Guide to comparative politics on the internet

1. THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

The first point concerns the internet itself. Six out of every seven people in the world have never used the web and internet access is still greatest in the affluent western democracies (internetworldstats). In much of the developing world, including most Arab and African countries, access is still a rarity and is likely to remain so until wireless access becomes more straightforward.

Even when the internet is available, use of it is sometimes policed (Unesco webworld), reducing the effective value of the medium. In any case, the internet is less useful to the billions of people on the planet who cannot read (UN statistics division). For now, the digital divide between the internet-enabled and the internet-disabled remains large.

Such knowledge gaps have political consequences. How different, we wonder, would the world be if internet use in Saudi Arabia were at the same level as in the United States? (Arab gateway). At any rate, as students of politics it behoves us to be aware that the internet is more than a research tool; it is itself a component of political communication.

2. SELECTION BIAS

Just as the highest proportions of internet users are in the developed world, so too are most websites. This gives rise to the 'selection bias' discussed in our book (pp. 49-50): the tendency to study topics for which information is readily available. It is easier for us all - professors as well as students - to write about internet-rich topics such as the American presidency and British government than about internet-poor areas such as social movements in Guatemala.

As a result of selection bias, the known becomes ever clearer but the unknown remains opaque, thus contradicting the underlying spirit of academic enquiry. A case can even be made that a greater total contribution to knowledge would emerge if, for a period, we all agreed to research website-free topics!

3. TYPES OF WEBSITE

The internet gives access to various sources of information, including (with example):

- government portals (Australia)
- intergovernmental organizations (United Nations)
- international non-governmental organizations (Médecins Sans Frontières)
- research organizations (Rand Corporation)
- policy institutes (World Policy Institute and links)
- interest groups (Federated Farmers)
- social movements (Mexico Solidarity Network and links)
- businesses (Shell)
- library catalogues (Library of Congress)
- booksellers' catalogues (Amazon)
- academic journals (Comparative Politics, Comparative Political Studies)
- newspapers (Offstats)
- search engines (Google, Google Scholar Beta, Google Book Search Beta)
- individuals (blogs such as Andrew Sullivan's)
- encyclopedias (Wikipedia)
- academic journals (Comparative Political Studies)

4. ASSESSING WEBSITES

The range and quality of information is immense; making sense of it requires the same skills as interpreting non-internet information, plus additional ruthlessness in disposing of irrelevant, low-grade and out-of-date material. How can we judge the accuracy, objectivity and comprehensiveness of internet material?

Sources do not need to be perfect to be useful. Sometimes, we are just interested in finding a particular fact or statistic, a task for which a simple query through a search engine is ideal. Encyclopedias such as Wikipedia are also helpful here though Wikipedia entries, being based on contributions from users, should be checked for accuracy.

Often, we are interested in what a government, interest group or political party has to say in and of itself. What an organization says - on its website or elsewhere - is

significant, whether or not it accurately reflects the views of individuals within the organization. So for this purpose, too, a trawl through the relevant sites is valuable.

Most often, however, we use internet resources as a guide to an external reality and we want to judge the value of internet information accordingly. There is no magic formula for doing this but here are some guidelines (most of which also apply to hard-copy documents):

- does the author have an interest in giving a selective account?
- is the site produced by a named person or organization ('the author')?
- does the reputation of the author depend on the accuracy of its information?
- what expertise does the author possess and demonstrate?
- how well do the author's views chime with other sources?
- does the site appear long on opinion and short on fact?
- is the information current? (often a website is the last medium to be updated)

When any organization discusses itself, expect a uniformly positive and intensely selective presentation. All such bodies – including charities, churches, government departments and universities - highlight their successes and underplay their failures. The facts as presented are partial and the overall interpretation is biased. Lies are rare but half-truths are everywhere.

It is the observer's job to think about what the website leaves out. The way to do this is through comparing one source against other (including interviews with staff or observers) until an overall picture develops. Outside analysts, such as journalists and academics, are useful in giving a more balanced insight. So the websites produced by institutions can provide a useful introduction and source of facts but the information is unlikely to be complete or deep. It supplements but does not replace academic writing on the topic. Good research requires more than a search through the sites. Be careful of allowing the content of partial sites to shape your agenda in ways of which you unaware.

See also Learn the Net and the World Wide Web Virtual Library.

5. SEARCH ENGINES

Search engines such as Google, Yahoo and Altavistaprovide a convenient way of trawling the web for a particular topic though bear in mind that some engines permit organizations to pay to appear near the top of a results page. Results vary from one engine to another so it is worth trying at least two for any topic. Also vary the phrase for which you search.

An intelligent search aims to produce a manageable set of results so explore the advanced search facilities of your preferred engines. These enable you, for example, to limit your results to those:

- of a particular type (e.g. Adobe PDF files, which are often substantial reports)
- in a particular language (e.g. English)
- from a specific domaine.g. .com, .coop, .edu, .info, .int, .mil, .museum, .org
- or from a specific country such as .dk, .no, .se
- which have been updated since a particular date (e.g. 11 September 2001)
- which have been accessed by many other users
- which have links to the page you specify
- which meet logical conditions such as:

OR – contains either keyword
e.g. ‘comparative government’ OR ‘Hague and Harrop’

AND – contains all keywords
e.g. ‘comparative government’ AND ‘Hague and Harrop’

AND NOT – exclude some keywords
e.g. ‘comparative government’ AND NOT ‘Hague and Harrop’

NEAR – contains all keywords and they are close to each other
e.g. ‘comparative government’ NEAR ‘Hague and Harrop’

6. TRAWLING THE DEEP WEB

A weakness of general search engines is that they still cover only part of the web. The ‘deep’ or ‘invisible’ web consists of public materials such as rapidly changing databases which are not fully indexed by search engines such as Google, Brightplanet claims that the deep web may be 500 times the size of the surface web. Thus, you should not rely on general search engines alone but also search more specifically.

For current news, for example, use either the news section of your engine or media websites such as the BBC, New York Times or Financial Times. Similarly, the best way to trace a particular book is through a bookseller (e.g. Amazon) or a library catalogue (such as the Library of Congress or the British Library). Many websites themselves contain internal search engines; if you search the United Nations site for ‘literacy’ you are likely to discover documents there that would not be included in the results of a more general search.

You can also try subject-specific directories and gateways such as the World Wide Web Virtual Library, Yahoo, Intute and Infomine.

7. THE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY AS A GATEWAY TO THE DEEP WEB

How can you use the internet to identify leading academic literature – books and articles – on particular politics topics? That is the key question you must answer if you are to make effective use of electronic resources. Using a general search engine or media website will be of limited use though Google Scholar Beta and Google Book Search Beta are certainly worth a try.

The central task is to identify the bibliographic databases to which your library subscribes, often at considerable expense, but which are usually free to current students. These resources include access to databases such as the Web of Science which enable you to search through academic journals seeking all articles on a particular topic (catalogued by title or topic). These databases are subscription-only and are not available on the surface web.

Currently, many electronic databases return only a list of titles or abstracts, not the full text, but your library may well subscribe to a particular journal in hard copy or electronic form or have a scheme whereby it can order items from other libraries on request.

These specialist resources are vastly under-used, notably by students who wrongly assume that all information available through a computer must be free to all. Often, too, students move too quickly to primary sources (e.g. what the American government has to say about 9/11) before they have understood the secondary literature (e.g. what other academics have already written about 9/11).

So to make effective use of the global internet, visit your own library's website first!

8. REFERENCING WEBSITES AND AVOIDING PLAGIARISM

Whenever you incorporate material of any kind from a website into your own work, you are expected to reference your source. If you fail to do this, you are guilty of plagiarism – passing off the work of others as if it were your own.

So how should websites be referenced? The essential point is to give all the information needed for the reader to find your source. Compared to books and articles in paper form, websites change rapidly and are accessed through a specific internet address. Accordingly, references to websites should include both the date of access and the full internet address, in addition to the source and where possible a title (Stein, 2003, p. 22).

Recommended MLA format:

Surname, first name, '*full title*', date of document (if available). Full web address (date accessed).

Example:

Norris, Pippa, '*Electoral Engineering: Voting Rules and Political Behaviour*'. Spring 2004. Pippa Norris website. (April 4, 2007)

An alternative format:

Author (year) 'full title' (full web address). Date accessed.

Example:

Supreme Court of Canada (2004) '*The Role of the Court*' (http://www.scc-csc.gc.ca/court-cour/role/index-eng.asp). Accessed April 28, 2010.

If you are submitting your work electronically, you can use the 'insert hyperlink' command to add a link.

9. FURTHER READING

Buckler, S., Eynon, R. and Howard, H. (2004) *Politics on the Internet: A Student Guide* (London and New York: Routledge).

Castells, M. (2003*) The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business and Society* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press).

Chadwick, A. (2006) *Internet Politics: States, Citizens and New Communication Technologies* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press).

Franda, M. (2001) *Governing the Internet: The Emergence of an International Regime* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner).

Goldsmith, J. and Wu, T. (2006) *Who Controls the Internet? Illusions of a Borderless World* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Hewson, C. et al. (2002) *Internet Research Methods: A Practical Guide for the Social and Behavioural Sciences* (London and Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage).

Karmack, E. and Nye, J. (2002) (eds) *governance.com: Democracy in the Information Age* (Washington, DC: Brookings).

Margolis, M. and Resnick D. (200) *Politics as Usual: The Cyberspace 'Revolution'* (London and Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage).

Stein, S. (2003) *Politics on the Web: A Student Guide* (Harlow: Pearson).

Sunstein, C. (2001) Republic.com (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).

See also Bruce Larkin's *Politics of the Internet* course.