

EIGHT STEPS FOR TAMING THE INTERNET



Sarah Cohen, *The Washington Post*

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")