How to get the best out of search engines

by Andy Pepperdine

Introduction

This paper is about how to select search engines and search terms to answer questions on the net. It will also include comments about some of the search engines that are available, but it does not purport to be inclusive; I can cover only those I have experience of or have heard of.

Finally, a comment will be made about the more popular browsers and how to customise the search bars on them where possible.

Example of search

In this example we want to find out why a newly purchased Lenovo laptop, running Ubuntu 12.10, cannot see its bluetooth, which it apparently has.

The first step is to identify the key parts of the question, which in this case are bluetooth and lenovo and ubuntu, so we can start with those and see what turns up. One of the items might well be a blog entry somewhere describing how to get it working. In fact, in the particular case we studied, there were a few immediate entries of interest. Just those particular ones were enough to find a few things that pointed us in the right direction.

This is general. If you can find the keywords that restrict the issue to the minimum yu will find what you are looking for.

Of course, if one of the words has multiple meaning, then you may need further help by adding other words that might be associated with the question you have. For example, the word “phone” is too vague. If you want to know something about a phone, then use the exact model or maker identification.

If you want to know how to do something in a spreadsheet program, then “spreadsheet” is not good enough as there are several. But if you using MS Excel, or LibreOffice Calc, then say “excel” or “calc” to limit the search. If your question concerns charts, then say so – or if it about formatting cells, then use those terms. The more the better.

However, it is not a good idea to use synonyms in a single search. It is probable that a particular web page will use just one term throughout, and so looking for both may not be what you want.

In some cases, it will be necessary to use a negative indicator to remove entries that are dominating the answers. For instance, there is a series of educational tracts under the name Excel; but if you try to find their mathematics section, you will find the results dominated by spreadsheet references. To solve that sort of problem, you can use “excel mathematics -spreadsheet – microsoft -ms”, where the leading minus sign will say you are looking for pages that do not contain that term.

Search engines

There are many different search engines. A selection is given below, and they all have their strengths and weaknesses. Some are more commercially oriented and can help you find a place to

purchase something; whereas others are more useful to find academic answers to specific technical questions, and a range between and different.

The list below contains some of the more popular general search engines.

As well as general searches, there are also some specialised sites where searches are within the site for specific types of item. For instance, Merriam-Webster has a search bar for English (American) words to provide definitions and etymologies.

I have given the encrypted form of the home site address where available, in case you are concerned to keep what you search for relatively private.

Google

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

This is the favourite among many people. It is often delivered by default by the browser for its search bar, and is always easily added if necessary. It's the most famous, and in many respects it can provide good answers to any question. It learns from the cookies to puts on your machine, so it will tailor more and more towards the type of information you are looking for.

This may not be what you want. In which case, you should remove all cookies and start again.

If you logged in to a Google account (for example to access Googlemail in the browser) then it will use information about you to adjust the search technique to provide what it thinks you need.

In my opinion, if they continue this too far, and they might, then the searches will become less useful to you, rather than more helpful – it assumes you live in a fairly restricted world, whereas a wider view provides better information in general.

It has many options to control, for example, the language of the user interface or the language of the searched pages. Click on the cogwheel at top right to see all the options.

DuckDuckGo

Home site: https://duckduckgo.com/

This is a relative newcomer, and claim they save nothing about you. They will use results from other search engines as well as their own index, and is supported by a charity. For the open-source minded user, it is a good clean alternative. Occasionally I've found the results from here the best of any of the search engines, but not consistently so.

Bing

Home site: http://www.bing.com/

Bing does not have a trusted secure connection to do searches, as of now. A news report from October 2010 indicated MS were looking into providing an encrypted connection, but when I tried it again just now, it still provides an invalid security certificate to Firefox.

Microsoft's attempt at providing a search engine to rival Google is not so extensive, nor can you tailor it so finely to the type of search to perform.

Ixquick

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

This prides itself on being private, and uses largely other search engines to generate its results, marking with stars whether an entry is common among the engines it looks at. Because some of the search engines are commercial and biased towards purchases, these results are too, to some extent.

Yahoo

Home site: http://uk.yahoo.com/

An attempt to force this to a secure connection failed, and the https was stripped off. The languages you can search in are fewer than Google, but adequate for all normal cases.

Dogpile

Home site: http://www.dogpile.com

Again, it does not have a secure connection available, and uses another company's technology (Metasearch) to combine the results from various other search engines, including Google, Yahoo! and Yandex.

Blekko

Home site: https://blekko.com/

Blekko tries to bias results towards good quality sites, based on reports from its users, so is worth a try in some cases where unusual subject matter is involved.

Browsers

There are several browsers that you could use, and they all have a search bar. Some search bars are the same as the address field (the place where you put a link reference to go to it), others use a separate bar to put in your search term, usually in the upper right of the window. They can all be customised to add different search engines.

Since most of them are similar, and everyone seems to know of Firefox, I will concentrate on that.

Firefox

The search bar is customised by each Linux distribution, to supply a subset of the possible search engines you can access. If you get it from Mozilla Corporation directly (e.g. for Windows or iOS), then you will have access directly to the full range of Mozilla's customisation.

In any case by going to http://mycroft.mozdev.org/search-engines.html you can access all of them even if you got Firefox from another supplier. The list includes a lot of entries that are also available from Internet Explorer and Google Chrome – look for the A9 symbols.

If you interested in doing a Google search with results in some language other than English, then this site will be useful: http://mycroft.mozdev.org/google-search-plugins.html Some of them can be applied to other browsers, too.

To add another search engine from the suppliers list, then you will find by clicking on the little

triangle in the search bar that one of the entries is “Manage Search Engines”. That opens a dialogue where you will also see a link to Get More Search Engines, which takes you to the pages that the supplier is keen to hve you loom at. For example, Linux Mint wants you to select the engines that give Mint a piece of the advertising revenue from the search, and so it does not provide Google to start with. It can be added by going to the secondary list they provide.

The Manage Search Engines dialogue also allows you to change to order of the engines for selection.

You can also add a keyword that will automatically switch to that engine to do the search, when the search terms are placed into the address field. For example, if you set the Keyword for the Wikipedia search to “wkp”, and then type “wkp photon” where you would normally put a url, it will search Wikipedia automatically for you.

Chromium / Chrome

This is google’s own browser and is designed for speed. It cannot be customised to the same extent as Firefox. The version supplied by Mint gives only Google, Bing and Yahoo as the search engines you might use. You can access the settings via the little three bar icon at the left of the url bar, which doubles as the search bar.

The browser is good for the modern web and later developments as it will support whatever Google is pushing as the Next Big Thing.

Opera

Opera is a browser aimed at providing web access to minorities, like the disabled. A version of the bowser has been incorporated in several mobile phones, although modern ones seem to be heading towards Chrome instead. They are an independent development, and so probably safer than the others. However, recent news stories indicate they may be moving over to one of the “standard” rendering engines, which will mean they will have the same vulnerabilities as others.

The list of search engines which are built-in is fairly representative, but adding more means you have to know the details of the invocation for that particular engine you want.

Konqueror

This is one of the browsers intended for use with the KDE desktop, although it is supplied with all the usual Linux distributions.

The user interface is almost the same as Firefox, but you will have to know how to invoke a search engine to add it. However, it supplies a very extensive standard list of ones you can add.

Midori

Midori is a small fast browser that is missing some of the more powerful features of the others. For this reason is seems better suited to smaller or older machines. There a re a limited number of search engines built-in, but any more must be added by knowing the details of how to call them. To manage the engines, click on the icon in the search bar – there is no triangle in this case.

Dillo

Dillo is an even smaller lightweight browser that is suitable only for the smallest and least capable of machines, in my opinion. It is missing too many of the standard features and abilities. However, it may be worthwhile keeping an eye on it in the future if the HTMLS5 standard and agreement on video encodings ever come about as I'm sure they will then be able to support the new standards.

Searching the web is not done like the others, in that a click on a "magnifying glass" icon starts a dialogue into which you put your search terms.

To modify any of the usual preferences needs a change to a configuration file – not the sort of thing an inexperienced person should be expected to do, but you would have to do to change the search engine in use.

Rekonq

This is intended to be a lightweight browser with similar capabilities to Konqueror, from which it is derived. The searching facility is access via a "keyword:" syntax in the address bar, and the list of search engines looks the same as its parent, accessed via the spanner icon and "Configure rekonq".

Further information

Further information can be found by searching the net for terms like "search engine", or "firefox plugin" etc.