How to Find Health Information on the Internet


Despite the Internet revolution, this book’s existence is proof that there is still a market for paradox. Basically a list of health-related Internet sites and related resources (newsgroups, discussion lists, File Transfer Protocol [FTP] servers), How to Find Health Information on the Internet seems to be a glorified bookmark file aimed at Internet-savvy patients. The good news is that the list provides a solid starting point for a broad variety of health-related content on the Internet. The author has predigested most of the sites/resources with a sharp eye for quackery, which adds to the book’s value. The paradox arises from considering why an Internet-savvy patient would look in a book for Internet information? Why not just search the Net?

At more than 300 pages (in paperback only), the book includes a brief introduction that describes the process of judging quality on the Internet, followed by 4 broad sections: “Search Engines,” “Conditions, Diseases, and Illnesses,” “Prevention and Treatment,” and “Health Care Issues.” Each of these sections is broken down into sub-chapters, with 2 to 30 resources listed in each subchapter. An extensive index helps find information easily. A typical resource listing includes a 2- or 3-sentence commentary about the site followed by “Vital Stats,” which include URLs, information on how to access the site, e-mail contacts, and, when necessary (FTP servers), login and password information.

Generally the listings and commentary are useful, though they include many that are repetitious or outdated. As an example, there are numerous resource listings for disease-specific pages maintained on the P/S/L NuMedia Web site. The Internet Sleuth Web site similarly gets many nods. It would seem prudent simply to list the parent site once and shorten the book by omitting resource listings for each subpage on the site. An example of how quickly this kind of information gets outdated includes the New England Journal of Medicine Web site description, which fails to mention that the full text of each issue is now available for subscribers.

What you will not find anywhere in the book is information on how to get on the Internet, what a listserv is, or what an FTP server is. While this may seem unnecessary for the Internet-savvy (and who is not these days?), token attention to this might broaden the book’s appeal to the consumer market.

This brings me to my main complaint about the book, which has little to do with its content, and everything to do with the lack of online companion information. Surely there is an online version with linked URLs that are automatically updated. Surely the list is being constantly edited, expanded, and reviewed. Surely there are instructions about using the various search engines discussed in the book but alas, there’s no online information at all (I do not count the author’s invitation to visit his home page, which is mainly an advertisement for his books). You have to type all the URLs yourself. If there is a link that’s outdated, you’re out of luck. The author’s plan to update the book regularly begs the question “Why?”

In short, the book has all the shortcomings of Old World publishing, with none of the advantages of the Internet phenomenon it describes. Clearly the author and publisher have yet to read Nicholas Negroponte’s 1995 book Being Digital, which nicely describes the advantage of shipping bits, not atoms. Why incur the production and shipping costs of an Internet-related book when you can publish the information online? At a minimum, why not provide online companion information that adds value to the book? The obvious answer is that there are still people who will buy print Internet guides, no matter how quickly they become obsolete.

My advice? If you know nothing about Internet search engines, do not want to take the time to do online research yourself, or are looking for a good patient resource for your waiting room, consider this book. Otherwise, visit one of the many online sites that rank and update health resources, like Medical Matrix (http://www.medmatrix.org) or Yahoo’s health links (http://www.yahoo.com/Health). You will save the cost of the book, automatically see the latest version, and won’t have to type your own URLs.

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