



The WWW Virtual Library: International Affairs Resources

Niall O Dochartaigh, National University of Ireland, Galway, Republic of Ireland

Name of Site: WWW Virtual Library: International Affairs Resources

Author: Wayne A. Selcher, Professor of International Studies

URL: <http://www.etown.edu/vl>

Type of site: directory/links

Housed at: Elizabethtown College, USA

Status [on 28^h June 2002]: live

This directory of Internet resources is part of the Virtual Library, a loose umbrella for hundreds of subject directories of widely varying quality. *International Affairs Resources* is divided into five major categories. 'Getting Started' includes 'Starter Tips for Internet Research', a list of links to tutorials and other sources on using the Internet for research. 'Media Sources' includes sub-sections on news sources, on radio and TV broadcasts and on International Relations journals and magazines. Much of the content of these two categories is thus quite general, pointing to resources of interest to people in a huge range of subject areas.

The latter three categories, on 'Organizations', 'Regions and Countries' and 'Topics' are the heart of the directory and each of them contains several sub-sections. Among the sixteen 'topics', for example, are 'Peace, Conflict Resolution and International Security', 'World Religions' and 'International Development'. Each topic includes a list of a large number of links but the author provides minimal description of the resources linked to.

Several years ago academics, library staff and researchers across the disciplines began to put up guides to resources in their own subject areas. By now there are innumerable guides to resources in every social science subject area you can imagine. All such directories face a few fundamental questions: what does your directory add that is not already provided by some other guide elsewhere? What audience are you addressing?

International Affairs Resources and other such guides which deal with a relatively broad subject area, rather than with a particular specialism, seem to me to be most useful to undergraduate students. The general tone and content of this directory suggests that this is the primary audience envisaged here, an impression reinforced by the inclusion of a section on 'Study, Work, Internships, and Service Abroad' in the category 'Topics'.

Such broad subject-area guides are immensely valuable for teaching purposes where they are of high quality. Teaching staff can simply ask undergraduate students to use particular guides and to limit themselves to the resources which a quality academic guide points to, unless the students have a powerful argument for using other online resources. It provides a measure of quality control over student use of the Internet while not involving a lot of work for the teachers.

If you consider this to be the prime function of such a guide, with a supplementary function being to direct more advanced students to other research resources, then certain things follow. The trick, as in teaching, is in what you leave out, not what you include. There are a million and one resources out there. What makes a guide valuable is

not only the work of classification but also the work of quality-control, selecting central high-quality resources.

In this guide Selcher has clearly put a higher priority on being comprehensive than on being focused. In many cases the pages of links would have benefited from the eye of a ruthless editor. Because space is not at a premium on a web site the tendency is towards inclusion rather than exclusion. But there are other good reasons for exclusion. If this guide only contained half the links it does it would be a more valuable resource for undergraduate students.

There are several sub-sections in the guide which could be abandoned entirely. There are Spanish, French and German language sub-sections. The German language section, to take one example, points to language teaching sites, engines for searching German-based websites and German-language sites, among others. This is an example of the web site author expending energy on areas in which many others have produced directories. The selections in these sub-sections are not so directly targeted at International Affairs students that they justify the effort and the duplication of work done by existing guides.

By contrast the sub-section on 'International Relations Journals and Magazines' is particularly useful and this seems to me a good example of the kind of 'core business' which the site editor could develop further, prioritising those very focused sub-sections which cater directly to those in international relations.

At least one medium-scale study of Internet users has found that animated graphics alienate and frustrate a lot of users, distracting them from page content (Spool et al, 1999). The animated graphics used in this directory could be cut without any great loss. The directory had been updated just a few days before I last viewed it and there didn't seem to be any problem with broken links. This is, in any case, becoming less of a problem for researchers as the larger organisations and services realise that it is important to maintain stable URLs. There is a 'site map' at the bottom of each page, listing all of the sub-sections in the directory. While perhaps not very visually attractive it is extremely useful. You never have to go 'back' to reach another part of the site. I'd like to see this on more sites but the concern with sleek graphic design inhibits many from doing it. The site looked almost exactly the same in Netscape and in Internet Explorer with no access difficulties for either browser. There is an email link to the author on each page, allowing easy contact.

This is a good comprehensive guide, particularly useful for undergraduate students but I think it would be improved if the author focused on developing the 'core business', cutting the number of links radically and perhaps adding a little more description to the links which remain.

Reference

Spool, J. M., Scanlon, T., Snyder, C., Schroeder, W. and DeAngelo, T., 1999, *Web site usability: a designer's guide*, Morgan Kaufmann Publishers, San Francisco.