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Tales from the Terminal Room
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Editor: Karen Blakeman
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Tales from the Terminal Room (TFTTR) is an electronic newsletter that includes reviews and comparisons of information sources; useful tools for managing information; technical and access problems on the Net; and news of RBA's training courses and publications. Many of the items and articles will have already appeared on Karen Blakeman's Blog at http://www.rba.co.uk/wordpress/

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Search tools

Compfight – a quick and easy way to search Flickr

Compfight (http://www.compfight.com/) was recommended to me by a couple of people at the Open University. It searches images on Flickr and has an option for Creative Commons images. Next to the search box you can switch between Creative Commons Only, Creative Commons Commercial and Creative Commons Off. The results are displayed as thumbnails and you simply click on an image to go to the original image page on Flickr.
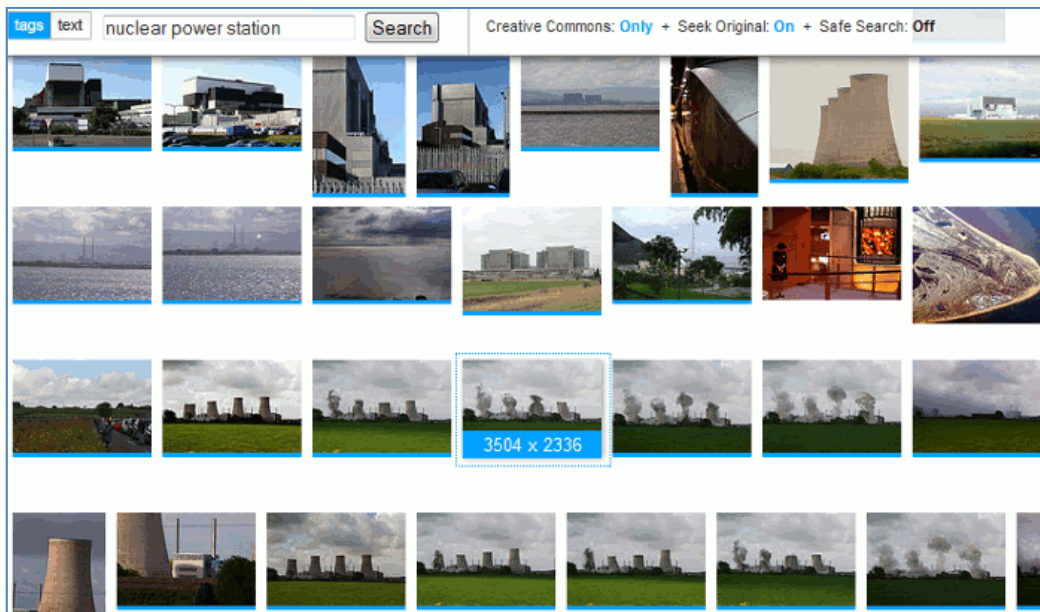
This is a very quick and easy way to search and preview Flickr photos with Creative Commons licenses, but do check the license of the image on its original Flickr page. There are several CC licenses with different levels of permissions and for all but one of them you are required to acknowledge the photographer.

Google Instant – display results as you type

No, Google hasn't branched out into groceries – yet. Google Instant is not a brand of coffee but a new search and display feature that shows changing results as you type your search. Google says that it is actually **search** b**efore** you type because it tries to predict your full strategy and delivers results for that search. As you add more terms the predictions and the results change:

> *"Google Instant is search-before-you-type. Instant takes what you have typed already, predicts the most likely completion and streams results in real-time for those predictions - yielding a smarter and faster search that is interactive, predictive and powerful."*

The list of predicted searches – they are the same as Google Suggest – appears below your search box. If you spot a better strategy you can scroll down the list to select it.

Note: If you are in the UK you have to be signed in to a Google account to see Google Instant but even then your organisation's firewall may block it. Also, the version of browser will determine whether or not you "experience" Google Instant.

I found that Google does eventually run out of predictions. In some cases it was after only three terms: in others it took seven or eight before Google gave up. If you are a more experienced and advanced searcher who uses search commands such as 'filetype:' or 'site:' you are suddenly presented with a blank page. This totally confused me at first and I thought that Google simply did not have any results for my search. In these situations Google reverts to 'old style' search, so just carry on as normal and press enter to view your results.

Not everyone will have Google Instant right now:

> "*Google Instant will become the core search experience on Google.com for Chrome, Firefox, Safari and IE 8. We'll also be offering Google Instant to our users in France, Germany, Italy, Russia, Spain and the U.K. who are signed in and have Instant-capable browsers. Over the coming weeks and months, we'll work to roll out Google Instant to all geographies and platforms.*"

I am guessing that IE 6 is **not** included in the "all geographies and platforms" as Google has already withdrawn support for it in some of its other services, for example YouTube.

The idea is not new. AlltheWeb – owned by Yahoo – was trying out a similar approach with its Livesearch a few years ago. I found it extremely useful because you could quickly spot if you had a gone a search term too far. The progression might go: OK-ish results, relevant, even better, superb, total rubbish. It was then easy to remove the last term you had typed in to get back to your superb results list. When further development of AlltheWeb was stopped Livesearch was discontinued. Another good idea abandoned by Yahoo and later taken up by someone else. Some of you may also remember Yahoo Mindset which gave you a slider bar to change the emphasis of your results to find more shopping or research oriented pages. Google now has a fewer/more shopping sites option in the left hand menu on results pages.

My first impressions of Google Instant are mixed. Sometimes the predictions work: sometimes they don't. And I do not find it as easy to take in the changing display as I did with AlltheWeb Livesearch. I think that is because Livesearch had the search box and suggestions on the left hand side of the screen and I find it easier to glance across the page rather than down to monitor what is happening to my search.

Do you find Google Instant distracting and want to turn it off? Either sign out of your Google account or click on the Settings link in the top right hand corner of the screen. The option to turn it off is at the bottom of the Settings screen. Alternatively, next to the search box on the results page there is a link that says "Instant is on". Click on this and you can scroll and select the off option. One of the "features" of Google Instant is that even if you have turned it off you can no longer turn off Google's search suggestions under "Settings". I am not bothered by suggestions and sometimes find them useful but I can understand why some people find them infuriating. Ted Cawston (Component Manufacturing http://www.componentmanufacturing.co.uk/) responded to my blog posting with a brilliantly simple solution: type in a '+' sign immediately before your first search term (no space between the plus sign and the term) and Google will be immediately brought to heel!

Do I have Google Instant on? NO! Here are three major reasons why not:

1. You only get 10 results per page regardless of what you have on your Settings page. This is a major problem for me because I have my display set to 100. I do not trust the first results in a Google search to be – er, how shall I put it – unbiased, and I want to be able to quickly scan through at least 30 or 40 to get an indication of whether or not I need to modify my strategy. Having to keep clicking for the next page is going to drive me mad. I can understand, though, that allowing everyone to have more than 10 results per page would probably slow down the processing and display of results.
2. The Wonderwheel has gone from Google Instant results. I do not use this feature that often but it does sometimes help me narrow my search or to branch out in a completely different direction.
3. It messes up several of my Firefox add-ons, in particular OptimizeGoogle.

Google Instant has been voted off this computer!

Advanced search tips and tricks

An interesting list of search tips came from the participants of the search workshops I recently ran in-house for a well known academic institution. (My Twitter followers will be able to work out who it was). As well as being experienced, savvy searchers they are fortunate in that they can choose which browser to use for searching. Attempts to demonstrate Google Instant failed, however. I was not able to show Google's latest "enhanced search experience" in action, even when using the latest versions of the browsers and being signed in to a Google account. This was probably due to their firewall. Personally, I think that is a plus for the institution. Some of you may disagree. Here is their combined top search tips list.

1. Keep it Simple!

There is a plethora of advanced search options and Google alternatives but starting off with a simple search string is often the best approach. Looking for data on the UK rat population? You might be tempted to include a file format limitation in your search and/or a site:gov.uk command but simply typing in a search for uk rat population statistics was quicker and came up with the relevant information. Note: the simple approach worked at the time with this example because it was a "hot topic" in the UK news. It might not work now, which brings us to number 2…

2. Be aware of personalisation and hot topics

The major search engines monitor what you search for and the links you click on, and use this to "personalise" your results and sponsored links/ads accordingly. This information is stored in cookies on the computer you used for the search. They also try and work out your location from your IP address so that they can deliver local content (this sometimes goes horribly wrong!). What is currently hitting the headlines will also be a factor in determining the results that are displayed on the first page (increase your displayed results per page to more than the default 10 and ideally to at least 50). This means that you will see different results from one day to the next and if you use a computer other than your usual machine.

3. Google isn't infallible

We covered a range of search techniques that you can try to bring Google to heel but if you are not getting anywhere try another search tool. Google does not cover everything and your best result may be number 1,200,675 in the results list. Try Yahoo or Bing as alternatives and also think about using specialist search tools for real time and social media, images, and subjects/industries.

4. Get to know the Google alternatives

There is no easy way to do this but visiting Zuula (http://www.zuula.com/) or Browsys Finder (http://www.browsys.com/finder/) once very couple of weeks will remind you of the alternatives and alert you to new kids on the block.

5. Google additional search options

Open up and explore the additional Google search options on the left hand side of your results page. You can restrict your search to news, videos, blogs, images etc and to a time period. There are also options for related searches, less or more shopping sites and….

8. The Wonderwheel

Use this to extract phrases and concepts from the top results and to change the direction of your search. Worth investigating if you are stuck in a rut and fed up with seeing the same results again and again.

9. Google Public Data Explorer

This is currently a Google Labs project at http://www.google.com/publicdata/home "..makes large datasets easy to explore, visualize and communicate. As the charts and maps animate over time, the changes in the world become easier to understand." There is a list of sources at http://www.google.com/publicdata/directory but the data available is more varied than the list suggests at first glance. The World Development Indicators and OECD Factbook are worth looking at in more detail to see if they have data that can help with frequently asked questions.

10. Creative Commons and public domain images

If you are looking for an image for a presentation or promotional literature, search for images that have the appropriate Creative Commons license. There are several licenses with varying degrees of restrictions. Details are on the Creative Commons web site at http://www.creative.commons.org/. You can search Flickr photos that have a specific creative commons license at http://www.flickr.com/creativecommons/ or use Compfight (http://www.compfight.com/). There are several other sites you can use for Creative Commons images but Geograph (http://www.geograph.org.uk/) was mentioned several times by the workshop participants. Geograph "aims to collect geographically representative photographs and information for every square kilometre of Great Britain and Ireland" and all photos have a CC 2 license, which means that they can be used commercially with attribution.

11. TinEye Reverse Image Search

http://www.tineye.com/
Type in the URL of an image or upload one of your own and TinEye will find similar images, how it is being used, if modified versions of the image exist, or if there is a higher resolution version. Provided by Idée Inc who also offer..

12. Multicolr Search Lab

http://labs.ideeinc.com/multicolr/
Search 10 million Creative commons Flickr images by colour. You can specify more than one colour and click on a colour several times to increase its prominence within the image. You can easily click through to the original Flickr image to double check the license.

13. Slidefinder

http://www.slidefinder.net/
Ideal for locating individual presentation slides that contain your search terms. There is an Advanced Search that enables you to search specific areas of a slide for example title, text, notes. You can also limit your search to a university. There are browsable lists at the bottom of the page but they do not list every institution: there are only 47 for the UK. One workshop participant had been given a paper copy of a complex slide and it had taken her "ages" to find an electronic version. She had had to wade through hundreds of slides in presentations that had been identified by using the advanced filetype: ppt search. Slidefinder found it straight away.

14. Twitter search tools

Do not expect Google, Yahoo or Bing to carry out a reliable Twitter search. Use specialist search tools such as Twitter Search (http://search.twitter.com/), Twazzup (http://www.twazzup.com/), BackTweets (http://www.backtweets.com/) for tweets that refer to your content, Tweepz (http://www.tweepz.com/) for finding people and organisations on Twitter, and TwapperKeeper (http://www.twapperkeeper.com/) for archives of tweets on a conference hashtag or keyword.

15. Google custom search engine

http://www.google.com/cse/
Ideal for groups or collections of sites that you regularly search and use. Google CSE is very quick and easy to set up and can be hosted on Google. Two that had been set up by a workshop

participant were a list of library associations worldwide and selected UK higher and further education web sites.

16. Watchthatpage

Tracking changes to web pages that do not themselves offer RSS or email alerts was not covered by the main part of the workshop but the question arose during one of the practical sessions. There is a list of some web based and downloadable programs and their features at Tracking Web Page Changes http://www.rba.co.uk/sources/monitor.htm. Watchthatpage (http://www.watchthatpage.com/) won the vote because it is free, web based and offers email alerts.

17. Evernote

http://www.evernote.com/
"Capture anything… Type a text note. Clip a web page. Snap a photo. Grab a screenshot. Evernote will keep it all safe.". I don't use this myself but it had several fans in this organisation. (I use Firefox add-on Scrapbook to do a similar thing).

18. Add-ons for Firefox

If you are a Firefox user explore the many add-ons that are available to make searching and managing information easier. For example Feedly (https://addons.mozilla.org/en-US/firefox/addon/8538/) to organize your favourite sources into a magazine-like start page; Scrapbook (https://addons.mozilla.org/en-US/firefox/addon/427/) to save and organize web pages; and Optimize Google (https://addons.mozilla.org/en-US/firefox/addon/52498/) for customizing your Google searches and results.

19. Don't re-invent the wheel – re-use and share

As well as images, many presentations have Creative Commons licenses and their authors are often happy for you to re-use slides from them as long as you acknowledge the source and do not incorporate them into a product or service that you then sell. Slideshare.net is a good starting point but do check the license to confirm what you can and cannot do with the content – not all are CC. Also, consider assigning a CC license to your own photos and presentations. The Creative Commons web site (http://creativecommons.org/choose/) can help you decide which one to use.

20. Time to explore

There was time to explore new techniques and tools during the workshop but it is not so easy to try out, for example, a new option on Google when you are back in the office and an enquirer wants that result NOW! Try and incorporate some "play time" into your schedule so you can keep up with new developments, even if it is just 10 minutes a week.

Business Information Resources

Malta Registry of Companies

The Malta Financial Services Authority Registry of Companies (http://rocsupport.mfsa.com.mt/pages/Default.aspx) has been added to my Official Company Registers page at http://www.rba.co.uk/sources/registers.htm. The registry provides free basic company details including registered address and company ID/number. You can browse the companies alphabetically or search by name or company ID/number. There is also a list of companies that have registered over the last 15 days.

Gizmos of the month

BT broadband availability page http://www.dslchecker.bt.com/adsl/adslchecker.welcome

Broadband Speed Checker http://www.broadbandspeedchecker.co.uk

Whether at work or at home, a fast and reliable internet connection is an essential for many of us. An increasing number of people spend at least one day a week working at home, some run their businesses from an office at home and, like it or not, the UK government and utility services are pushing us in the direction of managing our business and personal affairs online. There are numerous broadband providers touting their wares and trying to persuade us to switch to their super duper fast services with promises of 24 MB downloads, but the speeds achieved in reality are often far less. In some areas there is no broadband access at all. The problem is that should you discover you have been sold a very expensive dud you could be stuck in a 12 month contract with no easy way out. If you are moving house or thinking of switching provider you need to know what is possible in theory, which providers are available in your area and the speeds that people are actually getting.

First, can you get any broadband at all? For a long time after it was introduced I was unable to have broadband. The length and quality of the cabling from the exchange to my street was such that it was doubtful I would maintain even a 256 KB connection. And, no, I do not live in the middle of nowhere but in Caversham on the other side of the River Thames from Reading. I kept checking the BT broadband availability page (http://www.dslchecker.bt.com/adsl/adslchecker.welcome) and finally, after a major line and cable upgrade, I discovered I could have 1-2 MB – possibly. I went with an Eclipse business package – recommended by several colleagues – and muddled along with around 1MB download speeds for a couple of years. The only major issue I had was the time taken to download software and BBC iPlayer programmes (around 1.5 hours for a 45 minute broadcast). A few weeks ago the availability checker had good news: my exchange had been upgraded.

Your exchange is ADSL enabled, and our initial test on your line indicates that your line should be able to have an ADSL broadband service that provides a fixed line speed up to 2Mbps.

Our test also indicates that your line currently supports an estimated ADSL Max broadband line speed of 7Mbps.

Our test also indicates that your line currently supports an estimated ADSL2+ broadband line speed of 13Mbps. Our test also indicates that your line could support an estimated ADSL 2+ Annex-M broadband upstream line speed of 750Kbps and downstream line speed of 5.5Mbps.

Our test also indicates that your line currently supports a fibre technology with an estimated WBC FTTC Broadband where consumers have received downstream line speed of 22.6Mbps and upstream line speed of 9.5Mbps.

Eclipse upgraded me and I am now whizzing along at 11-14 MB download and 500-600 KB upload.

The second matter is that of speed, and I do not mean what the providers claim on their web sites or in their glossy brochures. Broadband Speed Checker at http://www.broadbandspeedchecker.co.uk allows users to test their actual line speed. As well as running the speed check you can add your test results to a Google map by giving your postcode and see other results for the surrounding area. If you are moving house or just want to see what is available in a neighbourhood go straight to http://www.broadbandspeedchecker.co.uk/broadband_speed_in_my_area.aspx and enter the postcode.
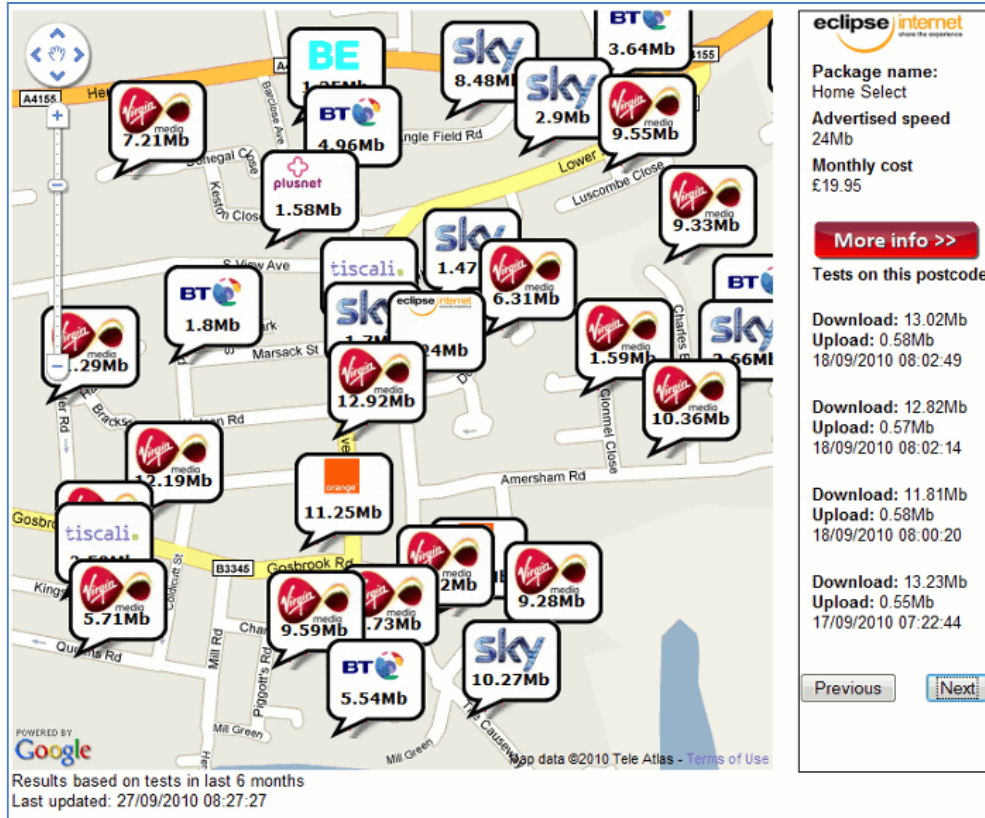
Speech bubbles mark the approximate location of the speed tests and give the name of the provider with the average download speed. Results are based on tests at the location over the last 6 months. Click on one of the bubbles and you can view the individual test results. Some have only one whilst other people seem to run them regularly. The broadband package, price and advertised speed are given but this might not be totally accurate. My own business package was not listed so I had to pick the closest home package in terms of speed and price. The maximum speed advertised for me is 24 Mb but I was told by my supplier that I would be unlikely to reach that. At 11-14 MB I am not complaining – it is at least 10 times what it used it be. I do feel sorry, though, for those poor souls who are paying for 20 MB and barely reaching 1.5 😖. It is probably why they ran they tests in the first place. Evidence with which to confront their provider!

Contact Information
Karen Blakeman, RBA Information Services
Twittername: karenblakeman (http://twitter.com/karenblakeman)
Email: Karen.blakeman@rba.co.uk
UK Tel: 0118 947 2256
Int. Tel: +44 118 947 2256
UK Fax: 020 8020 0253
Int. Fax: +44 20 8020 0253
Address: 88 Star Road, Caversham, Berks RG4 5BE, UK

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