

Search Engines

by Andy Pepperdine

Introduction

It's more than four years since we last looked at search engines, and after looking at what I wrote before, I realise that not much has changed.

Search engines

Using any search engine, just search for the words “search engine list” and you'll get to a list of popular search engines, and other information.

For example, look at this page <http://www.ebizmba.com/articles/search-engines> to see some, although not all search facilities.

The following list is just a selection of what is available. At the end there are some comments on more specialised search engines for specific subjects.

Google

Home site: <https://encrypted.google.com/>

Google is still the most popular search site by far, and appears to index more pages across the whole world than any other search engine. The downside to some people is that it insists on tracking ever search you make, and recording the details in order to provide more tailored information for you.

The promoted results and advertisements are not intrusive

It has many special features that can be used to refine the search. From the home page, at the bottom right is a menu for Settings, and there is found Advanced search with the ability to state what language you are searching in as well as including or excluding words and phrases, etc.

My experience is that whenever other search engines fail to find exactly what I am looking for at first, Google almost always points it to me from the first page of results. It remains the gold standard.

DuckDuckGo

Home site: <https://duckduckgo.com/>

This engine has become the default now in many Linux distributions as it does not rely on a commercial arrangement to be used as a search engine, whereas Google normally does. Its main selling point is that it does no tracking of any sort.

For normal commercial and everyday searches, it seems to do a good job. For more specific or esoteric matters, it is not so good. Certainly it does not have the academic access that Google scholar does. Similarly it is not so good for things behind paywalls.

There is now an extension for Duckduckgo for Firefox, which gives extra information on the searches it can provide, and especially useful are the keywords introduced with an exclamation mark. For example, including !gi will search Google Images, without Google knowing it is you. There are thousands of these so-called “bangs”, many will search just a single site, like Amazon or eBay, etc.

Duckduckgo provide a dedicated app for smart phones (both iOS and Android) for searching.

Although they have a way of restricting a search to a geographic region, I could not find a way of restricting to a language.

Bing

Home site: <https://www.bing.com/>

Bing is Microsoft's attempt to get some of Google's business. I'm more impressed this time than last for the searches I did. There is a way to restrict to pages in certain languages only, but even so it is awkward to do, and has to be done for all searches until the settings are set back. It does not seem possible to do it easily for a single search. Even so, there were still some English results among the answers.

I was pleasantly surprised at the general lack of forcing unwanted advertisements onto the page. It looks as though they are really trying hard to do the job right.

On the downside was the fact that some of my attempts for less popular subjects did not provide up to date information.

Yahoo

Home site: <https://search.yahoo.com/>

This search engine also provided good clean results for my simple tests. The possible changes in settings were limited, and again I could not just do a single search in a different language, although the results were all in the chosen language, and not in English – except for the general article on the side. However, surprisingly, it did not pick up the language variant in Wikipedia.

This also failed sometimes to provide the latest information on less popular topical subjects.

Baidu

Home site: <https://www.baidu.com/>

Baidu is the Chinese search engine. They have announced indirectly that they want to take on Google internationally. However, they have a lot of work to do first. The user interface is all in Chinese, so I could only do simple searches as I could not see a way of changing the language and getting at any settings it may have to customise the interface and searches.

For general things it did find the usual English language sources. For more esoteric queries it failed (and these were simply less common but neutral subjects). For commercial queries, it failed spectacularly, not realising that I was in Britain, and pointing me all over the place.

Ask

Home site: <https://uk.ask.com>

The Ask search engine was originally known as Ask Jeeves, and has some rather idiosyncratic ideas on what advertisements may be relevant to certain searches. However, if you can ignore those the results do seem reasonable and up to date, even on less common topics.

I thought to start with that it had no settings available, but in fact if you ask a question in a natural way in the language you want to use, it detects the language and gives responses in that language. There is probably more to it than I've discovered.

Aol

Home site: <https://search.aol.com>

AOL as a search engine appears to behave very much like Ask, where it can interpret the language you want answers in from the language the question is posed in. Otherwise there seemed very little difference between them.

Yandex

Home site: <https://www.yandex.com/>

This is the Russian engine, and it has a global reach and some translations, although not many. I got the English interface by default, and it has a few extra features for advanced searches.

It did well on factual searches, less well on attempts to purchase something, although it did the job.

Ecosia

Home site: <https://www.ecosia.org/>

For those who want to do something for the environment while searching the web, this German site plants trees from the income made from advertisements it supplies.

The results were good and fast on the few I tried, but I do not know where they got them from.

Webcrawler

Home site: <https://www.webcrawler.com/>

This site does parallel searches on other search engines and selects the top common ones, which gives it a steady set of results, and may miss some of the more unusual ones. Asking in the language you want answers in shifts the language for the results as it does for a lot of them.

Note that although this site does have an https connection, it is not the default, and Firefox warns that not all of the content is served over https. It is not clear whether the search items are in plain text or not.

Search

Home site: <https://www.search.com/>

This site is part of the CBS corporation, and handled general queries well, but when asked for a purchase did less well. The sponsored advertisements were in the UK, but other references were all from the US – less than useful for finding the best deals.

Looking for hotels was even worse – the non-sponsored results were largely irrelevant.

To switch languages, just ask the question in the desired language, like most of the other search engines seem to do.

Dogpile

Home site: <https://www.dogpile.com/>

This site does not default to a secure connection, but does have one available if you explicitly ask for it.

It uses external technology from the company Metasearch, which passes your query on to other search sites, and then selects the common and “most relevant” ones to show you. The results do appear very reasonable in the few tests I did.

I could not find a list of what other engines were used, which would have been useful depending on the type of search being conducted.

Ixquick / Start page

Home site: <https://www.ixquick.com/>

This prides itself on being private, and uses other search engines to generate its results,. Because some of the search engines are commercial and biased towards purchases, these results are too, to some extent. I could not find a list of which search engines it uses, although it only mentions Google specifically.

It has a wide range of settings that you can adjust to refine the search and how the results are displayed, as well as advanced search refinement features.

Googawho

Home site: <http://www.googawho.com/searchawho.php>

This is a way of getting access to several different search engines, and to display them in pairs side by side in two panes. However, it is not being kept up to date, and does not support enough to be very useful.

Info

Home site: <https://www.info.com/>

This is a highly commercial operation as the results will not display when blocking Google advertisements. I used Chromium to see what it would do.

It selects from other search engine results, and general queries were answered adequately, except that there were often a large number of irrelevant advertisements at the head of the page.

Specialised Searches

There are other search engines that specialise in various ways, by type of query, or general subject matter.

If you think you need a special search engine for research purposes, then it is probably best to start with a query in a general engine searching for search engines. Then see what comes back and investigate any lists that appear.

One site that names some useful links of a more scholarly and reliable nature can be found at: <http://articles.mercola.com/sites/articles/archive/2008/02/19/beyond-wikipedia-19-references-you-can-t-do-without.aspx> It does not appear to have been updated since 2008, so I suspect it will be rather limited now.

Wikipedia has a list that is worth investigating as well:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_academic_databases_and_search_engines

Unfortunately a lot of them are not free, but here are a few that are.

Wolfram Alpha

Home site: <https://www.wolframalpha.com/>

This specialises in mathematical and scientific answers and explanations, divided into many separate sections, for example, on physics, chemistry, life sciences, words and language, and many others.

PubChem

Home site: <https://pubchem.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/>

Type in a compound name and it returns references quickly. It is generally directed towards the biological effects of chemicals, but has three different aspects that can be searched for.

ScienceOpen

Home site: <https://www.scienceopen.com/>

This site can search vast numbers of available scientific papers, and you can refine the search with the addition of suitable filters on title, abstract, journal, affiliation, etc. It's a useful resource for scientific searches.

Excite

Home site: <http://www.excite.com/>

This site handles only commercial, entertainment and news items, so far as I can see. It does not have a secure connection via https, and almost certainly will be tracking you everywhere it can. The page is too busy for my taste.

General searches gave rubbish answers. Responses were much slower than other engines. Also, I had to switch to Chromium to get the answers to display, clearly Firefox could not handle the scripting, or else my privacy plugins were protecting me from the whole thing.