



Eight Steps for Taming the Internet

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Follow these eight steps, and you're likely to become a seasoned Internet reporter in a few months.



SURF IN ADVANCE

Good Internet reporters are like good shoppers: They've looked around, and know where to go for the best deal when they decide to buy. Listen to the people who always seem to know where to find what they need on deadline. These reporters have surfed, tested, surfed, and tested again. There's no shortcut for that kind of preparation.

One strategy for preparing is to report your story traditionally, then go back and see what you could have gotten from the Internet, and how long it took to find it. Another is to ask your sources what Internet resources they have for reporters, or what Internet sources they use regularly.



RESIST THE URGE TO CATALOG THE INTERNET

Don't try to find everything you might ever use on the Internet. Begin with proven sources, and other reporters' or your sources' proven sources. NICAR's Net Tour lists some. So do the many other reporters' desktops available (there's a partial list on the Net Tour). But remember – Net sites change daily. This will give you a start, but you'll find better sources on your own over time if you keep at it.



CONSIDER ALTERNATIVES

Before you start searching the 'Net, figure out if the information you're seeking is the kind of information that's typically available there. If it is, fine. If it's not, consider going elsewhere for your story. (See "Net Success – Know what you're likely to Find")



LEARN HOW TO USE E-MAIL AND JOIN SOME LISTSERVS

Some of the people you know who always know where to go are reporting every day simply by looking at – and deleting – lots of e-mail. Join some computer-assisted reporting listservs (CARR-L is particularly good for alerting you to new Web sites.) You'll never feel

lonely again, and may have to delete 40 messages a day. But scanning the titles of these messages will tip you off to sites that others know about.



READ ANY INSTRUCTIONS YOU CAN FIND

There are five or six major forms of search engines on the Internet, both within a site and at the big services like AltaVista or HotBot. Each works a little differently. Read the instructions whenever you get started on a new site. You'll save time in the long run.



ASK WHETHER IT'S WORTH THE EFFORT

If you know a fact should be on the Internet, you might not be able to find it. You'll get better at evaluating this over time, but at first don't spend precious time seeking out something when you know how to find it some other way. Frustration comes from using search engines to find information on people with common names or broad topics. Success comes from narrowing your search, or searches on uncommon names or arcane topics.



ASK WHO WOULD POST WHAT YOU WANT, AND WHY?

Nora Paul, the legendary news researcher now at the Poynter Institute, recommends reporters stop searching for the item they need, but focus instead on where they might find it or who might give it to them -- a government agency, an activist, a think tank or nonprofit, or an academic expert. Limit your search to those sites, or guess which ones might have what you need.



ORGANIZE YOUR BOOKMARKS, AND KEEP THEM ORGANIZED.

Every major browser allows you to organize your bookmarks in folders. One way to structure your research is to break out your bookmarks using a hierarchy that clearly indicates when you'd use the source and what for. It separates known, reliable sources from quacks or longer-term background. (See "A Bookmark Strategy for Efficient Reporting")



'Net success – Know what you're likely to find

Here are some examples of the kinds information that's typically on the Internet:

- Government statistical reports and press releases
- Commonly accessed databases of government information, like campaign contributions or databases for health, education and environmental researchers.
- Public communications from activists, advocates and hobbyists, often with assumed names. This includes university students and faculty.
- Promotional materials, resumes, and "teasers" for more expensive database services.
- Scientific and academic notes, papers and communications.
- People or companies you know have a strong presence on the Internet, like computer or software companies, Internet hobbyists, or 'Net providers.
- Easily obtainable directories, like directories of public employees, national telephone books, and sometimes members of organizations.

Here are some examples of the kinds of information you typically *won't* find on the 'Net, at least not for free. You can often find this information using some other online service, or you may be able to pay for access through the Internet. You'll probably have to set these up in advance.

- Public or credit records about individuals, including Social Security numbers, court documents, driving records or bankruptcy filings. Public records about companies are somewhat easier to find on the Internet. But the government has to want you to have access to the records for free.
- Detailed public records. These often only exist on paper, or there are privacy concerns about posting them on the Web.
- Hard-to-find phone numbers, including new listings, neighbors, or unlisted phone numbers.
- Searchable full-text databases of publications. While this is becoming more common, it's still easier and sometimes cheaper to use Nexis or another commercial service to get a full range of background articles.



A bookmark strategy for efficient reporting

Consider organizing your bookmarks so you know what you can do on deadline. Here's one way to separate the wheat from the chaff for deadline reporting:

- *Reliable sources.*

Just like the reliable sources you use on the telephone, these are Internet sites that have withstood the test of time, are almost always available when you need them, are kept up to date, and are produced by a person or organization you trust. This list includes only sites with information you'd feel comfortable attributing in a news story, such as the Census Bureau or Edgar. Only include sites you or your colleagues use regularly, say at least once a month.

- *The Hail-Mary Pass.*

You'll use this section to find people and businesses – You need one phone number and don't care that you get 40 that are wrong. But if you don't find someone quickly, give up and go somewhere else. Why? You have better ways to spend your time, and you or your library probably have many better resources for finding hard-to-locate people.

- *Not ready for prime time.*

These are databases and other documents that you can't use on deadline until you understand them better, or have done some follow-up work. Examples range from the U.S. Dept. of Education's Common Core of Data to ProfNet, which requires that you have a few days to get responses from the experts in its database.

- *Rent-a-Rolodex.*

These are geographic or beat-specific lists of relevant Internet addresses compiled by hobbyists, government agencies, commercial operators, or fellow journalists. They may not be up-to-date. But they will be filtered and give you a hint of what's available. Keep a running list of these Rolodexes that you've found have helped you instead of compiling your own.

- *If you must, use a search engine.*

These are the Alta Vistas, the HotBots, the Excites – places to go when you're searching something rare or specific and just want to check for hits. These won't have today's news indexed, and may not even have last month's news indexed. My rule of thumb – Check your two favorite search engines, and look at the first two pages of hits. If you don't see something exactly on point, walk away.