

Silent Partners on the Web

The identities of many online reference resources are often unacknowledged

Silence is not exactly the word one would associate with Web partnerships, but I bet you didn't hear much about Versaware's Web presence, or even Houghton Mifflin's, until Versaware's e-book project was mentioned in *Information Today* (December 1999, page 41). Still, these two companies have been licensing the digital versions of two widely known ready-reference sources—the *Funk & Wagnalls Encyclopedia* and the *American Heritage Dictionary*—for various Web publishers. To a lesser extent, Random House did the same with two of its dictionaries.

From my own informal surveys I know that hardly anyone is aware that these resources are available on the Web. Very few of the Web directories and subject guides list the free American Heritage Dictionary or the free Random House dictionaries. Those that do list the Funk & Wagnalls Encyclopedia refer to the original Web version published by Versaware (<http://www.funkandwagnalls.com>), but not the versions that have the advantage of not requiring a user ID and password. The many free Web versions of the American Heritage Dictionary fared even worse, as only OneLook—the excellent metasearch engine for dictionaries—identifies it in the list of dictionaries that it does not search.

This will change with the March release of the Bartleby Web project (<http://www.bartleby.com>). This site prominently includes and identifies—among other gems—the American Heritage Dictionary. The free implementations of the Random House dictionaries, however, are totally absent from the Web subject guides and directories.

As for the zillion "my favorite Web sites" collections, they don't seem to be aware of these excellent freebies, either. They list dictionary sites but don't identify the brand or publisher—information that's important when judging which dictionary to use. They're often treated as if they were cheap resources that must be kept hidden.

Ironically, these favorite collections almost never fail to include encyclopedias—and to a lesser extent dictionaries—which would make Diderot and Webster roll in their graves on learning what products are associated with these two words. Just take a look at the Free Internet Encyclopedia (<http://clever.net/cam/encyclopedia.html>). It's an ugly mishmash of links for terms that seem to have been selected with no rhyme or reason. Still, the encyclopedia appears in many directories and subject guides, including one created by librarians who really should know better.

Another example is the Encyclopedia of Women's History (<http://www.teleport.com/~megaines/women.html>), a K-12 site that is not only one of the most inappropriately named Web sites but also one of the most ill-conceived projects that I've seen on the Web. It's a collection of biographical excerpts that K-12 students simply copied from other encyclopedias, complete with their spelling errors. This isn't like a collection of children's stories, drawings, or other creative works. And it's certainly not an encyclo-

dia that should be listed among top reference sources. Check out the biography of Eleanor Roosevelt for an example of what I mean. Still, many Web guides and directories refer to it, and even give it awards (Top 5%, Magellan 4 stars, etc.), obviously based on its name.

Houghton Mifflin

Houghton Mifflin is the publisher of many textbooks and dictionaries, including the flagship print edition of the *American Heritage Dictionary (AHD)*. The company offers many of its products in SGML and HTML format, but its home page (<http://www.hmco.com>) doesn't reveal the AHD's licensees, and the catalog mentions only the print and CD-ROM versions—not the many free online ones.

Many publishers have licensed the digital format of AHD for CD-ROM. One of the most widely known is SoftKey International's CD-ROM version, which appears in several different editions with and without illustrations and with and without audio pronunciations. The AHD is also part of the Grolier Encyclopedia and Microsoft's Bookshelf. None of these is mentioned on Houghton Mifflin's Web site, and the Web versions fare worse. There is an allusion to the fact that the AHD is available on the Web, but the names of the publishers are not mentioned, let alone hotlinked.

Well, one of the publishers is Lycos, and it hides this excellent dictionary so well that it's almost impossible to find. You have to go to Lycos' advanced search page at <http://lycospro.lycos.com>, type in the word you want to look up, click on the radio button first, then on the Go Get It button (see Figure 1). When the result is displayed, you'll see the copyright statement that correctly identifies the source (the AHD) at the very bottom of the screen (see Figure 2).

Lycos has hoarded so many excellent reference sources on its site that its editors don't seem to know what they have. At the Lycos Pro site mentioned above, if you click on the word "dictionary" instead of its associated radio button, you'll be taken to another very good reference collection in Lycos that also has a top-notch dictionary.

Lycos does not list the AHD in its own directory of hundreds of Web dictionaries. Search engines find sites that sell the printed or CD-ROM versions of these dictionaries—or sites that serve a specific community like OHIO LINK—but don't find the free Web versions of these dictionaries. Why? Because the crawler programs that the search engines send out to collect information on Web sites can't find these dictionaries (and human editors may not care enough). The name of the dictionary only appears when the result is generated on a temporary page produced by a CGI script.

If you want to cut through the fodder, bookmark this URL (<http://www.lycos.com/cgi-bin/pursuit?cat=ins0>). It will directly display the AHD query form and allow you to enjoy the best free version of the AHD. You will find a detailed, illustrated review of this AHD implementation at <http://zelda.thomson.com/gale/reviewer/199911/amher.html>. Suffice it to say that the beauty of Lycos' AHD implementation is that it searches the entire text of the dictionary. In most of the other implementations, such as the ones under <http://www.allword.com> and

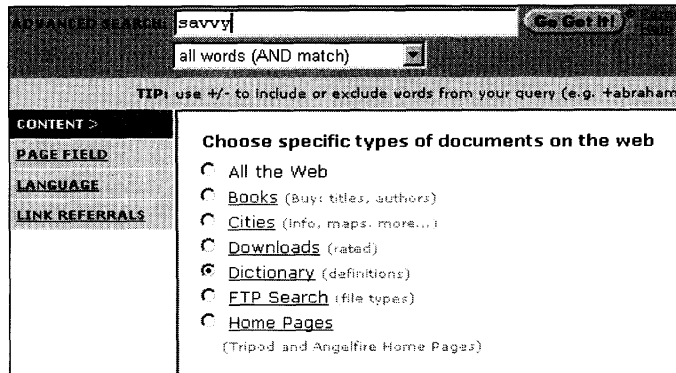


Figure 1

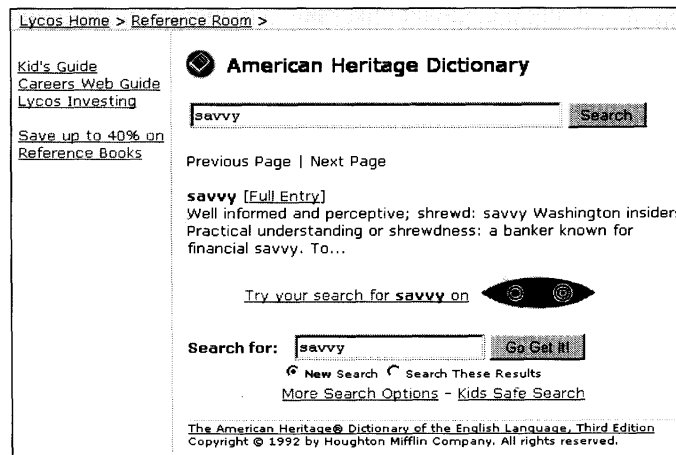


Figure 2

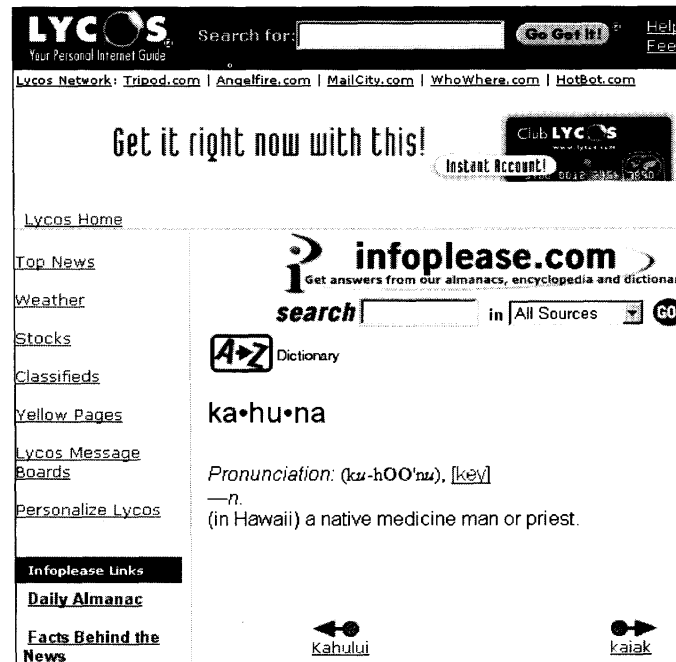


Figure 3

<http://www.dictionary.com> (the most envied URL in this category), only the header words are searched. The entire text—with the definition; etymological, historical, regional, and usage notes; and illustrative quotes that are so useful in the AHD—is not searched.

The second top-notch dictionary available through Lycos is the Random House Webster's Unabridged Dictionary (RHWUD). Lycos offers it through a branded version of the Information Please Web site (<http://www.infoplease.lycos.com>). You've never heard of the online version of the RHWUD? That's because the Information Please site oddly refers to the RHWUD as the Information Please Dictionary (IPD). Nowhere will you see that what is referred to as the Information Please Dictionary is actually the Random House Webster's Unabridged Dictionary. As opposed to the AHD, there is no credit given to the Random House dictionary after the entry is displayed (see Figure 3). Information Please, LLC does a wonderful job in "Webifying" its almanac family, but it's a mistake not to prominently display the name of such a respected publishing house, and it's confusing to the users.

To add to the confusion, there is a third dictionary available through Lycos: the Random House Webster's College Dictionary (RHWCD). It's part of the Lycos Research Center that was licensed from Versaware that in turn did some licensing of its own. This is where cross-licensing gets a little convoluted for both novice users and gurus alike. Let me try to clear it up a little by introducing Versaware, Inc.

Versaware

Versaware licensed the Funk & Wagnalls Encyclopedia, the Random House Webster's College Dictionary, and Geo-Systems country maps, and integrated them in a nice package for digital distribution. Versaware has been successfully promoting this package—not for end-users but for CD/DVD-ROM manufacturers and Web portal developers. Actually, it was the first DVD-ROM encyclopedia, and it was also published by Versaware in CD-ROM format and primarily distributed as bundled products with CD/DVD-ROM drives. The DVD-ROM version, for example, is bundled with the 5x Sony DVD-ROM drive.

Microsoft built the initial editions of Encarta on Funk & Wagnalls content, and then expanded it in a big way; however, it didn't have exclusive digital rights. So Versaware licensed its own version to Future Vision, which published it under the name Infopedia in the mid-1990s. SoftKey is also selling it again this year. In 1999 Simon and Schuster published its New Millennium Encyclopedia—a newer (but not current) edition of the Funk & Wagnalls Encyclopedia under yet another name. For a less than favorable opinion of this version see the review at <http://www.gale.com/reference/peter/peter.html>.

Many turn up their noses when the *Funk & Wagnalls Encyclopedia* is mentioned, simply because it was sold in department stores, often close to the pet food shelves. I never agreed with this snobbery, and what finally convinced me that I was right (I am amenable to being convinced about it) were two facts. One is that the print *Funk & Wagnalls Encyclopedia* was indexed by Barbara Preischel, retired president of PAIS, who

wouldn't have associated her name with a poor product. The other is that Ken Kister, a reference analyst who is the most knowledgeable about encyclopedias, has a good opinion of it.

The Web version of the Funk & Wagnalls Encyclopedia (along with add-on products) shows up in some Web directories and in some search engine results because it's available under the logical URL (<http://www.funkandwagnalls.com>). It is, however, only the tip of the iceberg as there are other versions—some of them more convenient than the one on the Funk & Wagnalls site, simply because they don't require a user ID or password. Would you be able to find them? Unlikely. The spiders don't find them, and the Web directories don't know about them.

So which sites have the Funk & Wagnalls Encyclopedia? There's Lycos, a company that seems to be very keen on being not only the entertainment hub of the Internet, but also the educational and reference hub. You may find the encyclopedia through Lycos' Web site at <http://www.funkandwagnalls.lycos.com> and <http://versaware.reference.lycos.com> (same content, different URL). You can also locate it at Xoom's portal service (<http://reference.xoom.com>), Versaware (<http://www.versaware.com>), and through YouthStream's Reference Center (<http://www.mybytes.com/entity.cfm?EntityID=27.5:214>).

As this issue goes to press, none of those sites turns up—at least not among the first few hundred "hits" that I waded through—when searching the Web for the previously

mentioned encyclopedias and dictionaries, except for the new and well-publicized Bartleby site. If you just go to the home sites of these portals you may not find this Versaware collection easily.

To make life easier, I made a chart with Judit Tiszai to depict the relationship between licensors and licensees. The services are hotlinked from the chart at <http://www.2.hawaii.edu/~jacso/extra>. Good clicking!

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