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The world at your fingertips

There's a wealth of information on the Web, but much of it has a price tag / **Simson L. Garfinkel**

The Internet is becoming a better and better tool for finding information. Unfortunately, more and more of that information isn't free.

Search and research

By far, the best research tool I've found on the Internet is the Encyclopaedia Britannica (www.eb.com). This is the real thing - all 32 volumes, plus Book of the Year from 1993-1996 and Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary. The Web site contains the full text to the world's best encyclopedia, and unlike the printed edition, the entire databank is searchable and cross-indexed with hypertext links. The Web pages have illustrations and links to other Web sites.

Britannica invites you to ask questions. Unfortunately, the answers you get back aren't always correct. I searched for "What's the biggest city in America?" and got articles about Peking, Washington, North America, Urban Cultures; Wheaton, Mecca, Lethbridge (Alberta), Barcelona, and there at the bottom, Mexico City.

Nevertheless, Britannica has become a valuable tool. I'm working on a new book, and no matter whether I'm looking for information on science, art, geography, history, or some person's biography, I have never

failed to find what I was searching for in Britannica.

What's really sold me on this site, though, is the price. Frankly, I would never shell out \$1,500 for a printed encyclopedia that's sure to be out of date before my daughter knows how to read. But I'm more than happy to pay \$12.50 per month for access to this service that's continually updated.

Britannica has set up mirror sites in Chicago, San Diego, and the United Kingdom, so Internet congestion doesn't get in the way of doing good research.

Company information

Good information about companies is also easy to come by on the Internet - not very surprising, considering corporations are the source of much of the funds fueling the online expansion.

Want stock market quotes? They are free and they are everywhere. If you are going to look for quotes frequently, check around. For example, I got fed up with the PC Financial Network (www.pcfm.com) because the site's pages gave me persistent JavaScript errors with Microsoft Internet Explorer 4.0.

A much better stock pick site is at Upside Magazine (www.upside.com). This site offers closing prices, percent change over the last month and 12

months, profits-to-earnings ratios, market capitalization, and other investor-oriented information. Click a button and you can retrieve news articles, a minute-by-minute graph of prices, historical charts, news stories, and even broker recommendations. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to find some stocks on the service. Yahoo (quote.yahoo.com) also does one of the best jobs in displaying stock information, including news, historical data, and recommendations from the major brokerages.

You'll find the most in-depth company information at Hoover's Online (www.hoovers.com), although for detailed company profiles you will have to pay \$9.95

per month for a subscription.

Odds and ends

One of the original purposes of the Internet was to distribute software, and it still does a great job. If you are looking for software for Windows 95 computers, check out www.windows95.com. Most of the software listed on this site is crippled shareware, which means that if you want to use all of the program's wondrous features, you've got to pay money and register your program. The windows95 site has a registration service that makes this as easy as typing in your credit-card number. For Macintosh software, I like the INFO-MAC Hyperarchive at the MIT Laboratory for Computer Science (<http://hyperarchive.lcs.mit.edu/HyperArchive.html>).

These days there are so many

news sites that it's pointless to list them here. But if you like your news in bite-size pieces, and if you are particularly interested in what's affecting the computer industry, check into Edupage. Three times a week, John Gehl and Suzanne Douglas go through major newspapers, business magazines, and computer trade publications digging up interesting, important, or just plain humorous stories. They put it together in a free newsletter delivered by e-mail. Subscribe by sending the message "subscribe edupage" to the address lstproc@educom.unc.edu.

Located in Australia, the Virtual Artists RoboCam is a Web camera with a twist. The camera is mounted on the front wall of the Ngapartji Multimedia Centre in Adelaide, Australia. Visit the page with Netscape Navigator at www.robocam.net, and you'll see a city street from halfway around the planet. The twist is a series of push-buttons on the page that let you move the camera up and down, turn it around, zoom in and out, and focus. Artists call it "Surveillance Art."

If I'm not sure where to find what I am looking for, I turn to an Internet search engine. If I am looking for a company's home page, it's often faster to go to the Yahoo directory (www.yahoo.com) than to guess at an Internet address. If I am looking for a particular document or person, or I want a lot of control over my search, I'll use HotBot (www.hotbot.com), the fastest, most versatile search engine around.

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