

'The wreck of matter and the crush of worlds'



Ivan Trundle

Manager, systems
and publishing

It all began with a request to find some information on the internet by my eight-year-old daughter. This came hot on the heels of a similar request from my slightly older son only a few days earlier, which resulted in an entirely different father-child discussion. Neither request was unreasonable, but in the light of some interesting 'discussions' at a recent Senate Select Committee hearing in Parliament House, I was more finely-attuned to what was at stake.

Like most other 'veteran' internet users (referring to the number of URLs or e-mails clocked, and not my age), I use the internet daily to retrieve information, and rarely think twice about the tools at my disposal. Nor have I been greatly concerned about the content or make-up of the 'net. But please allow me to return to my children's experiences, to highlight the problem at hand.

As part of an Australian history project, my daughter's class was asked to discover more about certain members of the First Fleet — via the internet. I am aware of a number of websites that focus on such material (it seems that entire school curricula are devoted to this segment of Australian history), and I am sure that there are sites with useful and pertinent background material which would reinforce useful strategies for finding information via the internet. The fact that better information may be found in bound volumes within the walls of most primary school libraries is another issue which I may explore at greater length in a later issue of *inCite*. But I digress. I was about to describe why I am looking for a better search tool, and why I think that ultimately we will never find one.

My hesitation and concern came through my son's recent internet experience of a few days earlier. He had asked to search for information (cheats, probably) on a popular and entirely wholesome computer simulation game, *SimCity2000*. Knowing that my son was proficient and adept in the use of computers, I sat back and let him loose on a useful search tool that I use all of the time, Sherlock. Sherlock is what I would define as an aggregating search tool — a tool that allows the user to search numerous search engines across the web all at once and rank or rate the results in a single window. It is an immense time-saver, and requires little expertise to use well. And away he went — but with a small typographical error which went unnoticed until after the search results were drawn on the screen.

The search results proved to be the focus of some interesting discussions for some time afterwards. One slip of the keyboard and my son was being exposed to material which I had not come across before, and which I hope to avoid in future. I will not go into details here, but needless to say the language used gave no doubt as to the content of the material at the end of the hyperlink.

It was a salutary experience, and one which gave me the opportunity to discuss with my son some issues which we were both glad to be able to talk through. But again, I digress, and may return to this element of searching at another time.

Across the internet, search tools are only as good as the operator. In the heady days of the early 1990s, when you could count the number of words to be found in all of the world's webpages using a 6-digit calculator, searching was not only fast and fun, but also fruitful. With so little to wade through, the task of finding information was relatively easy. Today, one would need an 8-digit calculator just to measure the number of hosts alone, not web pages [43 230 000 recorded hosts in January 1999 <http://www.nw.com/>]. The end result in 1999 is a cacophony of data, with little consideration by the creators of how to allow users to find that data quickly, accurately, and effectively. And I speculate that no amount of indexing, application of Dublin Core metadata, nor development of third-generation search software will bridge the gap between the available data and the required data.

Specialist search sites and engines only contribute to the choices available. Many websites (and websites are not the only place to find data) are offering specialist search engines of their own sites, but that in itself implies that the searcher knows that they have a reasonable chance of finding what they want in the first place. Unless a fundamental change takes place to the disordered and anarchistic nature of the internet, we are doomed in the mire of 'information glut'. And yet, the library and information sector is ideally-suited to stand tall above this wreck of matter and the crush of worlds. General searches can be left to those who enjoy serendipity, whilst those who place value on their time and on the accuracy of the information will seek out professional information managers (I am still unable to acknowledge the predilection of others to use the term, 'knowledge manager').

Go to it! Search and ye shall find! ■

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