

Facts and Oddities Online

James L. Horton

The great challenge of the Internet is size. Nearly everything one wants to find is there, but the problem is finding it. One analogy compares the Internet to the Library of Congress without a catalog. But it's worse than that. Picture the Library of Congress with moving bookshelves and books that appear and disappear randomly. That's closer, for Web sites come, go and vanish constantly.

In the old days of library research, one started at the card catalog or reference room and triangulated sources of hidden information. Today, we use Google (<http://www.google.com/>), but Google, as excellent as it is, cannot find information that we are not sure we are looking for. In other words, if we don't know the keyword to search, Google is no help. This requires research to identify a keyword and then more research after that. But even so, one might come up empty handed.

This essay is about directories and references that you can find online, and there are many – more than in most libraries. They are sources of facts and oddities that don't require a search engine. Why should PR practitioners care about finding such obscure information? Because facts and oddities can illuminate a point one is trying to make – or preserve one from embarrassment.

It is good writing to use startling facts to drive home a point with readers. That is why in the old days at *Life* – the long departed magazine – there was a staff of

researchers and checkers who kept writers supplied with facts and oddities. It was staff writing style back then to insert a misspelled word – *Koming* -- into text in place of a fact to come. An example I remember from a book about *Life* was, "There are *Koming* bolts in a bridge." It was up to the fact checker to find out how many bolts there are in a typical bridge.

As for embarrassment, the following happened recently. A client referred to a research study in a draft press release. We asked to see the study. The client didn't have it but named the author of the study and a book in which the author's study was referenced. The author has an odd name, so we "googled" it. There were more than 200 references to the author, the study and other books he had written, but we couldn't find the study. We then looked up one of his recent books on Amazon.com, a great reference. There, to our surprise, was a book review claiming the author was a fraud who was fired from a major business publication in the 1980s for faking his credentials. Google hadn't found anything like that. We weren't sure if it was true. We subsequently discovered in online newspaper archives that the charges were accurate.

PR practitioners often do not have the luxury of fact checkers: They look things up for themselves, so it pays to know what is out there to speed research. Research librarians spend a great deal of their time learning about references so

they are prepared to find esoteric information.

Here, in no particular order are a few resources one should know about:

- **History:** The Internet is a trove of history and biography, and it is a resource PR practitioners should consult often to provide perspective. Biography.com (<http://www.biography.com/>), for example, has a wealth of information on famous and lesser-known individuals dead and alive. History Buff (<http://www.historybuff.com/>) has a collection of original reportage from the 16th to the 20th Century, including the history of *Casey at the Bat*. The-Historynet.com (<http://www.thehistorynet.com/>) has several guide sites to history sources. The Best of History Web site (<http://www.besthistorysites.net/>) ranks other sites for their value to users. The British Pathe Web site (<http://www.britishpathe.com/index.cfm>) has 3500 hours of news reels covering much of 20th Century History. And there's more, much more.
- **Arts, Entertainment.** This is a particularly rich area for reference sources. You may have used the Internet Movie Database (<http://us.imdb.com/>) to settle an argument or two, but it is by no means the only movie reference site on the Web. Go to online-pr.com for a larger list (<http://www.online-pr.com/indust5.htm#Film%20Industry,%20Motion%20Pictures,%20Entertainment>). The Artcyclopedia (<http://www.artcyclopedia.com/>) is a compendium of great painters and artists on the Internet. Worldwide Arts Resources (<http://wwar.com/>) is another. Allmusic (<http://www.allmusic.com/>) is a compendium of composers and musicians

in just about every genre. And for those checking classical music facts, Duke University has an interesting site

(http://www.lib.duke.edu/music/resources/classical_index.html). Online-pr.com has a longer list of music sites at (<http://www.online-pr.com/indust6.htm#Music>) but it is by no means complete.

- **Science:** As you might expect, the Internet is a warehouse of science information. The challenge is finding what one is looking for on the many sites there are. The Why Files (<http://whyfiles.org/>) attempt to explain the science behind news stories and have a depth of information. In a less serious mode, How Stuff Works (<http://www.howstuffworks.com/>) does the same thing. NASA offers a searchable database of earth images (<http://www.visibleearth.nasa.gov/>). Students for the Exploration and Development of space have collected a database of astronomy facts (<http://www.seds.org/>). Enature (<http://www.enature.com/main/home.asp>) has a broad range of online nature guides. Every branch of science is represented on the Internet, especially medicine. Online-pr.com has special sections for several, including (<http://www.online-pr.com/indust7.htm#Science>) and (<http://www.online-pr.com/indust1.htm#Aerospace>).
- **Business:** Business is such a huge topic that online-pr.com has an entire section dedicated to business references. Look in (<http://www.online-pr.com/prfinmed.htm>) for seven distinct sections on business and financial information sites to include financial media; stocks and options exchanges; economic resources and data; international news and information; financial services information,

tools and organizations; stock and bond reporting services and corporate information sources. At last count there were more than 220 listings.

- **Not for Profit:** Not for profit organizations have plentiful resources such as Network for Good (<http://www.networkforgood.org/>), the Foundation Center (<http://fdncenter.org/>) and Guidestar (<http://www.guidestar.org/>). There are thousands of charities listed, many of which would otherwise be largely unknown.
- **Maps, travel, time:** Here again, there are so many references that online-pr.com had to break them out into their own section. See (<http://www.online-pr.com/prsrc3.htm>). Look for old reliables such as MapQuest (<http://www.mapquest.com/>) and The Weather Channel (<http://www.weather.com/>), But take the time to look into interesting resources such as Official U.S. Time (<http://www.time.gov/>) TerraServer (<http://terraserver.microsoft.com/>) for satellite photos.
- **Statistical Resources:** University libraries have been leaders in collecting sites with statistical data, and it is often that data a PR practitioner might have need. The University of Michigan, for example, has a huge statistical link site, (<http://www.lib.umich.edu/govdocs/statsnew.html>) but it is by no means the

only one. The University of California San Diego (<http://odwin.ucsd.edu/idata/>) keeps tabs on more than 750 social sciences data sites.

- **Trivia:** The Guinness Book of World Records is the best known source for extremes of everything and it is a Web site as well (<http://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/>). Did you know, however, that can find the most popular baby names at a government Web site (<http://www.ssa.gov/OACT/babynames/>)? Or how about a directory of cocktail recipes (<http://www.webtender.com/>)? Or a directory of useless knowledge (<http://www.coolquiz.com/trivia/>)?

Reference sites listed here do not include encyclopedias or calendars either. There are plenty of those as well. To find them, go to online-pr.com directory page (<http://www.online-pr.com/directory.htm>).

What is listed here scratches the surface of what is available on the Web. So, if you are unhappy with what a search engine is finding, go to online references and look for clues to better resources.

#

James L. Horton, founder of online-pr.com, has been a public relations practitioner for more than 20 years.