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Experts: Alternative search tools can help students

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Experts: Alternative search tools can help students
While Google and Yahoo remain dominant, other search sites can be valuable, too
By Dennis Carter, Assistant Editor

Primary Topic Channel: Search

Higher education is discovering that Google isn't the only game in town.

The search-engine giant, along with competitor Yahoo, has long been the most-used search site, but other search tools have surfaced in recent years that could help college students do more in-depth research of video and audio files and web sites that have cluttered the internet.

Blinkx is a search tool that allows users to scan more than 30 million hours of audio clips and video files from across the internet. Raymond Schroeder, director of technology-enhanced learning at the University of Illinois at Springfield, said audio and video files are translated to text, making it possible for word-based searches to find online videos.

For college projects that require the research and study of political speeches, for instance, Blinkx can be more useful to students than a quick search on Google or Yahoo, Schroeder said.

"It's perfect for when you're looking for a specific medium," he said.

Maureen Yoder, director of the online technology and education master's program at Lesley University in Cambridge, Mass., said the ubiquity of cell phones and smart phones on college campuses could spur the rise of the human-enhanced search engine ChaCha. The Indiana-based company launched last January and invites users to send questions via text or voice for free; within minutes, the query is answered and delivered back to the phone.

ChaCha's service might not be applicable for major term papers or projects, but Yoder said its immediacy could appeal to young adults with a quick question during class or a study session.

"It's one of the most innovative search tools I've seen," said Yoder, who has studied search engines for more than 20 years and who hosted a forum on alternative search tools at the Sloan Consortium conference in October. "Everybody isn't on their computer all the time, but everyone always has their cell phones with them. ... It's very new, and it's very exciting."

In September, ChaCha announced it's had more than a million users and has answered 27 million queries in its first nine months on the web.

But even with the rise of alternative search tools, Google and Yahoo dominate. In March 2008, Americans used internet search tools 11 billion times--and Google and Yahoo accounted for 9 billion of those searches. Sixty percent of those searches were conducted on Google, according to published surveys.

Experts who have tracked the evolution of web-based search tools said Internet Archive could be invaluable to students searching for headlines or stories from a decade ago or longer. The site--which archives more than 80 billion web pages dating back to 1996--shows exactly what web pages looked like from the time they launched to today. For instance, a student researching a presidential or congressional election could see what CNN's web site posted on that day and in the weeks following.

"You can see exactly how events were covered on the web back then," Schroeder said. "You can see how attitudes have changed."

There are also a host of little-known search engines that use visuals to display pertinent search results. Sites such as Kartoo display search results with miniature, thumbnail-like versions of the web pages that result. With Kartoo, one of the web's first visual search tools, users can scan over each option and click on the page according to its image and content.

Grokker and Touchgraph are other image-based search engines that give users a miniature preview of what they'll see when they click on a link. Grokker provides a variety of ways to narrow or expand internet searches. Users can zoom in and out of graphic results displayed on the screen, eMail results to other users, or separate results according to date.

"I would think there are some people who would rather have a visual representation of what they find rather than a list," Yoder said. "It's made for a different learning style."

A tool recently unveiled by Microsoft and a team of other web-based companies could enhance group projects on every level of education. The tool--called SearchTogether--allows people at different computers to conduct online searches together and pool the results, according to a New York Times report. Divvying responsibilities for projects, experts said, could streamline research and allow students to help each other use better search terms.

Relying solely on the giants of the web-searching world, experts said, could limit students' research and omit findings that could enhance their understanding of subjects and make their class assignments more thorough.

"I think, ultimately, using different search tools can provide much better research," Schroeder said, adding the he expects Yahoo and Google to purchase up-and-coming search sites as they gain in popularity, especially among college-aged people. "I think these tools will be bought up by Google and others and become part of the tools we use every day."

"If you only rely on one [search engine], then you are completely dependent on how [it] organizes information," Yoder said. "Google is great, but the functionality of [alternative search engines] goes beyond Google."

Links:

ChaCha

Grokker

Kartoo

InternetArchive