

Searching for good search engines

Written by Darryn Lowe
Thursday, 25 December 2008 00:00 -

Have we lost the ability to question? Has computing removed our ability to get the information we are really looking for?

My questions come from the complete waste of time that is search engines. We often resort to these when trying to find information but ninety percent of the time we get information that is so completely removed from what we want. The problem is search engines do a really bad job of searching.

I was doing a bit of research into whether or not a single language aides in the development of technology so I figured I'd enter in this string:

language and the development of technology

If you enter without quotes you get 64,500,000 hits of complete drivél. By putting the phrase in quotes you get 2 hits of complete and utter drivél.

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Why can't I find information on the speed of technological development based on a single language?

The general recourse people give is to "alter your search parameters". Why? Why should I have to go against the natural way of asking for information because a search engine doesn't understand a logical request? Why not change the search engine to respect the desires of humans rather than computers?

Go to a really really good bookstore (so not Whitcoulls or Borders or other child run bookstores) and ask for information on "language and the development of technology" and they'll point you in the right direction. They understand what you are after and can tell you where to get it.

Now it might seem bad of me for calling Whitcoulls or Borders not good bookstores but the fact they are what I call "child run" or in other words a supermarket bookstore where those on the counters are often teenagers means that finding what you want is made more difficult by the fact that these people will first go to a computer to get the information. But because a computer doesn't understand what is being asked of it it comes back with nothing and so the counter person says they don't have anything on that topic.

I'll give you an interesting example of this. I was looking for the Concise New Zealand Sign Language Dictionary and I naturally went to their website to see if they had it in stock. To see

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the answer I got follow this link:

<http://search.whitcoulls.co.nz/search?w=new+zealand+sign+language+dictionary&af=∓Search=Search&booksby=>

Can anyone spot the New Zealand Sign Language Dictionary there? No neither could I. So I figured they don't have one. I called Dymocks and they said they were getting some in but they didn't have any. I called Bennetts who said they didn't have any either but they did a search on their system and low and behold Whitcoulls DID have some. So why can't I find it on their website? What use is the website anyway?

Admittedly the shop doesn't use their website otherwise God help us all but it does show the folly of using a system that doesn't work. Teenagers, who neither have experience or were bought up in a technical society, often struggle when asked to think. It's not because they are dumb it's because they've been conditioned to think that technology can give all the answers. So when some one comes along asking for something on the topic of "language and the development of technology" they're dumbfounded because the computer can't give them the information they need to effectively help someone. As such they are seen to be the generation of helpless people. That in itself is sad. It's not their fault it's the fault of technology and more so the fault of teachers who teach their students how to get information using technology. How many times have you heard teachers saying look up Wikipedia to get information? It's dangerous and leads to a nation of ill-informed people.

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I have yet to find a search engine that actually gives me the information I want instead of basing it on a bunch of keywords which can be manipulated to include their sites that are completely unrelated. For example. When I was at Natural Gas one of the girls was looking for the website of the safety boots they wear and everyone likes. She did a Google search and found what she figured must be the website because it had the same name as the boots she was after. A quick trip to a gay porn site showed her the folly of trusting in the first entry in the list that the search engine threw her way.

And herein lies the danger. People aren't being taught the correct way to use a search engine and so little kids have ready access to very dangerous material, all because the search engine they used wasn't setup with adult content filters etc because the parents haven't been taught the correct way to use something in the first place.

Search engines need to be rethought. They need to be more human in their approach to getting information and they need to be free of the use of keywords which can be manipulated. They need to search for context not content. Currently search engines search for words so in my original example the string "language and the development of technology" is actually treated by the search engine like so:

language + and + the + development + of + technology

What this does is tells the search engine to search for all words that are "language";

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and "and" and "the" and "development" and "of" and "technology" and try and get them in that order. Most search engines will remove searches for "and", "the", and "of" anyway so the search engine will actually do a search of "language development technology". Notice how that completely changes the context of what I was after? The removal of "and", "the", and "of" has actually sent the search engine down a completely different tract and is now wanting to find searches of technology aimed and developing language.

Adding quotes forces a search for the entire phrase but the results are generally out of context as well.

So rephrase the request I hear you say. Okay, how about this:

the development of technology due to a single language

Both with or without the quotes I'm left with either 339,000 entries around language development or 0 entries based around the actual phrase. Either way I either have to traverse 339,000 entries to see if anyone can provide any information other than that of language technology or information technology which is rapidly becoming somewhat of a misnomer.

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Maybe I need a fresh mind with all this. Can any one of you think of how I could find information relating to the development of technology as a result of a single language. Industrial Revolution comes to mind or the use of English with regards to the rapid development of technology. I did just do a search based on this:

english as the cause of rapid advancement of technology

But the same old story of lots of unrelated information or none comes to play. Anyone?