



Networking: the Webscout

by Amanda Bennett

The Net is massive. Just the Web alone houses some 500 million pages of text, and millions are added daily. How many times have you entered a keyword into Yahoo or Altavista only to wade through irrelevant results and sites of little interest? So if you need to find something – particularly if you want to research it in depth – you are going to need some help. There are three basic types of Web search tools: search engines, search agents and hand-built directories that differ by how and what they search. Try using several for any particular search to get a feel for the differences in the sites they pull up.

A promising newcomer is:

<http://www.google.com>

- Its homepage could not be simpler, a single input box and not a banner ad in sight. It has a large database, an intelligent system of ranking hits by relevancy, and local cache access to pages that have disappeared since its last crawl (the program periodically “crawls“ around the internet looking for new sites) or are otherwise unavailable. Check it out, it looks set to become a future champ!

If you need more results, rather than visit several engines in turn query them simultaneously using a search agent. Good examples are:

<http://www.copernic.com>

- A more sophisticated program that can query several search engines at once. It filters out duplicates, displays the results on a single page and even retrieves them automatically for off-line browsing. You can download the Copernic 2000 package for free, so don't delay!

<http://www.dogpile.com>

- Another powerful meta-index that searches "best of breed" search engines. Currently twenty-five search engines are supported. Great for searching for extremely obscure topics.

For a variant on this theme try:

<http://www.kenjin.com>

- Kenjin is a consumer offering from the "knowledge management" software house Autonomy. Knowledge management is one of the current hot topics, the theory being that these tools can mine through vast expanses of unstructured information on the Internet and deliver relevant packets of information to individuals based on their pattern of PC use. This free download sits on the desktop and responds automatically to the content of new documents, e-mails and web pages, suggesting recommended links to relevant information (information not just on the web but on your local PC, network and those of similar minds in the Kenjin community). The hype is intoxicating: "Kenjin obviates the need for search engines" - but whether people take to this new kind of subliminal agent remains to be seen!

Other sites of interest for this issue's web watch are:

<http://www.ingenta.com>

- A global medical information portal. Ingenta.com provides free comprehensive article searching and personalised delivery of new research material. The site also fosters subject-specific online communities in co-operation with key content providers.

<http://www.dianthus.co.uk/resources/statistics/statistics.htm>

- A site intended to provide information on statistical topics that should be of use to medical writers. The aim is to alert medical writers to the problems they may face in interpreting and presenting statistical analyses rather than to explain how to do the analyses.

<http://www.bartleby.com/141>

- English usage in a nutshell. This site contains Strunk's classic reference book. The Elements of Style – a must-have for any writer. Believing that one must first know the rules to break them, it briefly outlines the principal requirements of plain English style and concentrates attention on the rules of usage and principles of composition most commonly violated.

<http://leo.stcloudstate.edu>

- This site is a nicely organised and fairly extensive collection of self-help documents on the writing process, organisation and cohesion, grammar, punctuation, citing sources, stylistic concerns, different types of writing, etc. The site makes use of examples to illustrate grammar and punctuation rules. It is probably the best place to start if you need a brush-up on English grammar or don't understand a particular grammatical rule. The documents are indexed by general area and also as links from a sort of questionnaire to which the user responds.

<http://www.grammarbook.com>

- An easy-to-use reference guide and workbook which is now available as an on-line resource. This is an indispensable and entertaining guide for writers, proofreaders, and editors. Use this site to find the answers to your questions concerning proper English grammar and punctuation.

<http://www.safemedication.com>

- This searchable database features more than 650 drugs and includes brand and generic names. Important information on how to take medicines, potential side effects, storage recommendations, and precautions are discussed in easy-to-understand language.

If you should come across an interesting or useful website that you think fellow writers would enjoy, please send the URL of the site to Bennetta@iconuk.com. Also, let me know if there is a particular area or topic that you would like to see included.

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