

SCIENCE & ENVIRONMENT

Your computer and the world beyond

A didactic guide to surfing the net

BY DARREN SPITZIG

Like it or not, the web is here, and since graphical browsers have appeared, the web has really blossomed.

A lot of people surfing the net are doing so for research. This is one of the weaknesses of the web because it is not easy to find pertinent, valuable research material as many would like.

A hint about doing research on the web — it is safer to stick to sites that belong to educational institutions or governmental organizations. If you are not well-versed in the subject you are looking for, you simply do not have the ammo to tell the difference between well-informed, valid research and a partisan, biased rant.

A danger of the web today is that people can be misled by completely reasonable-sounding arguments put up by sham artists. Take note of the number of UFO conspiracy sites out there, for instance.

A very positive effect of governments and institutions opening up on the web is that information is much more accessible to the average person. Material that had only been

accessible through archives or private groups is finding itself onto the internet. There are many examples to support this — a noteworthy one is the (slow) opening up of the FBI archives (<http://www.fbi.gov/foipa.htm>) to the public. While it will take some time, it will certainly make for some interesting reading.

Entertainment is certainly one of the most common reasons for surfing the web. However, it is not always easy to find interesting sites that you will want to come back to — news sites are the sites that people turn to most often. Entertainment is shifting from the idiot box to the monitor, in one form or another, be it games or surfing.

Where as the web used to be the domain of monitor-tanned computer nerds, it now has become more user-friendly. This is largely due to the graphical browser, which hit the computer world in the 1990s.

Since I can only list a small percentage of the sites I have visited and book-marked, I think it would be more valuable to help people find sites on their own. Two major search engines are Yahoo! (<http://www.yahoo.com>) and Altavista (<http://www.altavista.digital.com>). There are others (including meta-

search engines that query other engines to find what you are looking for), but they number too many to list here.

A common error that people make when they perform a search is being either too specific or not specific enough. To make your search easier and faster, use the plus or minus signs. The plus sign in front of a word means that it will look for exactly that word. A minus sign does the opposite.

If you are interested in what other people are looking for, head on over to <http://www.meta-spy.com>. Meta spy shows you exactly what other surfers are looking for by listing it on your screen. Some of the far out searches are: www.sex.com, sex, the effects of alcohol on sunflowers, nude military men and many more, including some that are far too explicit to print. It is very interesting to "watch" other people search, and wonder who and where they are — and what their intentions are.

Now that you think about it, what are your motivations when surfing the web?

Darren Spitzig is a contributing writer with the Imprint in Waterloo, Ontario.



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