Independent Study: Electronic Sources of Information

Websites

Anyone with access to a computer and a network account can create a website. Websites range from huge corporations and international agencies to personal diaries or blogs. There is lots of very useful, free information. There is also lots of junk that can make finding the good stuff difficult.

Benefits:

- Current: The information can be very up to date. This is helpful in obtaining news, statistics or contact information.
- VAST! You may have access to resources that are beyond the ability of your organization or library to maintain.

Cautions:

- Superficial: Many websites still do not provide the in-depth analysis found in books. There is often a lot of repetition, with different sites containing similar content copying the same (sometimes wrong) ideas over again. It can take a long time to sift through the huge number of sites that exist. Reference librarians sometimes say: *"6 hours on the Internet saves ½ hour in the Library."*
- Credibility: Whose knowledge is represented? Not all websites are screened like books and journals to check for accuracy. How can you ensure what you are reading is factual and reliable? If you notice small mistakes like wrong dates or spellings, what other mistakes are they making? There are tutorials on assessing a website's credibility.
- Transience: Here today, gone tomorrow! Just as information can be added to websites very quickly, they can disappear just as fast, particularly where current events and news are concerned. If you find a document that is very useful, save it to your H:\ drive or USB memory stick, or print it. If you have lost a webpage, try the Internet Archive [Wayback Machine](#).

How to Search:

- Search engines provide the most common entry point. You may get very different results using different search engines, so try a few to see which ones you prefer:
  - [Google](#)
  - [Google Scholar](#) focuses on academic sites
  - [Bing](#)
  - [Duck Duck Go](#) does not track personal information. There is a lot of talk now about internet privacy and the information that is gathered about us and what is done with the data (advertising, state surveillance, etc.). Next time you search a topic on Google or Bing, do you see new advertisements appearing?
  - [Wikipedia](#): The common warning for using this site is, *"a good place to start, a bad place to finish."* Wikipedia can be helpful to find a quick explanation or definition, and provides links to other relevant websites, but do not rely on it as your only source of information. In academic work, it is not considered to be a credible source for writing a paper.

- Conducting the same search on two engines may produce different results, depending upon how that engine operates. Search results may display what they want you to see first, which may not be what you want to see. Different methods include:
  o How soon or how often your keyword appears in the document
  o How many times other people have clicked on that page (popularity rank)
  o How much the website owner has paid the search engine company to ensure their pages appear first. If you are getting a lot of advertisements, try a different engine.
  o Your "digital footprint": Google and other engines track where you are, based on the computer's IP address or mobile's GPS and adjust the results. If may also draw on your social networking activity, other searches, etc.
- Think about your search terms. You may need to try similar words, for example: microenterprise, small business, income generating projects. Or you may need to try spelling variations: co-operative, cooperative, co-op
- Look for an **Advanced Search** feature. This option lets you define more clearly the information you are seeking, for language, exact phrases, date range, etc.
- Quotation marks let you search a specific phrase. This is useful if the words are very general and easily confused. Searching "capacity building" will look for that concept. Without the quotation marks you may get this: "Our company has the **capacity** for **building** houses from shipping crates."
- Not sure why a web page appeared in your results? Use the **find** feature in your web browser (look for magnifying glass or binoculars icon, in the edit or tools menu, or CTRL + F) to find where the word appears. It may just be a brief reference in a footnote.
- When you find a good website:
  o Look for search features within the site. You can further refine your search to include only the information that organization has.
  o Look for a **links** page which are the websites they recommend
  o Look for a **publications/research/resources/our work** page where you may find documentation they produce.

How to Cite:

Author. (year of publication). Title of webpage. Date retrieved, website address. Note if you cannot find an individual author's name, use the name of the organization:

Green Belt Movement. (2011). Wangari Maathai: A tribute to the life of Wangari Maathai, the founder of the Green Belt Movement. Retrieved from http://www.greenbeltmovement.org/wangari-maathai

Development Databases

Unlike search engines which just search for any page with the key words you provide, these development databases are designed by people knowledgeable in various fields who have identified relevant and reliable information. Examples include:

- www.eldis.org (wide range of development related material)
- www.microfinancegateway.org (specific to economic development)
- http://www.ruralpovertyportal.org/ (focus on rural areas, reports and statistics by country)
- http://www.developmentgateway.org/ (World Bank)

- http://www.bridge.ids.ac.uk/ (specific to gender and development)

Benefits:

- Organized by subject areas: the information has been reviewed and sorted for browsing.
- Typically commercial-free and open access
- Contain a useful range of documents from practitioners to academics and policymakers.

Cautions:

- Some of the entries in these databases are not updated when websites change. You may find a lot of "dead links" (404 errors), which can be frustrating.

How to Search:

- Subjects or Tags: In addition to the suggestions for searching web pages, these databases often use subject headings as well. These are terms assigned to documents that reflect the content, so you can find relevant documents even if the keyword does not appear in the title. Once you have found a good document, you may be able to search other documents that have been clustered near this one.

How to Cite:

Author. (year of publication). Title of document. Publishing information if available. Retrieved from: webpage where the document actually resides (look at address bar)

IIED. (2011). *Mainstreaming environment and climate change*. London: IIED. Retrieved from http://pubs.iied.org/pdfs/G03098.pdf

(Although I found the reference to this site on Eldis, I was redirected to the IIED's website to read the document, so I will use that webpage as the actual source of the document.)

Electronic Journal Databases

Access is often restricted to paid subscribers. We can open the contents as long as we are using a computer on campus or are able to connect using a StFX username and password. Links to popular databases can be found on the Journals page of the Marie Michael Library website.

Here are a few suggestions:

- ProQuest (broad range of journals and newspapers)
- Sage Journals (good for education and organization management)
- Science Direct (as the name suggests, good for science, agriculture, environment)
- Taylor & Francis Online (vast collection of academic journals)
- Directory of Open Access Journals (good collection of free, reputable journals)

Benefits:

- Full-text access to a wide range of journals, both current and archival, so you may be able to obtain references that would otherwise be very difficult to find.

- These databases store the electronic documents themselves, so you do not need to worry about "dead links" to external websites where the document no longer exists.
- Credible: These are typically peer-reviewed academic journals, research reports, conference proceedings.

Cautions:

- Many journals only provide *abstracts* or brief summaries of the articles and not the full content, or "embargo" their content for a year or more, allowing access only to older content. Ebooks may impose copyright limits on the number of pages you can save.
- Access is usually restricted to on-campus use or with university user accounts. You may have access to something here but not at home.

How to Search:

- Keywords, Advanced Search, Subjects, as with the other electronic sources mentioned.
- "Boolean" searching: Try adding AND, OR, NOT to your search terms. Look for the help section of databases to see what other search tools they provide.
- When you find a document that is of interest to you, look to see what key words or subject headings it was assigned, then search other documents within the same subject.
- You can also browse by Journal title. So, if you are interested in a particular journal, you can search for that title, and browse their holdings.
- Look for other settings such as "full-text only" (this will remove results that only have summaries available), "scholarly only" (this will show only academic journals), date ranges (past six months, past 5 years).

How to Cite:

They should be referenced the same way as you would a journal article, with a note including the relevant database, website address, or DOI number.

Srinivasan, S. (2005). Daughters or dowries? The changing nature of dowry practice in India. *World Development, 33*(4), 593-615. Retrieved from ScienceDirect http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0305750X05000057

Final Warning!
Remember to take good notes of where you find material online so you can cite references correctly, and find the documents again later. Do not use a google search results page as your reference source. Citation managers like RefWorks, Mendeley, Zotero are useful tools to organize you materials. Ask at the library about setting up an account.