

PolicyWeb: Using the Internet for Research in the Consumer Sciences

The Internet has created an information explosion. Finding reliable and factual information on the Internet, however, can be a daunting task. The PolicyWeb website facilitates policy research on the Internet. PolicyWeb includes lessons on using the Internet, privacy and regulation on the Internet, and how to contact policy makers and regulators through the Internet. It also includes a database of evaluated policy-related websites to facilitate Internet information search.

Kelly Manley, The University of Georgia¹
Anne L. Sweaney, The University of Georgia²
Carol B. Meeks, Iowa State University³

There has been an explosion in the availability of current and accessible information through the recent growth of the Internet. Finding specific information on the Internet, however, can be a daunting task for faculty and students alike. Consumer policy issues in particular are ideal subjects of investigation on the Internet since information can be updated quickly and easily. Many governmental agencies and other consumer policy-related organizations are maintaining the most up-to-date and relevant information through their own websites.

The Internet allows more than one person to access the same information at the same time, unlike the way a book has limited availability when it is checked out at the library. Additionally, the ever-changing nature of the Internet challenges users to expand their knowledge frequently. Keeping up with the Internet helps users to develop life-long learning skills, one of education's main goals (Geyer, 1997). These skills are particularly important for researchers in the consumer sciences who must be conscious of new developments in the ever-changing marketplace and regulatory environment.

The volume of information on the Internet, however, can be both a blessing and a curse. Some users may be overwhelmed by the thousands of documents returned when querying the typical search engine. The efficiency of searching on the Internet is decreased when users are forced to wander from site to site, while trying to find sources of information that match their needs (Carvin, 1997). Policy researchers on the Internet need the tools to make their information searches as efficient and precise as possible, in order to take full advantage of the available information.

The authors of this paper, through a USDA Challenge Grant entitled "Navigating Cyberspace for Policy Analysis in Family and Consumer Sciences" have created a policy analysis website, PolicyWeb (<http://www.fcs.uga.edu/policyweb>), that facilitates policy research on the Internet. PolicyWeb focuses on the development of a series of lessons for faculty and students that will develop their ability to use cyberspace for policy analysis concerning consumer issues and other areas. The five lessons are designed for both faculty and students, as well as anyone else interested in the policy making process. Each lesson covers an important aspect of using the new technology in policy analysis.

A database of policy research resources on the Internet and two search engines (one for the text of the website and one for the database) complete the compliment of tools found on PolicyWeb. Our website thus provides a convenient reference source around a policy research tool. Since PolicyWeb was not created with one specific course in mind, it can be useful in many areas of research and is open to all Internet users.

References

- Carvin, A. (1997, May 8). More than just hype: The World Wide Web as a tool for education. [on-line] Available: <http://sunsite.unc.edu/horizon/HSJ/Carvin.html>.
- Geyer, R. W. (1997, May 8). The teacher's ultimate classroom resources: Mosaic and the World Wide Web. [on-line] Available: http://www.coe.uh.edu/insite/elec_pub/html1995/163.htm.

Endnotes

1. Ph.D. Student, Department of Housing and Consumer Economics
2. Professor, Department of Housing and Consumer Economics
3. Dean, College of Family and Consumer Sciences