

Finding hidden information online

1. Introduction

Search engines, like Google, index a huge number of web pages. However, there are places on the web they can't reach. Some examples are password-protected areas such as commercial data collections and subscription databases. Content in these sources will not appear with publicly available information returned by a search engine.

Learning outcome

By the end of this activity you should be able to understand how to access online information that might not be available to a search engine.

2. Paywalls and subscriptions

Some sources of information are protected by a 'paywall'. This ensures that access is restricted to users who have paid a subscription.

In order to allow people to find the information, content providers reveal limited details to search engines that the rest of us cannot see. So, even though you might find something in a search, you may need to register or subscribe to view it.

If you are a member of a public or academic library, you will have access to some subscription-based information.

The Open University Library collection also includes some open access sources of information which are available to everyone. Follow the 'Open University Library: Publicly available' link at the end of this activity to find details.

It's worth exploring to see what you do have access to.

3. An information environment

Specialist collections can help you to find material a search engine might miss. The following examples introduce some freely available sources.

CORE

Search [CORE](#) to find research papers made freely available by universities and open access journals.

Electronic Theses Online Service (EThOS)

Search [EThOS](#) to find records of PhD theses submitted to UK universities. Some texts are available in full. Register to download material.

Internet Archive

Visit the [Internet Archive](#) to read ebooks in the 'Open Library' collection. Search the 'Way Back Machine' to find archived web pages.

Library Hub Discover

Use [Library Hub Discover](#) to search across many academic libraries in the UK and Ireland to find catalogue records of books and other holdings.

Open Grey

Search the [Open Grey](#) collection for records of research reports, PhD theses, and conference papers in a variety of subject disciplines.

Unsplash

Search the [Unsplash](#) collection of photographs to find freely available images.

4. A changing picture

Editorials and letters published in newspapers are no longer the only source of public opinion and commentary. Use Social Searcher to find information posted on social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook and Instagram.

Find a link to Social Searcher in the next section.

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5. Summary

Google and beyond

Google and other mainstream search engines find an increasingly large part of the content on the web, even if you can't always view it freely.

Specialised collections such as CORE, EThOS and Open Grey can help you to focus on a particular type of information.

Next steps

Think about what you have learned by doing this activity, that you didn't know before. Do you think you are likely to use any of the search tools mentioned in the future?

You might like to use [Social Searcher](#) to search social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook and Instagram.

Visit the [Open University Library: Publicly available](#) page to find a variety of open access sources of information.