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Getting Plugged In

How Teachers Can Weave the Web into Reporting
Classes

Updated: Wednesday, May 29, 2002.

Editor's note: This is the second of a two-part series on teaching online resources by [Mike Reilley](#). Send him feedback or column ideas to mike@journaliststoolbox.com

[Part I: Revisit the first six steps to implementing online research to reporting classes](#)

This is Part II of our 12 steps to teaching online research skills to college and high school students. [Part I](#) introduced us to some basic research tools and how to fact-check online. Part II explores some more advanced searches and research tools. We'll begin with some of the most important tools students will need as professional journalists -- online government databases.

WEEK 7: GOVERNMENT AND WATCHDOG DATABASES, PART I

Federal and state government, as well as government watchdog groups, use the Web as a clearinghouse for endless amounts of information -- databases, studies, contact information, etc.

Nearly all government sites end with the file extension .gov, while many of the watchdog groups end in .org or .com. It's important to identify the source of the site as it can help or damage the credibility of the information you're seeking. And remember, some of these sites haven't been updated for some time, so it's important to check with the agency that created the site to see if more current information is available.

It would take millions of pages to guide you through all of the resources available -- though you can explore it on your own -- so we'll touch on just the highlights:

I usually have the students start with the basics: the [White House](#), [Senate](#) and [House of Representatives](#) pages. Have them search the bios of congressmen and White House cabinet members, just to get them familiar with what's on the site.

One of the best sites to introduce students to is [Vote-Smart.org](#). This site, run by the watchdog group Center for Responsive Politics, offers a detailed database of congressional bills that allows you to track how a particular congressman voted, research the background of the bill, track the bill's status, look up the congressmen's background, etc.

I usually assign the students a group of bills to track throughout the school year. When writing obits on a particular congressman (I usually have them write obits for Jesse Helms or Bob Packwood), the students use the database to track the congressmen's backgrounds and how they voted. (Note: The students use many other resources while backgrounding the congressmen; this is just one resource.) This database also comes in very handy during an election year, as it gives you the congressmen's absences from key votes.

Once the students have mastered the [Vote-Smart.org](#) site, we move on to the [OpenSecrets.org Campaign Finance Database](#). This is a great site, again run by a watchdog group, that gives you a quick snapshot of federal campaign funds that public officials are required to report. Specifically, it lets you track who's making the big political contributions in your state, as well as where the money's coming from

(by city, by zip code, and graphically with "money maps").

There are several assignments you can explore with this database. For starters, I have the students track how much money Michael Jordan gave to Bill Bradley's presidential campaign in 2000. I also assigned them the names of Northwestern University's Board of Trustees to see to whom they donated money.

You can track corporate officials to see if they're donating money to congressmen sitting on committees that could benefit the company's success (i.e. Florida sugar growers funnel a lot of money into ag committee members' campaigns. Same with North Carolina and tobacco and California wineries and ag-based congressmen.) The students can use the Vote-Smart.org site to track how some of those congressmen voted on issues key to those industries.

The important thing is that the students must learn how to follow the flow of campaign money and see how it can impact decision-making in Washington.

Another watchdog site I've used to track campaign finance money is Environment Politics and Dirty Money. The Environmental Working Group's site shows which elected representatives get the biggest contributions from the filthiest polluting companies. It allows you to search by state, politician or Political Action Committee.

Opensecrets.org's lobbyist database is worth exploring as well.

For more, go to the Toolbox's [Federal Government](#).

WEEK 8: GOVERNMENT AND WATCHDOG DATABASES, PART II

Some students might have the opportunity to cover state government in their first job or even on an internship. So it's important that they understand what information is available online.

There are plenty of good state government databases. The 50StatesOnline.org site from The Center for Public Integrity allows you

to search conflict of interest databases and disclosure forms for your state government leaders. You also can find contact information, lawmaker disclosure penalties and voting procedure, information on gifts, trips and honoraria laws. The site also has public interest contacts in your state and some helpful Web links.

The 50StatesOnline.org's site also has a handy [conflict of interest map](#) that allows you to click on a particular state to find potential conflicts of interest in the state legislatures.

Poynter.org columnist Al Thompkins introduced me to another super investigative site called [The Public i](#). The Center for Public Integrity site features studies, links to stories, commentaries and more.

Public i.org also has a searchable campaign finance database for [state soft money contributions](#). Political parties registered at the state level raised more than \$600 million during the 2000 elections, and this site allows you to access how it was distributed.

How do you turn this into an assignment? Just have the students track a particular state (their homestate?) and a few legislators.

For more, go to the Toolbox's [State Government](#) page.

WEEK 9: CRIME AND LEGAL DATABASES

Just like with the government databases, crime and law databases offer many resources for stories. However, you won't find many court or police records available online, though there are some pay [Investigative](#) and [Crime](#) sites that charge a fee to search some, but not all, court records.

It's important that the students understand how to track Supreme Court decisions through [databases](#) and how to use online [court](#) and [lawyer](#) location tools. They also can track state court cases through sites such as [Law.com](#).

Also, the National Archives and Records Administration has a

[database](#) of federal laws and regulations. Or for a fun news-feature piece, let them search the [Dumb Laws Database](#) for story ideas.

There several crime databases that students can explore for stories. While at Northwestern, I had the students run the school's zip code through the [Illinois](#) sex offender database. They were shocked to find that there were almost 20 convicted sex offenders who lived near campus. (in 1999)

You can look for your state's sex offender database on the [National Registry of Sex Offenders](#).

For more, go to the Toolbox's [Legal](#) and [Crime](#) pages.

WEEK 10: GLOBAL JOURNALISM

The Toolbox's [Global Journalism](#) page offers links to business, science, government, history, environment, media and reporting resources. I usually assign the students countries and have them background the countries as a beat report, as though they were going to that country as a general assignment reporter. Make sure they list contacts, demographics, key contacts, etc.

WEEK 11: JOINING LISTSERVS

It's important that students know what [E-mail Listservs](#) and [Usenet Newsgroups](#) are available to them.

I encourage the students to join the SPJ and NICAR listservs because they're full of reporting tips and are usually student-friendly. I also remind them that there are listservs available on specific topics or beats they might be covering. Warning: Joining too many listservs can clog your e-mail. I usually set aside one e-mail address for listservs only.

Newsgroups can be a good place to go when searching for contacts in obscure topics (collectors, hobbies, etc.) or for possible "man-on-the-street" sources who are difficult to find (someone

suffering from an obscure illness, etc.) It's important to warn the students not to take information straight off a newsgroup, as people unfortunately post bogus information there. However, the newsgroups can be good for sourcing and making initial contacts and queries.

WEEK 12: HOW STUDENTS APPLY WHAT THEY'VE LEARNED

Now for the tough part: How do you pull together everything you've taught the students into one assignment? Here's an [example](#) of what I tried with some professional journalists at an Inland Press Association seminar: I walked them through a few steps of backgrounding a couple issue-based stories on NCAA legislation, using many of the online tools we've used in the first 11 steps.

In the end, they learned that in many instances, using the Web can save them much more time in backgrounding the stories than if they had done it through searching newsroom archives and phone calls.

Finally, stay in touch with your students. Ask them about how they use the Web when they return from internships or have spent a few years in the field. Ask them to update you with Web sites and software they're using in the field. This will ensure you that you're keeping up with newsroom trends.

I hope these tips and examples have been helpful. If you have any suggestions or questions, e-mail me at mike@journaliststoolbox.com.

[REVIEW THE FIRST SIX STEPS](#) for teaching Internet research.

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