

Taking a wider look

Readers respond with picks of their favorite metasearch engines / **Simson L. Garfinkel**

IAST JULY I WROTE a column about my favorite Internet search engines. At the end, I asked readers to write in with their top picks. More than 50 took me up on my offer. The experience was enlightening.

A large number of readers said that I should take a look at Dogpile (www.dogpile.com), a metasearch engine. What meta means is that instead of searching the Internet, Dogpile searches other search engines. You tell Dogpile what you are searching for and how many seconds you want to wait. Dogpile goes out to the other engines, asks your questions, and assembles the results. You get a lot of different results from a lot of different places. And it's fast: If a particular search engine is having a bad day (or a bad minute), Dogpile just skips it. I did a search for my name and got back answers from Yahoo, Thunderstone, GoTo.com, Lycos, WebCrawler, Excite, Magellan, What U Seek, InfoSeek, PlanetSearch, and AltaVista. Give it a try: It's free.

Dogpile isn't the only metasearch engine. The company that runs it has another service, called MetaFind, that offers the same contents but thankfully without the dog motif. (The pile, for those interested, is allegedly a pile of books.)

Other metasearch engines are MetaCrawler (www.metacrawler.com), Inference Find (<http://www.inference.com/infnd/>), and Profusion (<http://profusion.itc.ukans.edu>). Despite its name MetaSearch (www.metasearch.com) is not a metasearch engine. Instead of doing the searches for you, MetaSearch simply gives you an easy-to-use form for searching each Web search engine sequentially.

While all of these metasearch engines return hits from each of the sites, what they don't show you is the advertisements these sites depend on to make their profit. Instead, the metasearch engines show you their own advertisements.

Right now there is too little metasearching going on for them to make much of a difference in the bottom line of a company like Lycos. But the search companies see them as a potential problem.

"We are open to working with any metasearch that would like to compensate us for serving our results," says Laura Whelless, a spokeswoman for Wired Digital, which runs HotBot. "If a site becomes a significant traffic burden to our site that it costs us money, then we block their usage."

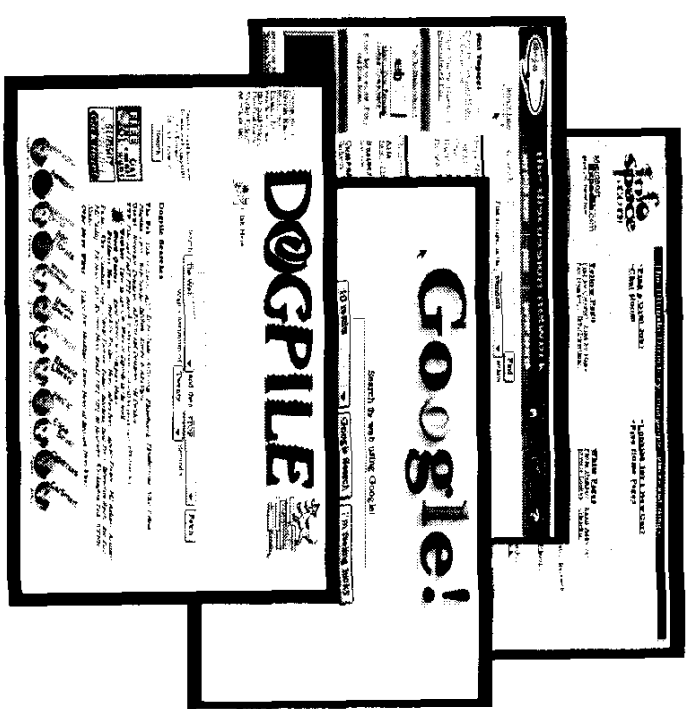
If the idea of metasearch leaves you a little confused, two traditional search engines that you might want to look at are Thunderstone (www.thunderstone.com) and Stanford University's Google (google.stanford.edu).

In my July column I wrote about my success with MapsOnUs, an Internet service that draws maps and makes travel plans. Bruce Miller, a reader in New Hampshire, wrote back to me saying that he didn't share my enthusiasm.

"Trying to use it has been a frustrating exercise. I get errors for my home address and work address. I get errors trying to plan routes. If I don't get an error I often get the message 'page has moved click here.' I have been successful a couple of times getting a map and a route drawn," wrote Miller, who says that he's had much better luck with Mapquest (www.mapquest.com).

Richard Davenport in Billerica chastised me for not mentioning the definitive Web site for searching back issues of Usenet, Deja News (www.dejanews.com). But while Deja News is a powerful tool, it's always given me the willies, because a lot of people who are participating or Usenet don't realize that everything is being archived and indexed. To get a feel for what I mean, jump to the company's Web page and do a search for the phrase "I tried LSD."

Mike Wyman and several other readers wrote to say that they have found the reverse phone number directory on InfoSpace (www.infospace.com) to be quite useful: Just type in a phone number and InfoSpace reports the name and address. "Of course," wrote Wyman, "this probably also keeps the privacy fanatics awake at night!"



Also in July I criticized the Library of Congress search system at www.loc.gov, which is shut down several hours a day for maintenance. What I didn't know was that the LOC has had an experimental on-line card catalog up for several months and it's much, much better. Next time you need to look up a book, check out <http://leweb2.loc.gov/annem/lookquery.html>.

Finally, in all of your searching, it's important to be aware that while you are looking for information on the 'Net it may very well be searching for information about you. Search engines keep detailed records. Using "cookies," Web site registrations, and a variety of other techniques, it's possible to match searches with the identity of the person who is looking for the information.

One search engine that's been doing this aggressively is HotBot. Every time you click on a HotBot search result, your computer first goes to the HotBot site, then jumps to the Web page for which you are actually looking. Not only does this tell the folks at Wired Digital exactly what you are looking for, it also slows things down. HotBot collects typical site information from visitors, including domain name, referral data, and browser or platform types," Whelless said. "This is the only information that is retrieved from visitors and is used strictly for purposes of product monitoring, product improvement, and targeted advertising."

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