Science and the web

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Published in:
Science

Publication date:
1998

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

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The report "Searching the World Wide Web" by Steve Lawrence and C. Lee Giles (3 Apr., p. 98) nicely reminds us about the novelty of the Web as an information resource and convincingly warns scientists (and others) about the current limitations of the popular search engines (such as that they return only a fraction of the available documents that match the query, return documents that are no longer valid because those pages have moved or have been withdrawn, or simply return documents that do not contain the query terms). Apparently, the most likely explanation for the latter malfunction rests with the typical commitment of webmasters to frequently update the content of the pages they maintain on a server. Of course, this highly desirable updating is the main advantage everybody is seeking when surfing the Web in search of information. However, it also means that, unless there is alternative support that guarantees the permanence of the information (as is the case for *Science* and most online scientific journals published with their paper-printed companion), the information one gets on the Web can be altered or may disappear after an unpredictable period of time.

It is increasingly tempting these days to refer to a uniform resource locator (URL) when publishing a scientific paper, and Lawrence and Giles appear to follow this practice, although wisely including the date of publication (last update) of the referred URLs. However, when releasing new data, presenting background, or discussing relevance to previously reported work, scientists might refer to information that could become inaccessible at any time. This would appear to jeopardize the validity of scientific knowledge because interrupting access to a reference is likely to impede reproduction of the data by the scientific community. I therefore think that there is an urgent need, when publishing scientific data, to distinguish clearly in references between perennial information (available on the Web but also safely preserved in multiple institutional libraries scattered around the world and accessible anytime to anybody) and information with an unpredictable lifetime (that is, available on the Web exclusively from one server). In order to protect our credibility, reference to possibly short-lived information in scientific publications should, I believe, be restricted to commentaries and, perhaps, letters and systematically banned from regular articles and reviews.

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