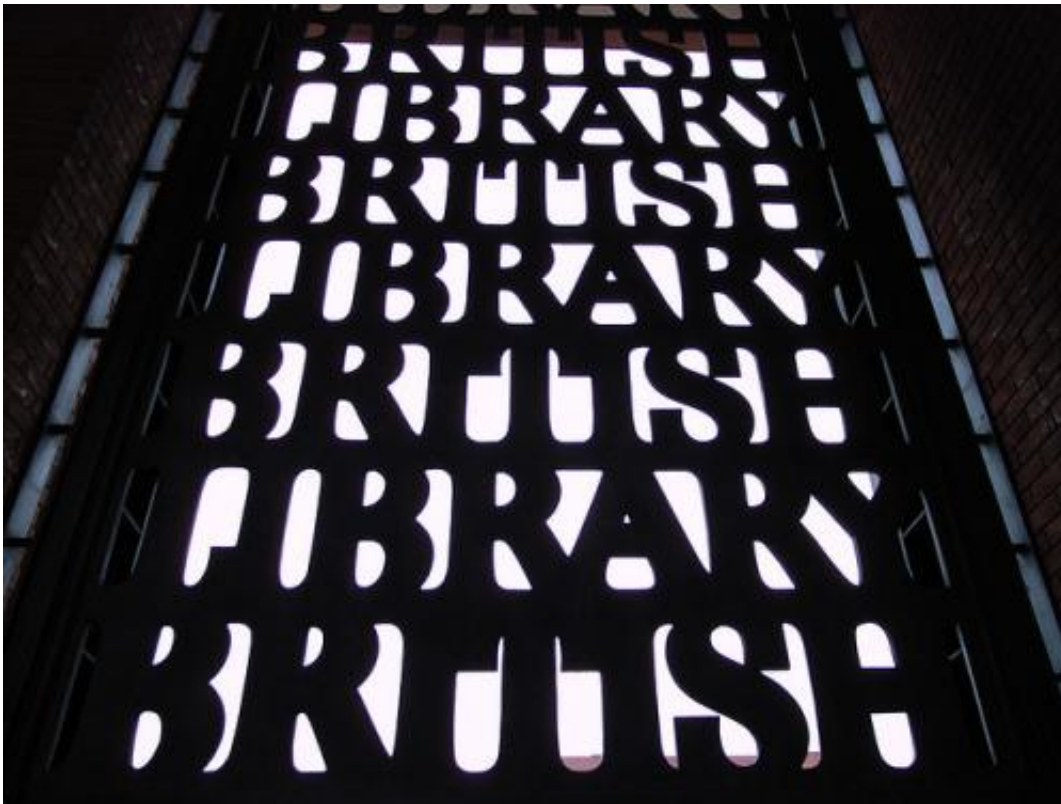


If learners live online, teachers and textbooks must follow them

October 17 2014, by David White



A 'library' today is as much digital as it is bricks and mortar. Credit: stevecadman, CC BY-SA

Ten years after the [launch of Facebook](#) and eight years after the launch of Twitter, social media has become more pervasive and our use of it more sophisticated. It's no longer a place where we report what we're doing, it's where millions of us live out a part of our lives.

So if you're a teacher hoping to get learners to engage with online resources, if you're in business trying to sell products or services, or you're in government trying to get out public messages, it's vital to understand how people now use the [web](#).

Efforts have been made to do this before, of course. Many will be familiar with the [distinction drawn](#) between "digital natives" – typically younger internet users who need little or no support to fathom how to work effectively in a digital world – and (usually older) "digital immigrants" who are playing catch-up and may never be fully comfortable online. But as internet use becomes more commonplace and more firmly embedded in daily life, this distinction is proving too simplistic.

Defining the way we are online

With [Jisc](#), the UK organisation that researches the role of technology in education, and [colleagues in America](#) I've been [developing a new model](#) which recognises the variety of ways individuals act online. How they behave depends on their purpose – what they are looking for, who they want to connect with and how they want to present themselves or their work.

Irrespective of how digitally savvy they think they are, most people will spend the majority of their time browsing online content before walking away without leaving a social trace. On other occasions, however, they go online purposely to meet people and interact. The first is visitor behaviour, the second is resident behaviour. This idea of [visitors and residents](#) defines opposite ends of what is really a smooth continuum, with private, functional use of the web at one end and highly visible activity at the other.

Finding and reading a Wikipedia article that answers a particular

question is a good example of visitor behaviour as would be paying bills or booking a holiday via the web. In this mode the web is like a collection of tools or resources.

Resident behaviour is chatting online with others through social media sites, or expressing opinions in comments sections, or anywhere online where our identity is visible to some extent. In this mode the web is like a series of spaces in which we reveal aspects of our thinking and character.

What people find and use when "visiting" is relevant to how we need to change the way we teach and study. How people act when "resident" offers us fresh ways to work together and communicate. By uncovering and better defining what students and their teachers do online the visitors and residents work aims to help engage students and staff in new way. And, in a commercial context, the same model can be used to understand customer behaviour.

What, and where, we can learn

The [visitors and residents project](#) is being used by Jisc to help universities and colleges improve their online resources, and to explore the relationship between institutional and online cultures.

While the university library might seem the most obvious place for online resources, it makes sense to ensure content or links to content can be found in places where students habitually go. That means Google, Wikipedia, YouTube, Flickr and others besides, as well as the many peer networks where students feel comfortable collaborating.

This is quite a significant shift, but it's one that could transform how we teach and learn. How the web can change things is still not fully appreciated, so educational institutions are only now considering how to

engage students there – and learners are reticent to admit that they use the web to find information, or [social media](#) to discuss it. Students are genuinely worried that their teachers will look askance at their work if they admit their research was done [without significant material from between the covers of hardcopy reference books](#).

Another interesting finding is that relatively few people are "super-resident" – highly active in many different ways, perhaps running a blog, maintaining personal YouTube channel and generally behaving like [minor web-celebrities](#). These will be the people who show up first in an online search, but most people in resident mode behave in a much more low-key way. In fact – in academic circles at least – working very openly online can be seen as egotistical and best avoided. So it's important that efforts to try and engage aren't unduly influenced by a very vocal minority, and to recognise that most people online play their cards pretty close to their chest.

The web is increasingly one of the places in which we live and work and in the future it will be where many aspects of life will converge. People are likely to become more resident over time and to conduct more of their lives in the online environment – the web can empower the individual with a voice, with potential benefits and risks that entails. So it's better that we begin to understand in detail now those motivations to engage, act and interact online that will grow in the future.

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