DELTA STATE UNIVERSITY

A guide to finding information in Roberts-LaForge Library

Finding Information on the Internet

The Internet is a valuable and easily accessible source of information. As more and more sites become available, one can find practically anything on the Internet. Some sites however, offer information that is either useless or unreliable (or both) and can make picking the best and most appropriate site a daunting task. Thankfully, several organizations have created Internet tools that make it possible and even easy to navigate through this ocean of information.

Internet Searching

Before beginning to search the Internet, it is best to get a clear picture of what information is needed. Otherwise, it is highly possible to become overwhelmed with wandering aimlessly through too many useless sites. First, decide upon a working topic and then choose the appropriate Internet tool. Two such tools are search engines and directories.

What is a search engine?

A search engine is a computer program for information retrieval. Search engines index web sites by keywords, then rank the results based on the frequency and rarity of the keywords within the documents they have indexed. In nearly all cases, the most relevant web site is listed first and so on. Indexing is done by a computer program and without any human intervention; therefore the quality of the content is undetermined prior to user evaluation. Keyword searching (as this type of search is known as) is very effective if you have a specific topic in mind and are using phrases or combinations of terms. Accuracy depends on how descriptive your terms are. The more terms that can be entered, the closer the results will be to what information is really wanted. There are numerous search engines available but one of the most commonly known is Google (www.google.com).

What is a directory?

A directory is a categorized listing of web sites. The most striking difference between search engines and directories is the amount of human intervention. Directories are developed by an individual or a group of people that have actually looked at a number of web sites and placed them in specific categories. These categories may be set up by directory editors for the site (such as *Yahoo Directory*) or by volunteers. The categories chosen tend to be broad-based and simple. In many instances, most of these categories are then divided into smaller more specific categories for easier searching. If the chosen topic is broad or the researcher is unsure of what exactly what information is needed, then using the directory is very helpful. Several web sites relating to broad as well as specific ideas/topics are available and will hopefully aid in the location and access of quality research materials. The perfect example of a directory is dmoz or the Open Directory Project (http://www.dmoz.org/).

Choosing an Appropriate Search Engine or Directory

The decision on which Internet tool to pick is not always an easy one. Even after having figured out which one (search engine or directory) to use, one is still faced with the decision of which specific engine or directory to search. Companies or organizations make their search engines and directories available through the Internet as a web site. These Internet tools are found just like any other site on the Web but it is in their function where the difference lies. Although one may randomly pick any one of them, there is a more methodical approach. Each engine or directory indexes sites differently. They all have some unique feature that separates themselves from all other search engines and directories. To find that difference, one could read each site's help pages to see how they search the web. That would take too long though. Instead there are a few sites dedicated to the evaluation of search engines and directories. Here is an annotated list of a few of them.

- **Noodle Quest** (http://www.noodletools.com/noodlequest/) – Noodle Quest provides a survey that questions how much one knows about searching the Internet and what type of information is required. After having completed the survey, a list of web sites best suited to finding the desired information is provided.
- **Choose the Best Search** (http://www.noodletools.com/debbie/literacies/information/5locate/adviceengine.html) – This well-researched site provides the general information need and then the column adjacent to it provides the best sites for that topic.

Several search engines and directories stand out because of their many useful services.

- **The Search Engine List** (http://www.thesearchenginelist.com/) – "A comprehensive list of search engines". Sites are grouped by broad subject types with a brief description and links provided for each site.
- **Google (**http://www.google.com) -- Quite possibly the best relevancy-ranked search engine available.
- **Librarians' Index to the Internet** (http://lii.org) – This site offers a topical arrangement of Internet sites similar to that created by dmoz. One can browse a topic or perform keyword searches. The advantage here is that librarians have indexed all of these sites and theoretically included the best of the best.

Search Tips

- Each company/organization's search engine/index has slightly different advanced search features. The advanced search is helpful in the event that you are looking for a combination of different types of information such as names AND date AND title.
- Most results are ranked according to relevance. In the event that you get thousands of results, chances are that the sites at the lower end are not very relevant to your search.
- To retrieve sites with all the terms you have entered, try AND or +.
- To eliminate terms, try NOT or -. (*Note:* some search engines will not recognize a lower case "and" or "not." Be sure to use capital letters for those operators.
- To search for a phrase, try WITH or put quotation marks around it ("delta state university").
- When searching for a common word or phrase, too many results may occur. Try, instead, using synonyms that may not occur as frequently.
- If you do not find the information you are looking for in a specific site or if you get an error message that the site has moved, try going to originating web site. It is possible that what you are looking for is still on the same server but in a different location.
- Remember that each search engine and directory is different. Therefore, consult the "Help" section for explanations concerning how each engine performs searches. Each engine will have different searching options as well and this will also be explained in the "Help" files.

Evaluating Web Sites

After having decided on search terms, picked the appropriate search engine or directory and have a list of several sites that may be useful, now source evaluations are needed. Evaluating any source for its quality is probably the most important part of any search. Internet sources are no different. Below is a basic criterion for evaluating web sites for content and usefulness.

Authority	Who is responsible for the page? What is the domain of the document? What are the author's qualifications? Can these qualifications be verified? Is there any contact information to verify what is on the site? Is the author of the page separate from the Webmaster?
Accuracy	Can you verify or corroborate in another source what is on the web site? Are there too many obvious errors in the page?
Scope	What area does the Web site cover and how in-depth is it?
Currency	Is the information dated? (information may be dated but still be relevant) How often is the page updated? Is the material regularly checked and update as needed? How many dead links are on the page?
Relevance	What is the bias, if any, of the author? What goals/objectives does the page meet? Who is the intended audience? What is the purpose of the document and why was it produced?

Below is a listing of the most common types of sites found on the Internet. This may also help in deciding the quality or usefulness of a site.

.com/.net – probably the most prevalent types on the Internet, .com and .net sites are commercial in nature and are usually promoting or selling something. There will be a substantial amount of advertising. Do not discount these types of sites however. Valuable information can be found in them. (www. amazon.com and www. magnify.net)

.edu – any university or education related institution that has a Web presence will have an .edu designation (http://www.deltastate.edu). Although these sites are mainly for promoting the institution and describing the programs and services of the particular institution, there are often many sites by faculty or groups on campus hosted by the main server.

.gov – The government has a strong web presence. In recent years, the government has made an effort to place as much information relating to the government as possible on the Internet. You can gain access to several documents including bills and laws passed (http://www.access.gpo.gov/su_docs/index.html) as well as information on what the Wildlife and Fisheries Department is doing. Government sites are a wealth of valuable information. In .edu and .gov sites, there will be very little, if any, advertising.

.org – Several non-profit organizations host their own web sites. If you are looking for information on a particular organization such as Red Cross (www.redcross.org), you can always go to their web site to find what you need.

Have a Question? Ask a Librarian
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