Review of the Internet Scout Project

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Abstract

This article reviews the *Internet Scout Project*, available at http://scout.wisc.edu/, an expert-curated repository of websites and software intended for educators, scholars, and curious individuals in the sciences and humanities. It simulates a typical user's exploration of the *Scout Project's* content archive, including usability, features, technical information, organization, strengths and weaknesses. It begins with the background information on the project, including some details about its funding.

Keywords: Internet Scout Project, digital archive, digital repository

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Project Background

The *Internet Scout Project* is an effort by the University of Wisconsin-Madison to develop "better tools and services for finding, filtering, and presenting online information and metadata." Scout's staff cultivate information and software and provide it to researchers, teachers, and librarians. Scout leverages expertise in the fields of computer science and information science to serve researchers in scientific disciplines and the humanities (Internet Scout Project, 2011).

The *Internet Scout Project* was founded in 1994, when it began publishing its weekly *Scout Report*. According to its website, the *Scout Report* is read by more than 250,000 people each week (Internet Scout Project, 2011). Since its founding, Scout has undertaken other projects, including the *Applied Math and Science Education Repository* (*AMSER*). *AMSER* "is a portal of educational resources and services built specifically for use by those in Community and Technical Colleges" (Internet Scout Project, n.d.). Another Scout project, *ATE Central*, was built to support NSF's *Advanced Technology Education* program that promotes American technology education (Internet Scout Project, n.d.).

Scout has received funding from the National Science Foundation (NSF), the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Claire Giannini Hoffman Fund, and the Microsoft Corporation (Internet Scout Project, 2011). The NSF's National Smete Digital Library awarded $402,000 to Scout in 2001 and $408,000 in 2003. NSF donated $724,000 to expand the *AMSER* project in 2008. Again in 2009, NSF granted $986,000 to fund *ATE Central*. Overall, the National Science Foundation has given over two and a half million dollars to the *Internet Scout Project* (National

Science Foundation, n.d.).

Organization of Resources

The *Internet Scout Project* contains over 27,000 annotations of the resources is has

selected. These annotations and other information about the resources they cover (metadata)

together form the records that make up the site. Each record's metadata are comprised of

eighteen elements, including the title, description, keywords, URL, date, subject classification,

and notes (Internet Scout Project, n.d.).

Six criteria for selection are published by the *Internet Scout Project*. These are content,

authority, information maintenance, presentation, availability, and cost. When evaluating

content, *Scout's* information experts consider the scope, intended audience, purpose, timeliness

and accuracy of the site or service. Related to this, they weigh the authority of the writer or

creator as best they can determine it. In addition to existing content, they consider the regularity

of updates to decide if the site is likely to remain timely and relevant ("The Internet Scout -

Selection Criteria," n.d.).

Apart from content, *Scout* employs criteria related to the accessibility of the resource:

presentation, ease-of-use, and link validity. Lastly, they consider cost. While they do not

immediately reject fee-based sites, they strongly prefer free ones, citing the possible hardship to

those in education that subscription sites may pose ("The Internet Scout - Selection Criteria,"

n.d.).

Service Features

Browse

From the Scout homepage, *http://scout.wisc.edu*, the *Scout Report* link takes the viewer

to the contents of the current issue. The *Previous Issues* page has a link to each and every report

since the first, dated April 29, 1994. The past issues are grouped by year and listed in

chronological order. Perplexingly, the years are listed in reverse chronological order, which

when combined with the order of the issues within each year creates an organizational zig zag

that defies intuition.

Nevertheless, browsing past editions is easily accomplished. All issues, current and past,

are comprised of a set of simple bulleted lists: *Research and Education*, *General Interest*,

Network Tools, and *In The News*. The first two are self-explanatory and contain roughly eight

resources per issue. *Network Tools* highlights a pair of software applications. They range from

video editing programs to anti-virus software. *In The News* provides useful background

information on topics of currency. For example, *In The News* for the September 2, 2005 issue

has a half dozen links to information on the Hurricane Katrina disaster and a two-paragraph

synopsis of the event (Internet Scout Project, 2005).

In a given set, each bullet shows the title of the resource that was chosen by *Scout's*

subject specialists. Clicking one of these titles takes the user to the entry. The entries consist of

just 3 elements: title, URL, and (most beneficial) a succinct description of the resource written

by the Scout Project's information professionals. Viewers can scroll up or down to view other

resources from the same set. In all, between 15 and 20 websites and software programs are

included in the report each week.

Misgivings on the part of the viewer may arise from the lack of Web 2.0 interactivity, the

inability to browse entries similar to the present one, and the dearth of still imagery. However,

the Internet Scout pages are strikingly simple and uncluttered. In fact, the site's ease-of-use and

absence of intrusive visual elements help mollify these misgivings.

Search

The *Scout Report*'s search experience resembles that of the browsing feature, with search results arrayed plainly across a spartan visual landscape. However, unlike browsing the collection, which requires a sequence of clicks from the main page, the simple search box exists at the top-right corner of most pages in *The Scout Project*'s website.

To test this feature, I typed "orthodox church schism" into the search box, which is labeled *Search Archives*, and hit enter. Above the lone search result, my search string was shown in bold, a minor feature perhaps, but a welcome reminder. The result was titled *Pope Makes Historic Pilgrimage to Greece*. A thirty word summary was below, with a link to the *Full Record* beneath that. The issue date, May 4, 2001, was positioned to the right. The title text was hyperlinked, so I assumed it would take me to the record. Instead, the title link goes to the page corresponding to the issue. This eyebrow-raising trait puts the *Scout Report* at odds with a decade of Web conventions, not to mention Google. It was made even more jarring by the fact that the item I sought was not visible without scrolling down.

Examining the record, I saw a total of ten links, about half were news reports of the Pope's visit to Greece and the other half explained the historical significance of the trip. Below the links was a distillation of the contents of the articles.

I decided to conduct a new search, so I sent my browser back until the *Search Archives* box appeared at the top. I entered "extrasolar planets" and was presented with the first ten of eleven matching items on the results page. Examining the date of each record, I was disappointed to find that the two most recent items were from March, 2005. Aided by newer and

more advanced instruments, astronomers make new discoveries every year. With a little

scouring I learned that there had been three subject-specific *Scout Reports*, but they ceased

publication in 2005. One of the discontinued reports was on the physical sciences, which

explained the absence of more recent information on extrasolar planets.

 Perusing a handful of these dated results highlighted a serious threat to the integrity of

any information stored on the Web, or anywhere for that matter: the corrosive power of time.

The 1998 report of Hubble's discovery of the first known extrasolar planet was retracted by

NASA when they realized the object they found was actually a dim star. More obvious signs of

outdated content: four of the eleven items gave *Page Not Found* errors and one site ceased

updating in 2006. Clearly, information can become embarrassingly outdated.

 The advanced search initially has two search fields: keyword and description. It also

allows the user to add fields, such as title, URL, creator, classification, date of Scout publication,

and notes. I searched for the classification "biology" and the keyword "influenza" and received

one result: a 2007 review of BioEd Online. A *Refine Search* link that allows the visitor to modify

the parameters of their search using the advanced search interface. This discovery prompted me

to repeat a simple search and I discovered that *Refine Search* can be used to convert a simple

search into an advanced one, which is very convenient.

 In addition, a link on the advanced search page asks *Need Help?* The resulting page

explains the differences between simple and advanced, the field prioritization, and some general

tips.

Commentary

 The *Internet Scout Project's* website is simple and easy to use. I believe the average

computer user or researcher would quickly become comfortable with the structure and navigation

of the *Scout Report* archives. Some usability problems exist, however, such as the unintuitive

destination of some links in the search results. The *Report* does not provide images or

multimedia to accompany the resources and annotations. I believe most users would appreciate

the discreet use of, for example, author photos, small samples of content, logos of responsible

organizations, and visual cues (like an atom to denote chemistry resources and a cloud to indicate

meteorology). Also, it is not possible to view one item and obtain a list of items that are similar

based on classification.

The *Scout Report* is also missing features that characterize the Web 2.0 era, such as

viewer ratings, reviews, comments, and user-derived content. Despite its shortcomings, the

Internet Scout Project is an informative tool for scholars and the intellectually curious. Its 17

years and 27,000 records comprise an impressive body of distilled knowledge. It offers a

window to the past, of not only the milestones of science and the humanities, but of the

fluctuating state of the World Wide Web.

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