Reviewing the Literature: How Can I Use the Internet in My Research?

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How Can I Use the Internet in My Research?

The Internet is an extraordinarily useful tool for research, and nearly everyone is experienced in using it. However, because it’s used so often to look things up in everyday life, it’s easy to become blasé about it. It’s important to remember that you need to treat Internet sources with the same caution that you apply to other sources.

Online search engines and databases can help you find the documents and data you need to conduct your literature review.

In the past, documents would have been held in a physical form in libraries, but they are now usually available on the web. Documents can include:

- Grey literature
- Reports
- Minutes of meetings produced by governments and international organizations
- Digital versions of older documents which pre-date the Internet.

A large amount of secondary data are available online, both contemporary and historical, from various data repositories. The ready availability of such data has transformed the character of much quantitative social research. Bodies which provide such data include:

- The UK’s Office for National Statistics
- Eurostat
- World Health Organization

Secondary qualitative is also increasingly available via archives such as:

- The UK Data Archive
- Mass Observation Archive
- ICPSR Data Archive

If the Internet is a topic of your research, you might find it useful to look at:

- Blogs
- Discussion groups, forums and lists
- Images
- The web presence of various institutions. For example, you can see how a particular global city region is represented on the net.

If you have access, you can use metadata (data describing data) from the web as a basis of social network analysis.
The Internet is very useful for researchers because of its open nature, which has encouraged academic and other bodies to make materials freely available that once were difficult and sometimes expensive to access. However the Internet’s very openness raises issues about truth and authority.

Care must be taken in using Internet sources as a true representation of reality. This is no different from the care you must take with any representation (re-presentation) of reality, but there is so much unverified information on the Internet that you must be particularly careful.

You should also take care with any authoritative statement derived from an Internet source. You should test all authoritative statements, but the Internet’s openness means that provenance is always an issue.

Search for resources about literature reviews

Search for resources about Internet research

Read more about grey literature

Read more about metadata

I’m ready to write up my literature review