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Internet Reviews: Alternatives to Google

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INTERNET REVIEWS: ALTERNATIVES TO GOOGLE

BY JENNIFER A. BARTLETT

HEAD OF W.T. YOUNG LIBRARY REFERENCE SERVICES
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Quick, what is the world's largest search engine? Most people would immediately, and correctly, answer "Google." As of 2012, Google dominated the traditional web search market with nearly 67% market share, followed by Microsoft's Bing and Yahoo!.¹ But is larger necessarily better? Although both librarians and our library patrons often "google" our web searches, other competing sites, old and new, may indeed be viable options to use alongside, or even to replace, the "Big Three."

METASEARCHING

Rather than maintain vast lists of web pages, as major search engines such as Google do, metasearch engines create their own virtual database of sources and then send search terms to several search engine platforms at once, returning a compiled list of results often organized by type or theme. One of the first metasearch engines, *Mamma.com* (<http://mamma.com>), was created in 1996 and called itself "the mother of all search engines" because of the perceived comprehensive nature of this model of searching and aggregation. Most metasearch engines offer advanced search features such as Boolean operators, phrase searching, wildcards and field searching.



Dogpile

<http://www.dogpile.com/>
Dogpile, created in 2006,

searches engines and directories including Google, Yahoo!, and Yandex. Users can choose to search web pages, images, video, news, local sources, and white pages. Helpful features include a list of related alternate searches on the results screen, as well as a list of a user's most recent 15 searches. The advanced search will allow users to search by exact word phrases, language, and domain, and Preferences offers options for adult filters, as well as how local results are displayed. Dogpile presents useful, relevant results in an

attractive, user-friendly interface. The canine theme is evident throughout: you can "go fetch" on the toolbar, and "Favorite Fetches" are trending searches listed on the first screen.

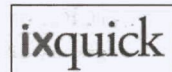


Metacrawler/Zoo

<http://www.metacrawler.com/>
<http://www.zoo.com>



Metacrawler has long been a popular metasearch option, featuring results from Google, Yahoo! and Yandex. Developed in 1994 at the University of Washington, Metacrawler was acquired in 2000 by Infospace, Inc., and will be renamed "Zoo.com" in early 2014. Zoo.com aims to attract more users to its simple, graphically-intensive home page with local weather, topic searches, and prominent links to Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest and Tumblr. Zoo.com searches Google, Yahoo!, and Truveo (for videos).



Ixquick

<https://ixquick.com>

Ixquick, launched in 1998, is more well-known in Europe than the United States, and bills itself as "the world's most private search engine." Users can search in 17 languages (including Norwegian, Finnish, Turkish, Chinese and Polish), and each language version includes local search engines. Searches return the top ten results from global and relevant local search engines, but do not use Google results. Ixquick's "star system" ranks results by awarding a star for each top ten result returned by a specific search engine; those results with the most stars will be listed first. It also offers an international phone directory for businesses, individuals and reverse number searching. A particularly interesting feature, especially from a privacy standpoint, is the ability to access a webpage from the results page using the Ixquick proxy, which will open the page anonymously with

no IP address or other user information. The IxQuick Highlighter, another results page option, emphasizes the search terms on the webpage.



Yippy
<http://yippy.com>

Yippy (formerly known as Clusty) is a metasearch engine that collects results from Ask, Gigablast, Open Directory and others. Similar results in Yippy are arranged into topics, called “clouds.” As with an increasing number of search engines, Yippy advertises itself as a private search engine that does not track user activity and history on its website. In addition, it aims to be a “one-stop-shop” for users, offering web-based e-mail, document storage, calendars, a contact list, video conferencing, and an array of widgets. Self-described as a “family-friendly” platform, Yippy removes results dealing with pornography, sexual products, gambling, and sites inappropriate for children (see the site’s censorship FAQ for more details).

PRIVACY

A hot topic in the news recently has been online security and privacy, which has direct applicability to major search engines. Google, Bing and Yahoo! have one thing in common: tracking search histories and using that data to tailor results to searchers’ interests. While tracking might improve the search experience for end users, it also may be perceived as an invasion of online privacy.² Several alternate search engines are geared toward protecting user anonymity, while claiming to provide equally comprehensive results.



Duck Duck Go
<https://duckduckgo.com/>

Founded in 2008, Duck Duck Go says it protects user privacy and avoids the “filter bubble,” a situation in which search algorithms predict what information users would most like to see based on previous searches and thus isolates them in their own information echo chamber.³ Examples of common filter bubbles include Facebook’s advertisements and news stream, Amazon’s purchase recommendations and Google’s personalized search results. DDG purports to avoid this issue by not tracking search queries or IP address. In addition to using results collated from its own webcrawler, DDG also runs searches against Bing, Yahoo, crowd-sourced sites such as Wikipedia, and over 30 other search engines.

Using triggers such as “news” and “map” to searches will narrow results to specific types of content, and DDG’s “!bang” syntax searches over 1,000 other search engines directly. For example, typing “!abebooks siddhartha” will search the Abebooks.com website for all titles including the word “siddhartha.” Directly echoing Google’s “I’m Feeling Lucky” search option, the “I’m Feeling Ducky” option allows users to bring up only the first search result (and hopefully most relevant) search results by including a back slash (\) before the search term. Also interesting is the goodies pages, which lists specialized search queries in categories including Geography, Travel, Trivia and Entertainment. DDG falls short by not yet providing image searching, although it can be accomplished by adding manually adding “!i” to any search. Additional options are available in the drop-down menu next to the search box.



Startpage
<https://startpage.com/>

Another site claiming to protect user privacy is Ixquick’s Startpage, which bills itself as “the world’s most private search engine.” Unlike Duck Duck Go, Startpage gets its search results from Google, but first removes all identifying information from the query. It records no information about its users, including search logs and IP addresses. Further, Startpage offers an optional proxy server service that allows users to connect to websites outside Startpage without passing along personal data such as cookie information and IP addresses. Startpage, launched relatively recently in 2009 in the United States, is based on the previously mentioned Ixquick search engine (<https://www.ixquick.com/>). Both sites use the same searching and privacy features.

USER INVOLVEMENT

Why do you see what you do in a list of web search results? Search engine algorithms take into account many of the factors that we as librarians observe, albeit in a mechanized way: relevance of keywords, authority, trust level, domain, location and so on (including advertising, in some cases).⁴ These signals combine to present the user, ideally, with the most relevant results depending on the types of materials requested. Search Engine Optimization, or SEO, involves finding ways to make website appear higher in search results, thus attracting more traffic, and is of major concern to marketing professionals.⁵ Another factor that new

search engines are incorporating, however, is user opinion, delivered either passively through searching behavior or actively by means of comments and scoring; examples of “crowdsourced” information platforms include Flickr, Waze, Google Maps, and YouTube.

blekko**Blekko**

<http://blekko.com/>

Launched in 2010, Blekko is a human-curated search engine that searches 3 billion selected “trusted websites.” Rather than troll the web for everything, Blekko concentrates on sites its search algorithms and human curators consider to be the most reputable, which ideally cuts down on irrelevant results. The initial search page offers a selection of trending topics in addition to a simple, Google-like search box, which includes an easy option for searching photos and videos. Search results are presented in pre-defined categories based on search terms, for example, “Top Results,” “News,” “Shopping,” and so on. In addition to built-in categories, Blekko relies on the concept of “slashtags” to further define search results. There are hundreds of pre-existing, human-created topical slashtags, or users can formulate their own slashtags and build a collection of favorite websites by creating a Blekko account. The slashtags are then added to the list and can then be used by other searchers. For example, the search “garbage disposal” will retrieve results split into seven discrete categories: “Quick Answer” (a description of garbage disposals from Wikipedia), “Top Results,” “Shopping,” “DIY,” “Appliances,” “Magazines,” and “Latest.” The search “garbage disposal /diy” will retrieve only pages related to garbage disposal installation and repair. Blekko’s interface is heavily graphics-intensive, and the mobile version in particular, named “izik,” has been designed specifically for the layout and gesture controls of iPad and Android tablets.

blippex**Blippex**

<https://www.blippex.org/>

Another site priding itself on its protections of user privacy is Blippex, the next iteration of the Archify search engine, which was discontinued in mid-2013. Blippex’s search algorithm ranks search results based on how long users stay on a website, or its “DwellRank.” In order to gauge user engagement, Blippex requires users to install a browser plugin, which tracks the page URL, current time, and the amount of time spent at a particular page. No doubt realizing that this requirement

might be a hard sell, Blippex emphasizes that there is no registration process, and that user privacy is a major emphasis. In addition, Blippex is remarkably open about its data, providing a monthly database dump of the Blippex search index, in addition to a variety of interesting search statistics.

**SPECIALIZED AND DEEP
WEB SEARCH ENGINES**

Name any subject, and there will probably be dozens of niche search engines devoted to it. Further, some search engines specialize in specific types of materials such as blog posts, images, games, and so on. Three well-known and comprehensive directories of specialized search engines may be found at Best of the Web (<http://botw.org/>), the dmoz Open Directory Project (<http://www.dmoz.org/>) and the Yahoo! Directory (<http://dir.yahoo.com/>).

These directories will often include sites not indexed through major search engines such as Google, which indexes primarily the “visible web.” The “deep” or “invisible” web includes dynamic searchable databases which require a login procedure or the entry of keywords in a search box, websites behind corporate firewalls, unlinked sites, and other pages deliberately blocked from search crawlers by their authors. One example of a specialized “deep web” search tool that gets around some of these barriers is Pipl (<https://pipl.com>), which is designed to find information about individuals using sources such as public records, member directories, and social profiles not typically retrieved using traditional search engines. Other deep web search engines and directories include *Infomine* (<http://infomine.ucr.edu/>) and Complete Planet (<http://aip.completeplanet.com>).

Finally, this hybrid search engine is an interesting example of a human-curated, specialized search tool:

**Wolfram/Alpha**

<http://www.wolframalpha.com>

Not a search engine per se, Wolfram Alpha is a “computational knowledge engine” that answers factual questions using a system of algorithms and human-curated data from outside sources, rather than presenting the user with a list of possibly relevant websites. For example, the query “life expectancy” in Google will present the user with a Wikipedia article and data chart, a life expectancy calculator, and statistics from the Centers for Disease

Control and Prevention. Wolfram Alpha will extract relevant data from its library of sources and present it on the results pages: the mean, median, highest and lowest lifespan worldwide, a life expectancy world map, mean life expectancy history and distribution, country rankings, and so on. In addition to mathematics and statistics questions (a particular strength of the service), Wolfram Alpha's categories also include money and finance, socioeconomic data, geography, food and nutrition, life sciences, sports and games, and more. A Pro subscription allows manipulation and downloading of information and images.

Web search platforms change almost daily and your favorite site may change its ownership, interface and features in the blink of an eye. To keep up with the latest news in web search engines, try *Search Engine Journal* (<http://www.searchenginejournal.com/>) and *Search Engine Land* (<http://searchengineland.com/>).

Happy searching!

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