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Robert Ellis JD, MLS
The King's College

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THE INVISIBLE WEB: A QUICK OVERVIEW

Robert Ellis, JD, MLS
Director of
Library Services
The King's College
New York, New York

This article provides a quick overview of recent literature published about the Invisible Web. In particular, this article covers such topics as what is the Invisible Web, weaknesses of popular search engines, types of information found on the Invisible Web, when to use the Invisible Web, search tools and search strategies.

The Worldwide Web has both visible and invisible components.¹ In other words, there is more to the web than meets the eye.

Laura Turner, in the March-April 2001 issue of *Book Report*, explains that the reason databases appear "invisible" to the average person searching the Internet is because they are not indexed.²

In the Summer 2001 issue of *Library Journal*, Brian Smith lists several types of web sites which would be "invisible":

- sites that require registration or log in (New York Times);
- sites that are fee based or licensed (Lexis-Nexis);
- sites that are interactive (calculators);
- sites that reside on a private network or behind a firewall;
- sites that deliberately exclude spiders, crawlers and robots; and
- sites where information does not exist until a user queries a database (MapQuest).³

Contrary to popular belief, search engines do not index the entire web. Why? According to authors Gary Price and Chris Sherman, costs are prohibitive.⁴ Locating web pages and maintaining current indexes requires lots of money. To remain in business, search engines must limit the quantity of web

pages retrieved.⁵

Also, there are technical reasons why certain areas of the web cannot be indexed. There areas include compressed file, executable programs, streaming media, images and graphics.⁶

Mick O'Leary, in the January 2000 issue of *Information Today*, claims that largest search engines can only index about 20% of all web pages.⁷

The web itself is growing exponentially⁸ with over one million documents added daily.⁹ The size of the "invisible web" will increase as growth in web pages overtakes the search engines' ability to index.¹⁰ Bonnie Snow in the May/June 2000 issue of *Online* predicts a growing discrepancy between information available and information delivered.¹¹

You might be wondering what kinds of information are found on the Invisible Web. Everything from weather reports, job listings, historical stock quotes, patents, and library catalogs to dictionaries and driving directions.

Reference librarians would be interested in learning how Invisible Web search results compare with those of general-purpose search engine results. Often, searching on the Invisible Web provides more comprehensive results than a general-purpose search engine.¹²

When should one use the Invisible Web? If one desires very precise or constantly changing information.^{13,14} For these reasons, general search engines have been compared to "shotguns", as opposed to the Invisible Web's "rifle".¹⁵

Librarians should keep the following list of Invisible Web Search Tools handy for future reference. Most of these sites are free; some are not.

INVISIBLE WEB SEARCH TOOLS

All Seeing Eye: www.streateye.com/cgi-bin/allseaingeye.cgi

AlphaSearch: www.calvin.edu/library/searreso/internet/as (searchable subject directory)

Beaucoup: www.beaucoup.com

Big Hub: www.thebighub.com

Bulls Eye (from Intelliseek): www.bullseye.com

Complete Planet.com: www.completeplanet.com (online directory with links to over 17,000 databases)

Direct Search: <http://gwis2.circ.gwu.edu/~gprice/direct.htm> (list of databases compiled by Gary Price)

Fossick: www.fossick.com

Infomine: <http://infomine.ucr.edu/search.phtml> (An academic search engine which searches multiple databases, unlike many invisible web search tools.)

Internet Oracle: www.internetoracle.com

Invisible Web: www.invisibleweb.com (From Intelliseek. Free searchable directory of over 10,000 databases)

LexiBot: www.lexibot.com (downloadable software from BrightPlanet that searches hundreds of databases simultaneously)

Librarians' Index: www.lii.org (Searchable subject directory)

Library Spot: www.libraryspot.com

OneLook Dictionaries: www.onelook.com (Uses a single search form to access many different databases)

Profusion from Intelliseek: www.profusion.com

(Searches invisible web and general purpose search engines.)

Refdesk.com: www.refdesk.com (searchable subject directory)

Search.com: www.search.com

Webdata: www.webdata.com

Gary Price recommends several strategies for searching the Invisible Web.^{16,17} Some of these strategies include:

- Subscribing to trade publications that review web sites (*Searcher, Online*)
- Subscribing to Internet Newsletters such as Scout Report (<http://scout.cs.wisc.edu/scout/report/current/>), Internet Resources Newsletter (www.hw.ac.uk/libwww/irrn) and Free Pint (www.freepint.co.uk)
- Subscribing to "What's New" Lists
- Neat New Stuff I Found on the Web This Week, by Marylaine Block (<http://marylain.com/neatnew.html>)
- New Resources Alert, at Infomine (<http://infomine.ucr.edu>)
- New This Week, at Librarians Index to the Internet (www.lii.org/search/file/ialinglist)
- Research Buzz, by Tara Calishain (www.researchbuzz.com)
- TVC Alert, by Genie Tyburski (www.virtualchase.com/TVCAlert)
- Virtual Acquisition Shelf, by Gary Price (<http://resourceshelf.blogspot.com>)

Currently, search engines cover about one in five web pages. As the number of web pages increases, these search engines will index proportionately less and less of the web. On the other hand, the Invisible Web should continue to grow in size. Librarians should therefore become familiar with the Invisible Web search tools and strategies discussed in this article.

ENDNOTES

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12. Price, Invisible Web, p.93.
13. Ibid., pp.95-96.
14. Georgetown Tutorial.
15. Price, Invisible Web, p.94
16. Price, "Exploring," p.32.
17. Price, Invisible Web, p.110. *