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The Best of the Best Ranking and Rating Digital Reference Resources

Karen R. Diaz EDITOR

Karen Diaz is Web librarian at the Main Library, Ohio State University, Columbus

What makes a Web site the best? There are myriad answers. What makes a Web site the best for reference? Even though the question is more specific, there are still many answers. A high-quality site can be hard to define in generic terms. In describing the process of selecting the top reference titles for the year, Lawrence similarly asked, "As for the pertinent question, what constitutes an outstanding reference title? Ask ten people, or librarians anyway, and you will get as many answers."(1) It has been said, in fact, that quality is like art—it's hard to define, but you know it when you see it.

Increasing attempts are being made to provide evaluated, high-quality Web surfing. Some of this is done by meta-site creation. These resources imply that a site is "good" if it's in the guide. Many examples of these sorts of sites available by and for libraries and their constituents exist. However, some resources go beyond simple listing and provide actual ranking, rating, and evaluation of sites, which can lean toward either the subjective or the scientific and are hard to do well without selection and ranking criteria. This column examines various examples of Web site rankings or ratings and attempts to enumerate the vast possibilities of criteria for evaluation.

To clarify at the outset, ranking and rating are two distinct processes. Ranking requires comparing sites with each other and putting them in some prioritized order (the coolest, the most in-depth, the best-looking, etc.). Rating requires evaluating a site against criteria and assigning a score or rate to the site based on the criteria. In reality, distinguishing constantly between the two processes in the scope of this paper would require a much more tedious examination than I have given and would lend a different tone than I hope to set. Thus, you will find references to ranking and rating as if they are very much the same.

Vanity Evaluation

If vanity publishing on the Web is rampant, it must follow that vanity evaluation cannot be far behind. Mark Gallagher <www.Gallagher.com/best.htm> touts an impressive resume for the IT world, but also maintains a personal site to explore the technology. Besides pictures of a tailgate party he attended and an e-mail from his niece regarding a Hanson concert, Mark provides us with a list of his eight best Web sites, including Netscape's store where you can buy the best gift (blue denim shirt) ever. Ann <www.Gallagher.com/best.htm> serenades us with midi music while providing a list of her best sites, inclusion in which seems to require that the creators have military service behind them and play midi music on their site as well.

While these cases seem extreme and perhaps silly, it becomes quickly apparent that knowledge of the ranker's identity, authority, and purpose are key to evaluating and trusting the

sites that evaluate. Also apparent from scanning these sites is that none of the authors provided selection or evaluation criteria.

Popularity

Another way to rank sites is by popularity. The idea here is that if a site is visited often, it must be good. 100hot <www.100hot.com> provides a ranking of the most visited Web sites each week. By using the logs of many proxy servers, this site tracks the patterns of more than one hundred thousand Web surfers worldwide. A scan of a couple different weeks' lists show that sites that make it near the top are somewhat predictable.

The Netscape and Microsoft sites usually rank near the top. How many hits are due to the fact that users have not learned how to change the default homepage in their browser or who simply press the search buttons of those browsers as a first step in finding information on the Web?

Other sites include those that offer free e-mail and chat. An increasing strategy of search engines and others sites is to offer free e-mail to ensure lots of visitors to the site. This makes statistics soar, advertising revenues rise, and rankings look great.

Greeting card sites appear in the top twenty locations. At this point in the list, you might notice that none of the reasons the above sites became "tops" has anything to do with content that— as I'll argue below—is the sine qua non of reference work.

Some news and sports sites also have high ranks. Many news organizations advertise their Web sites on television or in print, while supplementing news stories online. More and more people use the Web as a way to keep current on the news and sports scores.

Search engines have high ranks. People need to have direction for Web surfing. But because many search engines offer free personal calendars, e-mail, and other amenities, it is hard to know whether they are popular because the search engine is great, or because people want the free services.

I consider TuCows <www.tucows.com>, which appears at least once on the 100hot list, a great reference site that contains reviews and comparisons of software. It also offers free downloading of that software, which more likely explains its popularity.

While popularity is interesting and provides useful insights to general Web surfing patterns, just because a site is popular does not mean that it is good. Good for what? Again, selection and rating criteria become important issues that are not apparent when considering popularity alone. Sites vary in the extent to which they clarify their approaches to these two issues. The following sections examine these variations and provide examples of each category.

Clear Selection Criteria/ Unclear Rating Criteria

Some sites provide useful guidance in terms of selection, making it easy for the user to know if the site will be of interest for a particular need. While most rating sites provide some sense of rating criteria, often the lack of clarity leaves room for improvement.

Best Feds on the Web <www.govexec.com/dailyfed/0598/050198a1.htm> is a list of the top federal government sites for 1993 by *Government Executive* magazine; a separate list exists for 1997. This site admits to less than scientific ratings and reports the "top" sites in no particular order. However, some general criteria are listed. Again, the list itself is likely more important to the researcher/ reader than the actual criteria.

Hardin Meta Directory of Internet Health Sources <www.lib.uiowa.edu/hardin/md/> offers a somewhat different approach. Their claim is to "list the best sites that list the sites". The only criterion for inclusion is "sites with 93 percent connection rate." Uncomplicated as this criterion is, it does not provide a rich understanding of quality. Because Hardin is not an informational site, the philosophy that a connection rate "serves as an excellent general indicator of the level of care and attention that's given to a site" is probably logical for this type of service, but would otherwise prove alarming for a medical site.

While the sites in this category lack clarity in rating criteria, they offer very clear scopes of inclusion. As understanding the scope of any tool is so important to the success of reference librarians, these resources actually prove more useful in the reference environment than the resources in the following category.

Unclear Selection Criteria/Clear Rating Criteria

Lycos 5% <<http://point.lycos.com/categories/>> has existed since 1994 and claims to provide detailed reviews of the "finest sites." The rating categories are specific: content, design, and overall. Topic listings can be sorted out by any of the rating categories and Lycos itself can be searched to find only those resources that have been evaluated. In selecting sites, Lycos claims they make no distinction among commercial, public, and personal sites. They further state that, "Excellence is our only criterion." This claim does not exactly make for a clear selection policy.

Webnet Webratings <www.Webratings.net/> is sponsored by a full service Internet provider that will rate your service for free. Without having tested this theory, I assume such a service allows this company a foot in the door for telling you what services they can provide for you. Thus, Webnet would not do the selecting; rather, it would allow for self-selection and provide a service to the webmaster.

An evaluative site that does not provide clear selection criteria does not seem to have a target audience in mind. The world is its oyster. Finding gems likely occurs because the judges or evaluators are Web-addicted and always looking. Consider World Best Websites <www.Websurf.com>. The title indicates the vastness of consideration and scope. But this site's excellent description of the criteria applied to evaluation provides a valuable template to the would-be evaluator. With its hierarchical categories from basic "functionality," such as html quality and accessibility, up a scale to "professionalism and effectiveness," such as focus, values, and advanced components, this site offers a real model of evaluation. These rating criteria also take into consideration how the site fits into the larger Web, such as search engine visibility and hosting efficiency.

Evaluation sites without clear selection policies likely are less promising for reference where the librarian is not so much interested in a site for beauty or functionality alone. Rather, that librarian wants to know that their answer will likely be waiting within a resource. As Lawrence said, "My idea of a good reference tool is one that should lead you quickly to verifiable information that's relevant to your question."⁽²⁾ These sorts of sites do provide excellent criteria to those librarians who wish to become evaluators of sites or to those who wish to examine the effectiveness of their own library or reference Web sites.

Clear Selection Criteria and Clear Rating Criteria

This final category is, of course, ideal in a rating site. Some sites have not only created

themselves around a specific theme for a target audience, they have also carefully defined the criteria by which they rate and evaluate resources.

The Argus Clearinghouse <www.cclearinghouse.net/ratings.html> rates Web guides. Guides receive one to five check marks based on how well they meet five criteria. Each criterion includes a list of all the factors considered.

Interestingly—and thankfully—it is easy to find examples of rating sites in the healthcare field. Medical Matrix <www.medmatrix.org> provides a copy of the resource evaluation form used by its editorial board. Six categories are rated on varying scales of 1-20, 1-10, or 1-5. Peer review is the category that can earn a site the most points. Nutrition Navigator <www.navigator.tufts.edu> has four categories examining content and usability that can be rated 1-10, 1-7, 1-5, or 1-3. Nutrition accuracy is the category that can earn a site the most points. It is understandable that medical rating sites are most concerned with accuracy and authority of information.

In another field, the Dow Jones Business Directory <<http://bd.dowjones.com>> assigns ratings to business Web sites. Dow Jones provides ratings in four categories (content, speed, navigation, and design) and rates each on a 1-10 scale. The highest score a site can receive is 40, which the site originators claim is rarely seen. They also claim that sites with very low ratings are rarely seen, because they seek to include only quality sites. A nice subject arrangement and keyword search function make it easy for the reader to then find sites on a topic of interest.

Education World <www.education-world.com> is a commercial site that provides original content as well as reviews of more than one hundred thousand sites. Each site is first evaluated on content, aesthetics, and organization, and is then described and evaluated. Each category receives a letter grade instead of a number. While the graded rating is clever and useful, the site offers no insight as to what constitutes an A+ versus A or A versus B.

Another excellent example is the Britannica Internet Guide <www.eblast.com>. Just as Dow Jones is recognized as a premier resource for business, Britannica is a recognized authority for high-quality, encyclopedic information. The site lists five criteria for "best" consideration: accuracy/depth/ breadth of information, authority of author or publisher, quality of design/graphics/multimedia, ease of navigation, and timeliness of revision <www.eblast.com/about/edpol.html>. Each site further receives a rating of 1-5 stars ("noteworthy" to "best of the Web"). To further enhance this rating guide, all the five-star sites are listed on a "Best of the Web" page. All resources selected are indexed and searchable by topic or keyword. What results is a resource that librarians can use to confidently search and make decisions based on descriptions of sites offered or rankings given.

Most of the sites with clear selection and ranking criteria additionally rank each category separately, providing the score for each category as well as the overall score. This helps the librarian/ reader make further judgements on the usefulness of a resource. If content is important and aesthetics are not so important to the readers, they will know to select the resources rated most highly in the content category and won't worry about lower scores in the aesthetics category.

The Criteria Summarized

Using the ratings criteria of the sites included in this paper, plus the input of two other papers that discuss evaluation of Web sites, I have attempted to form an integrated and organized list of possible rating criteria."(3) The general outline of these criteria comes from World Best

Table 1
Web Site Criteria

| Functionality | Design | Content | Originality | Professionalism and Effectiveness | Findability | Overall Site Effectiveness |
|---------------------------------|---|--|---|---|---|---|
| Accessibility | Graphic design | Purpose | Innovation and lateral thinking (innovative solutions, innovative content, commendable insight) | Customer service and respect (ease of contact, effective response to customers) | Search engine visibility (through effective metatags) | Web as appropriate medium for the service/information |
| Speed and bandwidth sensitivity | User friendliness | Scope | Creativity | Values (honesty in selfrepresentation, support of worthy causes) | Search engine rankings (through proper and expected use of terminology on the site) | Cost (if fee based, are the rates reasonable and worthwhile?) |
| Server reliability | Aesthetics and beauty (fonts/colors/images) | Significance | Technology (effective leading edge technologies—Java, Dynamic HTML, database integration) | Focus (no pop-up windows/attention clash) | URL clarity | |
| HTML quality | Alignment and layout | Authority/accuracy of information | Distinctiveness (provides an impression) | Advanced components (interactive maps, active server pages, etc.) | | |
| Navigation and links | Integration (unified feel) | Depth/breadth of information | Vision | | | |
| Legality | Use of appropriate media | Stated/obvious bias if appropriate | | | | |
| | Organization/navigation | Human interactivity | | | | |
| | Easy output (printing/e-mailing) of information | Information process (readability/chunking information/simplifying the complex) | | | | |
| | Reasonable load times | Verbal expression (spelling, grammar, absence of repetition) | | | | |
| | | Attention to detail (absence of mistakes/deadends) | | | | |
| | | Up-to-date | | | | |

Websites Judging Criteria <www.Websurf.com/criteria.htm>. Of all the sites included in this paper, I found this to be the most thoughtful and thorough set of Web-based criteria in use.

My integrated list (table 1) is generic. The needs of various rating/ranking attempts will vary according to the scope of what is being rated. There might be more specific needs in some cases, and some of the elements here might not seem important. Additionally, some ranking services might give more weight to one category over another, as was seen with some of the medical sites examined.

Conclusion

In the reference environment, I would rank the broad categories in the above list in importance as follows (most important to least important): content, design, functionality, findability, professionalism and effectiveness, and finally originality. As with print reference resources, the content is the crux of a work, but layout and the ability to find specific information quickly (as are enumerated in the design criteria) are nearly as important and lead to timely service. Ranked lists, such as the MARS "Best Reference Web Sites" appearing in this issue, help highlight sites for librarians. Other meta-sites that don't necessarily rank also help to highlight important reference tools. But "findability" becomes important for newer sites that haven't yet made it into these tools and in fact for any site to be found by these tools. Findability also increases the chances of the uninitiated user to successfully find a quality site. But while I've attempted to rank the broad categories, I find that none of them are irrelevant for determining what makes a "best reference Web site."

In looking at the subcategories of criteria listed above, some important factors are highlighted in my mind for reference purposes. The obvious are accuracy and authority of content, datedness and obvious bias of content, and server reliability (a great Web site that can not be reached is as useful as a great reference book that is nowhere to be found). Tillman puts at the top of her list of "Key Indicators of Quality" the "ease of finding out the scope and criteria for inclusion that lets me see whether there is a match with my needs."⁽⁴⁾ I heartily agree, and would like to add that services that site rankings should also include this information for each site rated. This allows the reader or librarian to know why the source is great. Thus, a great ranked list should also describe the resource.

In the end, the best reference site *is* the one that provides the answer to the question at hand in the format needed. Anticipating those sorts of needs is an art that can certainly be attained by a site creator and rated by users and librarians. Ranking and rating lists whose purpose and selection criteria are clearly defined provide site creators with benchmarking of their site and criteria for improving their site. NetMarketing for Everyone includes a good discussion of rating sites and their importance for revenue generation.⁽⁵⁾ A site ranked highly on any list of quality Web sites most likely will see its traffic (and most likely revenue) increase.

Ranking and rating Web sites is a service both to librarians and site creators. The more clearly defined these services are, the more useful they are to both sides. To be most useful, a ranking service should give clear selection criteria, provide an understanding of the rating process when there is one, and provide descriptions of sites included so the reader knows if it is in fact a great resource for the need at hand. Adding subject organization and search access to large ranked lists further enhances their value.

References and Notes

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