



The New Value Equation

Recently, I was invited to revisit a presentation I had given a decade ago on “free vs. fee,” in which I looked at the thought process information professionals go through when deciding which type of resource to use for a research project. Back then, our main calculation was whether it was cheaper to look for an article on the web or to pay for a copy from a fee-based online service—a decision driven primarily by time vs. money.

One of the biggest changes from 10 years ago is that of the information landscape. Newspapers have moved from print to multimedia and now produce content in the form of videos, podcasts, animations, newsletters, chats with columnists, and live streams of breaking news. This material is not usually included in bibliographic databases, and much of it is not easily retrievable from newspapers’ sites; most papers’ searchable archives consist of static content that has appeared in the print version of the paper.

Conversely, more grey literature is discoverable through general-purpose search engines than was the case a decade ago. Conference organizers are making proceedings, papers, and slide decks available to both attendees and the public; see, for example, a selection of materials from the 2019 Computers in Libraries conference, produced by *Online Searcher* publisher Information Today, Inc. (<http://computersinlibraries.infotoday.com/2019>). Peer-reviewed journals are now making available the research datasets on which their articles are based, and libraries are curating collections of high-quality OA datasets, usually in institutional repositories.

Universities are making their students’ dissertations and theses available through their websites, albeit without the consistent metadata and subject indexing of a source such as ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Professional. And just as the fee-based online services are seeing full-text versions of their content on the open web, so data aggregators are attempting to expand their reach. A recent scan of Source categories on ProQuest Dialog and Factiva turned up coverage of selected blogs, think tank reports, conference proceedings, working papers, and practice guidelines. Yet, these nontraditional sources are not well-represented; I find that these types of grey literature surface unexpectedly but not consistently, and I cannot imagine relying on a fee-based aggregator’s coverage of anything more than the traditional publications they are known for.

Further complicating matters when calculating which type of resource to use is the fact that our web finding tools are still

far from sufficient for professional researchers. Google is, after all, essentially a high-tech ad agency, and while Google charmingly claims that its mission is “to organize the world’s information and make it universally accessible and useful,” Google parent Alphabet Inc.’s 10K filing lists as one of its risk factors that more than 85% of its revenue comes from advertising. Just as with AltaVista, the mid-1990s search engine beloved by info pros for its ability to retrieve more and better information than any other web finding tool of the time, we are relying on a resource whose ultimate goal is to sell something (in AltaVista’s case, to highlight the capacities of Digital Equipment Corp.’s new supercomputer). The priorities of any information service are necessarily driven by the needs of the buyers; Google develops tools to help advertisers find the right consumers, and Springer builds new tools to help info pros visualize information.

This means that info pros conducting in-depth research are faced with a Hobbesian choice. We can conduct deep searches in fee-based online services, which offer powerful search functions, consistent indexing of reputable published sources, and documented coverage that often goes back decades, while understanding that coverage of less traditional content is far more limited and there will be costs involved in obtaining the full text of any of the retrieved information. Conversely, we can take the approach of starting in a search engine with the understanding that we can never consider the results to be comprehensive, that the results are inevitably filtered in ways we cannot control, but that we will find information not included in fee-based services and it will most likely be available for free.

It is more important than ever for info pros to consider the entire informational landscape when selecting research sources and tools, keeping in mind that price and value are not always correlated. As Stewart Brand famously said back in the 1980s, information wants to be free because it has become so cheap to distribute, copy, and recombine—too cheap to meter. It wants to be expensive because it can be immeasurably valuable to the recipient. Rather than viewing the world from a free vs. fee perspective, we need to calculate for any given project where we will find the information that potentially has the highest value for the client. The price of obtaining the information is only a portion of that value.

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