Using the web for conference preparation

Effective use of online resources is an great way of building the knowledge base that interpreters need.

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Never before has so much information been instantly available as it is today on the World Wide Web. What's more, it's multilingual and it's free. Effective use of this resource represents an extremely powerful solution to interpreters' unique knowledge requirements. This series of articles will put you on the fast track to finding useful background material and accurate multilingual terminology on-line.

1. Why is the World Wide Web important for interpreters?

The World Wide Web (WWW) is the medium through which you are probably reading this article. It contains around a billion pages of publicly available information and is constantly growing. Most importantly for interpreters, the WWW is increasingly multilingual and searchable.

This means that you can, essentially instantly, find authentic, current texts on-line in different languages on any specified topic. The Web is therefore immensely important for conference interpreters as an unprecedented source of just-in-time knowledge, in terms of both subject matter and glossary preparation.

This is the first in a series of articles that will show you how to make efficient use of the WWW search tools most relevant to interpreters in order to find the multilingual background information and terminology you need to prepare for a conference.

We invite you to read the articles in this series on-line, and to right-click on the various links to open them in new windows as you read. In this way, you can experiment with the search techniques described, and bookmark sites that you find useful.

2. Search Engines vs. Web Directories

Before we get started, let's take a minute to examine the two basic online tools we will be using. A search engine is essentially a website that allows users to query the engine's proprietary database of websites in order to locate specific pages on the World Wide Web that match defined parameters. The database itself is populated automatically by special software that scours the Internet. Search engines you may be familiar with include AltaVista, Google, and Northern Light. A web directory is a website whose editors have manually compiled an index of selected webpages arranged in a subject hierarchy. The most famous web directory is Yahoo.
Search engines send out automated "spiders", aka "crawlers", to look at webpages and capture information. The results are then indexed in a database for retrieval through the engine's search interface. The index is in fact just a list of words harvested automatically from web pages, together with information on their environment (such as the page's URL, word relationships, word weighting).

No human being checks the pages as they are indexed, meaning that the web pages are indexed only on the basis of the text they contain.

Web directories, on the other hand, consist of entries reviewed by human beings, and often include reviewers' annotations. They therefore cover much less of the Web than search engines, but are by nature discriminating.

What does all this mean for you when it comes time to search for information on the Web?

In order to find very specific information, it is best to use a targeted search in a search engine. In order to get a feel for what's out there or to do wide searches in a smaller, more manageable database, use broad search parameters in a subject directory.

The converse is also true: a broad search in a large search engine will yield far too many irrelevant results, while a narrow search in a subject directory will not yield enough results to be useful.

Right, let's roll up our sleeves and try out some different search engines and subject directories to carry out some sample searches.

3. Search Engines and How to Use Them

For conference interpreters doing Web research in different languages, the best search engines at present are the following:

- Alta Vista: http://www.altavista.com
- Google: http://www.google.com
- Fast Search: http://www.alltheweb.com
- Northern Light: http://www.northernlight.com
- Excite: http://www.excite.com
- Infoseek: http://www.infoseek.go.com
- Hotbot: http://www.hotbot.com

It is very important to note that no one search engine even comes close to covering the entire WWW. Most of them boast from 20% to 80% coverage of the entire WWW, but independent reports indicate that the lower range is closer to the truth. Of course, all search engine indices do not match exactly, although there is considerable overlap in the websites that have been indexed. In order to find what you are looking for, therefore, it will very often be desirable to use at least three or four of the above engines in succession. We recommend that you bookmark each of the above, and learn how to use at least two or three of them well.

3.1 Developing a Search Strategy

The first step is to get to know the subject you're interested in. Indeed, since search engines locate pages based on the words they contain, the key to successful searching is to match your query terms with the content of indexed pages. In order to make optimum use of a search engine, you should ideally already have a rough idea of how your subject is likely to be addressed by websites.

For instance, say you're interested in multilingual glossaries on finance (and who isn't?). Go to AltaVista (http://www.altavista.com) Advanced Search.
Now think of some keywords. "Finance" or "financial" are the obvious keywords. But there are so many financial sites on the Web that you'll have to use other keywords in combination to locate what you want. Otherwise, you will be inundated with thousands of irrelevant hits.

Again, remember what keyword searching means in WWW terms. No one has and ever will classify WWW content semantically. The objective is to use keywords in combinations that will match the content of the websites you're looking for.

To come back to our above example, the keywords "multilingual", "finance" and "glossary" will NOT retrieve a web page that would describe its multilingual financial glossary as a "French-English terminological database" only.

Likewise, "glossary" is probably a very good keyword to retrieve references to interesting websites, but you should combine it with likely synonyms, such as "database", "dictionary" or "terminology".

What other keywords could you use to identify those glossaries that are multilingual? Since it is fair to assume that online glossaries or databases will identify the languages they cover, why not use the languages you're interested in as keywords, instead of "multilingual".

The other trick to using search engines effectively is knowing how its syntax works. Query syntax - i.e. the way words have been combined in the Boolean query box above - differs from one search engine to another. The above example illustrates so-called Boolean logic, to which we'll return in our next article. AltaVista Advanced Search is a great tool for Boolean searching. But equally interesting search engines, such as Google (http://www.google.com) do not allow Boolean queries. Again, it is important to become familiar with each engine's individual features.

By the way, the above search has retrieved a very interesting, multilingual (English, French, German & Italian) glossary of financial terms (5000 entries). You will find it at http://tradition.axone.ch/.

This first article has introduced the topic of online search tools and how they work. Against this background, in our next article we will discuss in detail the basics of Boolean search logic and on which search engines it can be used. We will also cover other powerful techniques such as field searching. Stay tuned, and till then, have fun exploring the Web with the above-listed engines.

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