

Web Alert

Finding people on the Web

Ben Ramster

Elsevier Science London, 84 Theobald's Road, London WC1X 8RR, UK

Received 8 December 2000

First published online 19 January 2001

Finding people on the World Wide Web often appears to have much in common with hunting fugitives from justice. Today's global scientific community is often portrayed as a village, but it is surprising how many barriers one can encounter when extending an invitation for collaboration to someone on another continent. Contacts are increasingly protective of their personal details, made weary by the prospect of an ever growing amount of unauthorised junk mail. We here would like to offer the C&B general readership advice on how to overcome the common barriers of publicity shyness, time zones and the corporate machine.

The first port of call when trying to find a person's contact information must be within his or her own organisation's homepage. To find academics an obvious starting point is any one of the 'World's Universities' directory pages held by most major search engines. These allow quick access to personal and departmental homepages, as well as campus telephone/e-mail directories. If information is easily available then this is where it will be. The same goes for commercial scientists, in that visiting their company's site can sometimes yield an easy result. However, if people are trying to protect their personal information (such as e-mail addresses), and this becomes an increasingly common problem when entering the commercial sector, then this is also where you will meet your first hurdle. Organisations will often offer general contact information in place of more specific details, where messages can be left and faxes sent, but the reliability of these services vastly differs. Time differences and language barriers can make phone calls inconvenient and expensive. E-mail, in contrast, also has the advantage of being a highly effective way of corresponding with the international traveler.

When one approach to sleuthing has failed it is time to change tack and draw on the easily accessible directories of published medical and scientific papers that are available online. Pubmed, Medline and Science Direct are three

such services, which each offer fully searchable databases of hundreds of thousands of published articles. The e-mail address of your contact, or a helpful colleague, may, if you are lucky, be right there.

But what if your author is not widely published? What if they've moved in the last six months? If this is the case a more generalised search engine may be what is required. While most people are familiar with the major players (for example Alta Vista and MSN), there are also many useful less well known sites. Direct Hit and Google offer alternative databases of Web pages (1 247 340 000 by Google alone) and searching these may bring up unexpected information, such as that from conference programmes. Conference organisers are usually more than happy to provide information about their speakers.

My final piece of advice when looking for someone online is to try using a metacrawler. This special type of Web site acts as an umbrella to other search engines and will employ several others on your behalf. Dogpile is one example and claims to simultaneously look at the results from over a dozen search engines.

Finding people's contact information using the internet can be a lengthy business. But if done wisely it can be very quick and easy. The pointers I have mentioned should result in the desired address nine times out of ten. However if after all this you still cannot find that elusive (personal) e-mail address or phone number I suggest that you resign yourself to the fact that the person you are looking for may just not want to be found.

Useful URLs

World Universities	http://dir.yahoo.com/Education/Higher_Education/Colleges_and_Universities/
Pubmed	http://www4.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/PubMed/
Medline	http://research.bmn.com/medline
Science Direct	http://www.sciencedirect.com/
Alta Vista	http://www.altavista.com/
MSN search	http://msn.co.uk/homepage.asp
Direct hit	http://directhit.com
Google	http://www.google.com
Dogpile	http://www.dogpile.com