Beyond the Open Web: Why Journalists Need More Reliable Tools for News Research

The seemingly unlimited range of information available on the internet has fundamentally changed the way that journalists are able to gather information for reporting. Statistics that used to require multiple phone calls to track down can now be snagged with a few mouse clicks and experts who were tough to locate can now be identified with some quick online searches.

Unfortunately, many journalists are learning the hard way that there are fairly serious risks in relying on free online information sources and counting on the open web for story ideas, research and fact checking. These professionals can attest that if a reporter wants to get a story right, he or she needs to move beyond the open web and use more reliable online research tools for news research.

The Risks of Open Web Research

The explosion of doing basic journalism research on the open web was driven by the simple fact that a substantial amount of raw primary content is available for free on the internet. Searching on the open web is easy and consistently productive because Google® and other search engines allow you to search several sources simultaneously, making the open web an easy place to get a quick take on an issue. In fact, many millennial journalists joined the workforce having relied on Google as their only research tool for collecting information.

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Media Helping Media
However, it’s important to keep the role of open web research in proper context. Internet searching was never intended to serve as the platform for authoritative journalism research, so much as a good place to start. Indeed, former Google CEO Eric Schmidt once told the Newspaper Association of America that the quality of content on the internet is like a “sewer out there” and the co-creator of Google Scholar, Anurag Acharya, has said that Google is in the business of making information available, not making it easy to find the specific piece you need.

Consider just a few embarrassing incidents in recent years:

• Some media outlets published a news account of a study that found blondes are going extinct but discovered later it was based on an errant online posting
• An article about greedy Wall Street bankers that went viral was later found to be based on an online image created with Photoshop
• More than a few journalists have mistakenly reported news stories that originated as satirical articles from The Onion

“Don’t take for granted what you read on a third-party website,” advises Media Helping Media, which provides journalism training resources. “It might look professional and sound convincing, but that doesn’t mean it is true.”

More Reliable Research Tools

If journalists don’t understand what can and can’t be reliably done on the open web through Google searches—versus the use of a credible online information service such as LexisNexis—the results can be disastrous.

There are profound differences between the wild frontier of the open web and a respected online news and information service that can be relied upon for accuracy and relevance. As Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel wrote in “The Elements of Journalism,” journalism’s “essence is a discipline of verification.”

Relevance of search results

Open web sites indexed by Google typically deliver large amounts of raw, unfiltered data from various websites that journalists must review and scrutinize.

LexisNexis provides both authoritative content and superior search tools—as well as flexible delivery options—to ensure journalists obtain the content that matters most to their reporting. For example, LexisNexis adds value to search results by applying its proprietary LexisNexis SmartIndexing Technology™ to ensure the results are relevant to the search query. This is a major reason why most media companies choose paid search providers such as LexisNexis to deliver relevant content that can be trusted.

Google indexes no more than 16% of the content on the open Web

Go beyond paywalls

As more content is moved behind paywalls, the fact is that free web search engines are actually becoming even less comprehensive than they were before. They are only able to provide results and alerts on content that is available on the open web and has already been indexed. In fact, a study published in Nature found that Google indexes no more than 16% of the content on the open web, with the bulk of the content sitting behind passwords, paywalls and proprietary sources.
On the other hand, LexisNexis aggregates premium, licensed content from news, business, legal and public records sources—plus the open web—to provide journalists with the most comprehensive results available from a single search. The licensed news results provided by LexisNexis show the direct source of each piece of content so users know the exact author and location from which it originated. No paywalls, no problems.

We take you beyond the paywall to deliver more relevant results.

More confident research

Journalists who rely on the open web for research and fact checking risk accessing material from questionable sources featuring spoofed or dated material.

LexisNexis curates and manages news and information for journalists, making available a database of content selected by professional editors for relevance and authority. When a journalist taps into LexisNexis content, he or she obtains direct access to full-text documents, not just links or summaries. In addition, LexisNexis delivers content that is licensed directly from the publisher, helping to ensure editorial integrity and source accuracy. Even the open web content that is surfaced has been hand picked by LexisNexis subject experts based on editorial quality and the influence of each source. Finally, all LexisNexis content is updated, indexed and archived so journalists can be confident they are able to retrace their steps or refer back to a source.

Research support

When journalists rely on the open web for research, they’re joining the Wild Wild West—it’s everyone for themselves. Free web search engines don’t regularly communicate with users to let them know of changes that may affect results and there’s no helpful research assistant waiting on the other end of a toll-free line to help guide them to the critical information they need.

As a paid research service, LexisNexis views each user as a customer and provides 24/7/365 on-call research support to help journalists zero in on the information they’re trying to find. The company also employs research consultants and technical support professionals who provide step-by-step guidance on how to conduct more effective research on an ongoing basis. Moreover, LexisNexis listens to its customers and makes enhancements to its research services based on that feedback.
Conclusion

There is clearly an economic value to using the internet as a starting point for some basic research exercises. But for journalists to do their jobs—report the facts of a story in an accurate and compelling way—they need to have confidence in the integrity and reliability of the information they collect in their research. Unfortunately, this is not always available on the open web.

As many good journalists have discovered the hard way, reliance on the internet for information gathering can pose inherent risks to a reporter’s credibility, as well as the reputation of the media entity that publishes an inaccurate story.

LexisNexis provides a reliable online research destination to help media organizations find inspiration for story ideas, collect research for their reporting and fact-check key pieces of information before they publish articles. When journalists go beyond the open web and turn to a paid online research service such as LexisNexis, they arrive at a safer place to obtain fast results from reliable sources that publish accurate data.

About LexisNexis

After nearly 40 years providing solutions that help organizations harness the power of information, LexisNexis remains dedicated to developing innovative tools to support data-driven decision-making. Our commitment extends beyond comprehensive content and outstanding search technology to world-class client service support, ensuring that our clients gain maximum insights—and value—from LexisNexis solutions.

For more information

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