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Make the web work for you

The story goes that the internet puts the world at your fingertips, but the wealth of information can make finding things all the more difficult. Jim Haryott takes a look at online search engines and shows you how to make sure they get straight to the point

If your local library expanded its collection of titles at breakneck speed without properly cataloguing them, you'd be pretty flummoxed when it came to finding something you wanted.

That's how using the web feels. It grows and grows until it's no longer easy to know how to find what you're after online. If you're not overly web-savvy, it can be very tricky indeed.

Step forward search engines, without which the web would be nigh-on unusable. They are the online equivalent of a cataloguing system but, given the size of the web, they're not always successful at locating what you are looking for. To understand the mammoth job they have on their hands, type the words Gulf War into a search engine such as Google (www.google.com). You'll find those two keywords are matched in some 1,760,000 web pages.

Even with a search engine trawling the web can feel like looking for a needle

in a haystack. But there are certain tricks you can employ to make your search easier, more profitable and less frustrating.

At a crawling pace

Before diving straight into a search engine, it helps to know just what makes them work and what different types exist. As a rule of thumb, there are three types of search engine: crawler-based engines, human-powered ones and ones that combine the two. The former are the most popular – one of the web's most popular search engines, Google, uses a crawler-based engine as do HotBot (www.hotbot.com) and AltaVista (<http://uk.altavista.com>).

Crawler-based engines send out a software robot known variously as a 'spider' or 'crawler' that travels across the web looking for particular words. The information the spider brings back is catalogued by the search engine

for you to view. The spider is sent out on a regular basis – around once every two months – and any changes it finds will eventually be reflected in the listing.

Although most crawler-based search engines work in roughly the same way, sending out spiders and indexing what they find, the words they search for and the way they index their findings changes from engine to engine. This is why if you type the same keywords into two engines you will get different results.

In the army now

Human-powered search engines, or directories, have a voluntary army of editors who add web pages to the directory and review them individually. A good example is the Open Directory Project (<http://dmoz.org>). It's a non-commercial site, so it's free of pop-up ads. Other directories such as Yahoo (<http://uk.yahoo.com>) use crawler-based

Advanced searches

Google's Advanced Search page allows you to narrow down a search using various parameters such as the date it was modified or the language it's written in. You can even search within a single URL.

For protective parents, Google can limit offensive content – click on Filter Using SafeSearch to enable it.



1 Click the Advanced Search hyperlink next to the search box on the Google home page to access the search options page. Here you can specify exactly what you're after to get more targeted results. You can also specify safe filtering to stop adult-content websites being listed

Within the Google Preferences page (www.google.co.uk/preferences) you can then select how strict you want the filter to be. You can look for specific images by going to <http://images.google.com> and if it's up-to-date news from loads of different sources you're after, try Google News at <http://news.google.com>.



2 To find pictures of your search item, hit the Images tab on the Google home page then type in what you're looking for. You might want to use Boolean terms (for instance, 'Beatles-insect') or John, Paul, George and Ringo might not be the only eight-legged friends in your results. For more on Boolean searches, see page 125

Getting results

There is a whole gamut of tricks you can employ – from the simple to the complex – to help you hit the nail on the head when you're searching the web.

- **Perfect match** Always try to be as specific as possible when keying in a search. If you're looking for sites relating to the history of Stonehenge, you can do better than just typing 'Stonehenge' into the search bar. Type 'History Stonehenge' to avoid irrelevant results. Be specific in your terminology. If you're looking for a weekly cleaner, typing 'Cleaner' will not get you very far. 'Domestic Help' will get healthier results.

- **Location, location, location** Another trick is to type the relevant country (or town) in order to narrow your search even further. So, if you're looking for a UK-based shoe store, always type UK after the search.

- **Order, order** It can also help to enclose a phrase or term in quote marks so that the search engine knows to look for those words in that order, rather than just pages that randomly feature those keywords.

- **Canny browsing** By checking out a site's links you may eventually get to where you want to be.

Get to know your search engine

As well as simple tips and Boolean searching, many search engines offer plenty of advanced search tools for you to play with. Here's an idea of the features on offer in some of the more popular web search engines.

- **AltaVista** (<http://uk.altavista.com>) Californian-based AltaVista offers news and images searching. Select a tab on the home page above the search bar if you want to search solely for video or audio files.
- **Ask Jeeves** (www.askjeeves.co.uk) Ask Jeeves works slightly differently to some engines in that, as well as having standard search capabilities, it also has an index of common questions asked by web users. The whole idea is that you type the question in as you might ask it to another person. For example, typing in 'How much does the London Eye cost?' brings up sites relevant not just to the London Eye, but also those that sell tickets for it.
- **Google** (www.google.com) We've covered some of Google's advanced features elsewhere in this workshop, but there are two others particularly worthy of mention. First is the I'm Feeling Lucky button. Clicking this will return just one result that Google deems to be most relevant to your search, by choosing the site that has had the most visitors. This saves you the hassle of cycling through pages and pages of search results. Of course, the down side is that it could return a completely irrelevant page.
Second is the Similar Pages feature. So if you search for BBC History on Google, click on Similar Pages which can be found at the bottom of the BBC History search result. Google will return what it considers to be similar pages, such as The History Channel. It's a quick way of broadening your net knowledge of a particular subject.
- **HotBot** (www.hotbot.com) Part of the Lycos empire, HotBot has a handy feature – it will let you search using either HotBot, Google or Ask Jeeves. In addition, you can choose between the different engines' Advanced Search features in the same way.
- **Lycos** (www.lycos.co.uk) Lycos allows you to search in any of 46 different languages, from Afrikaans to Welsh. If you're not interested in all the added extras such as the directory channels and chat pages you can access just the Lycos search bar at Speed Search (www.lycos.co.uk/search/slim). Like some other engines, Lycos also allows you to search exclusively for images. Simply select the Images button on the search bar and you're off.
- **MSN** (www.msn.co.uk) Many of the advanced features found in one search engine can be found in another and MSN is no different in that respect. Its Advanced Search page at <http://uk.search.msn.com/advanced.aspx> allows you to restrict or widen the file type you're searching for. It currently defaults to searching for HTML files, plus Microsoft Word, Excel, PowerPoint and PDF/Adobe Acrobat files. You can narrow this down if you want or add other file types – such as MP3s or AVI video files.
- **Yahoo** (<http://uk.yahoo.com>) Part directory, part crawler-based search engine, Yahoo has two sections to its Advanced Search page, one for a standard search and one for a search through the directory.

search engines along with a large directory of sites kept up to date by staff.

There is another type of search engine known as a metasearch. These sites – such as Search.com (www.search.com) and Dogpile (www.dogpile.com) – don't index their own sites, but instead 'piggyback' on the results picked up by other search engines. They even allow you to choose which search engines to use.

To try this for yourself go to the Dogpile site, click on Advanced Search (situated just beneath the search bar) and select or deselect the engines you want to use.

Feeding frenzy

But it's not just metasearch engines that haul in search results from other sources. In fact, many search engines feed off one another for their results.

For example, when you search on AOL's site (www.aol.co.uk), you are in fact using Google, which provides all the AOL UK results. This is clearly stated on AOL's site, but other tie-ups are less clear. Often, sites that run crawler-based searches as well as directories get their results from different sources. Google, Lycos and AOL, for example, all get results from The Open Directory Project.

Funky extras

Many search engines offer extremely useful extras that aren't necessarily linked to searching. Google and AltaVista, among others, offer tools that translate pages harvested from foreign language sites into English. The quality of the translations can be more 'Allo 'Allo than you might like but you still get the gist of what's going on.

Other popular add-ons are toolbars that can be downloaded to your desktop, obviating the need to type in a URL every time you wish to search online. HotBot and Google are just two sites that offer this timesaving facility.

If you're after a map of your street so you can direct someone to where you live, simply type in the street and/or the postcode using Yahoo's or AltaVista's Maps feature. (Accessing the AltaVista Maps tool forwards you on to Yahoo as it's exactly the same facility.)

Boolean searches

Based on mathematical logic devised by George Boole in the 19th century, Boolean searches involve adding one or more conditions (called operators) to a search. The operators, AND, NOT and OR, considerably narrow down searches.

Check each search engine for the specifics on how they deal with Boolean searches. The help pages should shed light on the matter. Some engines allow you to use Boolean operators in the main search bar; others require you to use the search bar in the Advanced Search sections.

Other sites, such as Google and HotBot, offer Boolean searches but use different operators. Google, for example,



1 If you want to find a web page on Phil Collins or Genesis, simply type in Phil Collins OR Genesis. The search engine will return results where at least one of the two terms is present. Replace the OR with AND, the search engine returns those sites where both are mentioned, thereby narrowing the search slightly

uses the mathematical symbols + and – instead of AND and NOT, but still uses OR in its full form. HotBot uses these symbols too, but also has a Word Filter section on its Advanced Search page which allows you to do a Boolean search without the need to key in an operator.

In fact, almost all search engines use simplified versions of Boolean operators to make things easier. So, for example, rather than typing 'fish AND chips' into Lycos' search bar, you can enter the words next to each other in the Results Must Contain box. Lycos will then do the rest, as if you'd entered the operators yourself.



2 If you want nothing to do with the 1970s and 80s pop phenomenon and instead are looking for web pages about the first book of the Old Testament, you might want to bring in the NOT operator. By typing Genesis NOT Phil Collins you will take many of the websites about the band out of the equation, allowing you to concentrate on the Old Testament as required. You can, of course, use a combination of the three Boolean operators

Searching on the hoof

With the latest generation of mobile phones (and many older ones) you can surf through thousands of WAP sites that cover a variety of topics. And with the increasing takeup of large-colour-screened mobiles, the sites available are getting more and more complex.

Google, not one to miss a trick at the best of times, makes the most of this by offering a WAP-based version of its search engine. It can be accessed on any phone by keying in <http://wap.google.com>. A cut-down version of Google designed especially for your handheld device can

be downloaded from www.google.com/options/wireless.html.

Also worth a look on a desktop computer is All The Web's Mobile search engine (<http://mobile.alltheweb.com>) that will return WAP sites for you to check out and bookmark.

If you are unsure how to type URLs into your phone's WAP browser, it's always worth browsing around the default portal of the UK mobile phone operator you use. Orange (www.orange.co.uk), for example, has a handy Find feature on its WAP home page.

Not all big websites have a WAP site – far from it. However, one of the UK's most popular websites, BBCi, does have a WAP version and, for mobile viewers, it's well worth a look at www.bbc.co.uk/mobile.

Life on the online waves

There are many more search engines than we have mentioned here, but the same principles apply to most of them. If you learn how to specify search terms, master Boolean logic and other advanced features, you'll find your searching blues significantly improved. Happy surfing! ■