

Accessing Consumer Information on the Internet

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A colleague enthusiastically tells of a recent adventure. "I found great teaching guides on the web. Then I searched ERIC through Gopher. Finally, I went browsing and wrote to a friend in Europe." Expecting her to describe a skiing trip or a concert, you are surprised to find that she was using the Internet. How did she learn to navigate the information superhighway? What is this all about?

The *Internet* is a worldwide network that links computers to share information through an interconnected body of databases. It is available to average computer users, not just computer gurus, and provides a wealth of information, and most of it is free! Over 20 million people, primarily scientists, teachers, and professors, use it (Andrews, 1994). Over 70 countries and 20,000 computer networks link to exchange data, news, and opinions. Two of the most widely used are Gopher and World Wide Web. To use them, software programs must be installed on a computer connected to the Internet.

Gopher is a text-based, menu-driven system for exploring Internet resources. Thousands of organizations, especially colleges and universities, have gopher servers. Each server is like a card catalog subject index, allowing one to look through menus of "online catalogs" or "libraries." Using a deductive process, you move between servers. While Gopher resembles a card catalog, the *World Wide Web* (the Web, WWW, or W3) is like browsing through library stacks and opening a book to a specific topic. It is a *hypertext*-based system for finding and accessing Internet resources that allows users to identify a word and request further information about the topic (Krol, 1994). Unlike libraries in which information is arranged alphabetically or by category, hypertext information is organized in relationship to other information. The same topic can be found at multiple sources, which permits users easy access to related information.

Each WWW site has a *home page* which serves as a road map to resources and links with other search and/or information services. Most home pages are organized in three sections: (a) title of the sponsoring group, (b) information about the group supporting the page, and (c) a list of links. Selecting or "clicking" the highlighted link word on the home page takes the user to a second document that



contains more information about the topic. For example, on the NICE home page, clicking on *AskERIC* will transport the user from Eastern Michigan University's WWW server to Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) at Syracuse University. Sometimes, you may need to manually enter a Web site address to get to a particular home page. Each WWW site is identified by a *URL* (Uniform Resource Locator) address which begins: **http://**.

Browsers are navigational systems for World Wide Web. They are client software programs that allow access to hypertext from home page sites. WWW browsers, unlike the text-only Gopher system, can include illustrations, sound, and movies in documents. Browsers include *Macweb*, *Netscape*, *Mosaic*, *Lynx*, and *Cello*.

Consumer Resources on the Internet

Millions of resources are available at thousands of Internet sites. Of particular interest to consumer educators are ERIC, Consumer Information Center, Federal Trade Commission (FTC) ConsumerLine, and Consumer Product Safety Commission. Some of these organizations can be reached through the NICE home page and others can be contacted at an address listed at the end of this article.

Since ERIC is the most complex of these resources, further elaboration will ease navigation. ERIC can be reached through *Search ERIC Database* at the Clearinghouse on Assessment and Evaluation at Catholic University of America. The complete ERIC database is also available at the Auburn University Libraries using *TN3270* and the Syracuse University *AskERIC* Virtual Library site (LaQuey & Ryder, 1993). Searchable fields include title, author, subject heading (descriptor) and keyword. Hypertext versions of the ERIC Pocket Guide and Network Directory are available on WWW (Wagner, 1994).

AskERIC can answer specific questions or find resources on a specific educational or schooling topic. At Syracuse University it is a gopher and WWW site which contains question and answer information and referral services. Over 25,000 users access *AskERIC* and normally receive a response within 48 hours. *AskERIC* also includes *Internet listservs* (electronic discussion groups) related to education, downloadable lesson plans, and ready-made ERIC searches. ERIC Digests are available at the Educational Research, Improvement, and Statistics Clearinghouse.

Hopefully, you now feel more confident to travel on the Internet. Just wander and make it an adventure. The more you travel the "net," the more comfortable and expert you will become.

References

- Andrews, E. (1994, November 12). MCI to offer one-stop shopping on the Internet. *New York Times*, p. D2.
- Krol, Ed. (1994). *The Whole Internet: User's Guide & Catalog*. 2nd ed. Sebastopol, CA: O'Reilly & Associates
- LaQuey, T., with Ryer, J.C. (1993). *The Internet Companion: A Beginner's Guide to Global Networking*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Wagner, Judith. (1994). "Locating Consumer-Related Materials in ERIC." *ERIC Keys*. Columbus OH: Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education, Ohio State University.

Another Useful Resource

- Braun, E. (1994). *The Internet Directory*. New York: Fawcett-Columbine (Ballantine).

Internet Addresses

- Census Bureau: **[gopher gopher.census.gov](mailto:gopher@gopher.census.gov)**
To receive e-mail news releases & tip sheets send message to **pio@census.gov**: In message type "Subscribe press-release"
- Chicago Mercantile Exchange:
<http://www.interaccess.com/users/wilbirk>
- Consumer Information Center through:
A. Gopher: **[gopher www.gsa.gov/gopher/staff/pa/cic](http://www.gsa.gov/gopher/staff/pa/cic)**
B. E-mail: **catalog.pueblo@gsa.gov**
- Consumer Product Safety Commission through:
A. Gopher: **cpsc.gov**
B. E-mail: **info@cpsc.gov**
C. List Server: **listproc@cpsc.gov**
Message: **sub CPSCINFO-L FirstName LastName**
- ERIC on WWW: **http://www.cua.edu/www/eric_ae**

ERIC Database through Gopher at Catholic University: **gopher gopher.cua.edu**; Select **Special Resources**; Select **3** (Assessment & Evaluation); Select **9** (Search ERIC)

ERIC Database through TN3270 at Auburn University: **auducacd.duc.auburn.edu**; At opening screen, tab to **APPLICATION**, enter **01**; At main menu, type **ERIC**; Follow screen instructions

ERIC Digests through Gopher: **gopher gopher.ed.gov**; Select **6** (Educational Research, Improvement, & Statistics); Select **5** (Educational Resources Information Center); Select **4** (Search ERIC Digests); Type keywords; Hit **enter** to start search

ERIC Virtual Library (AskERIC) at Syracuse University:

- A. Gopher or FTP: **ericir.syc.edu**
- B. WWW: **http://erys.syr.edu**
- C. Telnet to: **ericir.syr.edu** and type gopher at login
- D. E-mail: **askeric@ericir.syr.edu**

Federal bill status: **http://www.unipress.com/will-t-bill.html**

Federal Government publications locator: **gopher kraus.com**

Federal Trade Commission ConsumerLine through Gopher: **consumer.ftc.gov**

Internet Training Materials: Collection of training resources on WWW: **http://www.brandonu.ca/-ennsnr/resources.html**

National Institute for Consumer Education (NICE) through:

- A. WWW: **http://www.emich.edu/public/coe/nice.htm**
- B. E-mail: **NICE@emuvax.emich.edu**

Occupational Outlook Handbook 1994-95: **gopher umslvma.umsl.edu/library/govinfo/ooha**

US DOE Library INET through:

- A. Gopher: **gopher.ed.gov**
- B. WWW: **http://www.ed.gov**

Visa "Choices & Decisions: Taking Charge of Your Life":

- A. Internet: **ftp.visa.com** (use "anonymous" as ID)
- B. WWW: **http://www.visa.com/visa**
- C. CompuServe: **GO STUFORUM, GOEDFORUM, GO CONFORUM, or GO INVFORUM**

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