



UNFANGING THE WEB

A Guide To Internet Research

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Untangling the Web: An Introduction to Internet Research
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Preface: The Clew to the Labyrinth

One of the most famous stories about libraries tells of the tenth century Grand Vizier of Persia, Abdul Kassem Ismael who, “in order not to part with his collection of 117,000 volumes when traveling, had them carried by a caravan of 400 camels trained to walk in alphabetical order.”¹ However charming this tale may be, the actual event upon which it is based is subtly different. According to the original manuscript, now in the British Museum, the great scholar and literary patron Sahib Isma’il b. ‘Abbad so loved his books that he excused himself from an invitation by King Nuh II to become his prime minister at least in part on the grounds that four hundred camels would be required for the transport of his library alone.²

A 21st Century version of the story might feature any number of portable electronic devices—a laptop, a PDA, or even a mobile phone—designed to overcome this difficulty. Today, 1000 years later, the Persian scholar/statesman would have to find a new excuse for declining the job offer. Abdul Kassem Ismael (aka Sahib Isma’il b. ‘Abbad) would be hard pressed to explain why he couldn’t just find what he needed on the Internet. The message seems to be that books are passé, replaced by ones and zeroes, the real world replaced by a virtual one, knowledge supplanted by information at best and chaotic data at worst. Have we shrunk the world or expanded it? Or have we in some way replaced it?

Untangling the Web for 2007 is the twelfth edition of a book that started as a small handout. After more than a decade of researching, reading about, using, and trying to understand the Internet, I have come to accept that it is indeed a Sisyphean task. Sometimes I feel that all I can do is to push the rock up to the top of that virtual hill, then stand back and watch as it rolls down again. The Internet—in all its glory of information and misinformation—is for all practical purposes limitless, which of course means we can never know it all, see it all, understand it all, or even imagine all it is and will be. The more we know about the Internet, the more acute is our

¹ Alberto Manguel, *A History of Reading*, New York: Penguin, 1997, 19. Manguel cites as his source Edward G. Browne’s *A Literary History of Persia*, 4 vols., London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1902-24. I found the specific reference to this story on pages 374-375 of Vol. 1, Book IV, “Decline of the Caliphate.” There is, sadly, no mention of the alphabetical arrangement of the library. This entire masterpiece is available online at The Packard Humanities Institute, Persian Texts in Translation, 23 February 2006, <<http://persian.packhum.org/persian/pf?file=90001011&ct=0>> (15 November 2006).

² Edward G. Browne. Vol. 1, Book IV, “Decline of the Caliphate,” *A Literary History of Persia*, 4 vols., London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1902-24, 374-375. Available online at The Packard Humanities Institute, Persian Texts in Translation, 23 February 2006, <<http://persian.packhum.org/persian/pf?file=90001011&ct=0>> (15 November 2006).

awareness of what we do not know. The Internet emphasizes the depth of our ignorance because “our knowledge can only be finite, while our ignorance must necessarily be infinite.”³ My hope is that *Untangling the Web* will add to our knowledge of the Internet and the world while recognizing that the rock will always roll back down the hill at the end of the day.

I will end this beginning with another story and a word of warning. “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” describes the discovery of an encyclopedia of an unknown planet. This unreal world is the creation of a secret society of scientists, and gradually, the imaginary world of Tlön replaces and obliterates the real world. Substitute “the Internet” for Tlön and listen. Does this sound familiar?

“Almost immediately, reality yielded on more than one account. The truth is that it longed to yield...The contact and the habit of Tlön have disintegrated this world. Enchanted by its rigor, humanity forgets over and again that it is a rigor of chess masters, not of angels...A scattered dynasty of solitary men has changed the face of the world. Their task continues. If our forecasts are not in error, a hundred [or a thousand] years from now someone will discover the hundred volumes of the Second Encyclopedia of Tlön. Then English and French and mere Spanish will disappear from the globe. The world will be Tlön.”⁴

As we enjoy, employ, and embrace the Internet, it is vital we not succumb to the chauvinism of novelty, that is, the belief that somehow whatever is new is inherently good, is better than what came before, and is the best way to go or best tool to use. I am reminded of Freud’s comment about the “added factor of disappointment” that has occurred despite mankind’s extraordinary scientific and technical advances. Mankind, claims Freud, seems “to have observed that this newly-won power over space and time, this subjugation of the forces of nature, which is the fulfillment of a longing that goes back thousands of years, has not increased the amount of pleasurable satisfaction which they may expect from life and has not made them feel happier.”⁵ Indeed, most of the satisfactions derived from technology are analogous to the “cheap enjoyment...obtained by putting a bare leg from under the bedclothes on a cold winter night and drawing it in again.”⁶ What good is all this technology and information if, instead of improving our lot, it only adds to our confusion and suffering? We are continually tempted to treat all technology as an end in itself instead of a means to some end. The Internet is no exception: it has in large

³ Karl Popper, *Conjectures and Refutation: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge*, London & New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 38.

⁴ Jorge Luis Borges, “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” in *Labyrinths*, ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby, New York: New Directions Books, 1962, 17-18.

⁵ Sigmund Freud, “Civilization and Its Discontents,” tr. James Strachey, New York: Norton, 1962, 34-35.

⁶ Freud, 35.