

REFERENCE NOTES

A program of the Minnesota Higher Education Services Office (HESO) at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities

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True or False: Internet Search Myths

“Finding anything in cyberspace is a challenge. Electronic information is invisible, and the contents of a collection of electronic documents offer none of the visual cues that humans rely on to locate either what they seek or where they stand in this invisible space. Under such conditions, searching may often seem like a quagmire, with patches of hidden quicksand ready to snatch the unwary. It comes as no surprise, then, that search engines are viewed with some suspicion.” (Feldman and Liddy, p. 68)

Search engines viewed with suspicion? Some librarians can’t imagine what they would do without searching the Internet, which has become an integral reference tool in many libraries. But, how well do you really know your favorite search engines? Susan Feldman and Elizabeth Liddy recently dispelled some misconceptions and cleared the waters in “The Searching Quagmire.” (*Searcher: The Magazine for Database Professionals*, May 2001, 67-75. Fulltext is available in Expanded Academic ASAP and InfoTrac OneFile, which are licensed by MINITEX for libraries statewide through ELM.)

Below, we’ve summarized a few of their points to help you make your way through the shifting sands. While some of these ideas might be old news to you, it helps to be reminded of the jungle we encounter with each Internet search. Inside, we take a look at evaluating Internet information. Watch future issues for additional information to help make you a savvy Web searcher.



Search engines cover the whole Web

There are several dimensions to this issue. First, it is important to know how search engines work. “In order to search, a search engine must have an index of terms to search against. This is created by gathering the text of millions of Web pages and then creating an alphabetical list of words with ties to their locations in each Web page indexed...In order to create this index, each Web search engine sends a *crawler*, *spider*, or *bot* out to forage on the Web” (70). Due to the sheer and ever-growing size of the Web, no search engine has been able to gather everything available. Plus, new material comes up every day.

Second, it is estimated that about 50 percent of the Web is not publicly or easily available, thus it isn’t likely covered by search engines. The “invisible Web” consists of pages hidden by firewalls or by software that blocks crawlers, information in formats other than HTML text, and information contained in databases.

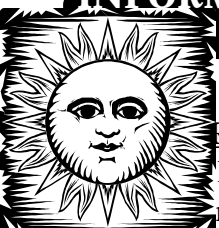


Search engines perform live Web searches

Search engines actually search their own indexes, NOT the live version of Web pages. This explains why your search results might include dead links or the page content doesn’t seem to match your search. Since the search engine’s spider or crawler last visited, pages may have changed or moved. Likewise, sites with information on recent events might not be found because the crawler or spider hasn’t yet visited the pages.

(True or False” continued on page 2)

INFORMATION BITS



Reference has moved!

left the basement of
 ry and joined most of the
 MINITEX staff in the Elmer Andersen
 Library. The only contact information
 that has changed is the fax number--
 we’re now using the main MINITEX
 fax at 612-624-4508. If you’re in the
 vicinity, stop by to see our new digs.

MINITEX Reference at fall conferences

We’re scheduled to present sessions on the Electronic Library for Minnesota databases at both the MLA and MEMO conferences during October. Watch for more information next month.

All search engines cover the same sites

Several studies have shown that each search engine covers only a fraction of the Web, and this coverage usually doesn't overlap what other search engines cover. Work by Greg Notess estimates overlap of 20 percent or less between any two search engines. Thus, doing a "comprehensive" search requires several search engines.

Search engines are all the same

"Search engine" has become a fairly generic term for any tool that helps you search for information on the Web. Important distinctions exist, however, between directories (e.g., Yahoo!) and search engines (e.g., Google). Directories are compiled by human selectors/indexers and allow for browsing through the hierarchy of a classification scheme. Search engines' automatically compiled indexes cover many more sites and allow for needle-in-a-haystack retrieval. Even within the group of search engines, conventions for handling phrases, plurals, Boolean operators, how much of a page or site is indexed, and ranking vary widely — not to mention the size of each search engine's index.

In conclusion, Feldman and Liddy drive their message home with an analogy: "Like tools in the non-virtual world, search engines can make your life harder or easier. Using a spackling knife to hammer in a nail is probably futile. Do you blame the spackling knife for not being a good hammer or do you learn how to use each tool appropriately? Perhaps the cyberworld is more like reality than we think." (75).

This free directory is produced by the Minnesota Department of Agriculture. It is published annually as a statewide guide to "direct from the farm" Minnesota Grown products. There are two versions: print and online. The print directory was first published in 1981 and has grown significantly as locally produced foods have become popular with consumers. It now contains over 400 grower listings and print distribution has grown to approximately 200,000 copies. Some products included in the directory are honey, mushrooms, alpacas, duck, wild rice, dried flowers, herbs, and popcorn.

The print and online directories allow you to search for products and services in four different ways. First, you can search by area. The directory has separated Minnesota into five regions and contains a map identifying those regions as Northwest, Northeast, Twin Cities Metro, Southwest, and Southeast. Within each region there is also a breakdown by county and then city. Second, you can search by a farm or market name by referring to the "Farm/Market Alphabetical Index." Third, you can search for products or services by using the "Product Index," which lists products and services alphabetically. Finally, you can search by scanning the pages for "Product Icons."

Product Icons are divided into four categories: Miscellaneous Items like farm tours, fresh fruits and vegetables; Ornamental Products like Christmas trees; Specialty Food Products; and Specialty Meats, Dairy, and Other. Fruit and vegetable growing seasons and peak times are also included in the descriptions. Each farm or market directory listing contains contact information, including phone numbers, seasonal dates and hours open, an email or Web address (if available), location details, and descriptions of products sold.

The online version of the Directory begins with an editorial outlining reasons for buying locally grown products, links to complimentary Web sites, and a brief description of the Minnesota Grown program. The online version allows you to download the Minnesota Grown Directory and the Specialty Meats Directory and provides a link for ordering print directories. To access the online version, connect to <http://www.mda.state.mn.us/mngrown>. You can also contact the Minnesota Grown Answerline at 800-657-3878 or via email at mngrown@state.mn.us.

Reference Notes

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Temple, Heidi Armstrong.....612-626-9843, htemple@umn.edu
Main Website.....www.minitex.umn.edu
Reference Email.....ref@othello.lib.umn.edu
Office Hours.....Mon-Fri., 8:00am-4:30pm
Reference Intake Form.....
.....http://kinglear.lib.umn.edu/reference/refdb