are also valuable to him. He enthuses about one that focuses on Buddhism, a core interest: “The Buddhist Peace Fellowship has a sweet combination of news, events notices, and occasional impromptu discussion for folks around the world. ... As with all lists, a main topic (thread) can be the jumping-off point for various and sundry human affairs, branching off, looping the loop, and fanning out in all sorts of interesting byways.”

Chat: The online discussion group or mailing list is not to be confused with “chat,” which is real time. Jodi Picoult says she sometimes enters a chat room to talk with her fans. She likes it, she says, because she can do it in her pajamas and have lots of fun while getting important feedback about her books.

Personal Web Sites

Nonfiction writer and Internet searcher extraordinaire Sarah Wernick says that having your own Web site is like “having a business card with a portfolio of writing samples attached.”

Some of the very computer-savvy writers you’ll find in this book advocate learning how to write, design, and post your own Web site. They say they really enjoyed the process. Do not fear; you don’t have to do it yourself if you don’t want to! You can hire people to do it for you.

The major benefit of having your own Web site if you are a writer is that you can publicize your work. You can also make yourself accessible to fans and contacts in the publishing world by providing an email address on the site for people who want to write to you.

Technophobia

Many of the writers I talked to admit knowing other writers who are apprehensive about using the Internet. They are surprised by this and feel that a writer who is not making use of the Internet is missing out on a whole new world—a world they’d actually be thrilled with if they only gave it a chance. Author David Weinberger of *Cluetrain Manifesto* fame is succinct on this subject: “If you’re writing something that occasionally touches upon the factual world, you can learn more, faster, on the Web than in the real world.”

Reid Goldsborough, who writes a syndicated column about computers and certainly qualifies as an Internet expert, confesses: “If I speak glibly about this, it’s because I once was technophobic myself. . . . Over time, I experienced one ‘Eureka!’ moment after another as I discovered how my PC could help me do what I wanted to do.”

Only a Tool

This last comment by Reid Goldsborough sums up what the writers are saying about the Internet—it’s only a tool. They’d much rather be writing than talking about a tool, however interesting that tool may be. Carpenters don’t want to talk about a hammer, after all. They’d rather talk about what they’re building. As Reid sums up in a pithy quote: “I’m a writer first, nerd second.”

I can't blame the writers for finding my questions difficult. I'm relieved that no one asked me how *I* do online searching. I'm not an expert. I'm only a little older than a "baby user," even though I've been using a computer since 1980. Just this morning when I sat down to write this, I dragged my Eudora email application to the trash icon by mistake—and then emptied the trash. I'm the longtime editor of *Link-Up* [146, see Appendix], a bimonthly print magazine that's been covering online services since the early days, and I am bombarded with press releases every day. All that information on the latest developments in computers and online technology hasn't translated into a natural ability at searching.

But I do go online—constantly. Practice makes perfect, I hope. I search on the Internet for my work as a freelance editor and writer, and I search on the Internet for anything that pops up in my personal life. I'm hooked. And so are the writers who share their online experiences here. Watching over their shoulders as they carry out the very important business of research, the foundation of writing, can only benefit us.

If you're a writer, you're probably a reader. And if you don't get anything else out of this book, at least you will be introduced, as I was, to writers in genres you might not read on a regular basis. They cover the gamut—detective fiction, historical romance, popular fiction, poetry, sociology, writing instruction, computers, and science.

If you're a writer, you're undoubtedly also curious to see what other writers are accomplishing and how they've gotten to where they are today. If this is the case, you'll love reading their bios, which in most cases are in their own words.

Again, I want to thank the writers for taking time out of their hectic lives to get involved with this project. They are here, in these pages, in part because they are accessible to their readers. They have Web sites or email addresses or both, thus choosing to make themselves available to the public. Some writers, I found when beginning the research for this book, prefer to stay hidden from their fans, and tell their publicists to say no to interviews.

The writers I interviewed are not afraid to try new technology. In my search for potential interviewees, I found some authors who aren't even using a computer yet. One, Elmore Leonard—who has written more best-selling mysteries than I can count—was kind enough to refer me to his researcher, whom you'll meet in Chapter Four.

The writers in this book agreed to talk about how they do research. They didn't promise anything more. In fact, when they learned the title of the book and that it was to be one in a series of books about "super searchers," many hesitated. They claimed they couldn't live up to the title. But if you listen carefully, you'll come away with secrets they didn't know they possessed.