

# Sorting Out the Wheat from the Chaff

Take a look at the multimedia features of seven Web-wide search services

Recently, some of the largest Web-wide search services (AltaVista, HotBot, Lycos, Excite, and Snap) have added to or improved their abilities to search for images, audio, and video files. Yahoo! merely has an ImageSurfer module with a relatively small collection of images. Infoseek has no multimedia search filters, special engines, or database subset. (This is odd because Infoseek is now an ABC-Disney company and part of the GO conglomerate. Both ABC and Disney have immense multimedia collections with much already in digital format, so it is very likely that in a short time Infoseek will have multimedia search capabilities.)

It is interesting to see how different the approaches and the results are even from search services that use the same search engine, Inktomi, which is the engine for Yahoo!, HotBot, MSN (until it switches over to AltaVista), and Snap. It is also telling that in spite of having the same search engine under the hood, many search services yield vastly different results. This is because of the differences in how each customizes the parameters of the spider component of the Inktomi search engine in terms of the types of sites to be visited, the depth of data collection, and the frequency of data collection.

### Yahoo!

Yahoo! is deeply disappointing for multimedia searching (although it is good for multimedia browsing through its excellent classification system). The ImageSurfer (<http://isurf.yahoo.com>), which is an earlier version of the software developed by Excalibur, does not appear on the Yahoo! home page at all. You must click on the "more" option then scroll down to the very bottom of that page to find the link. The size of the collection in the image gallery that Yahoo! offers must be quite puny. There was not a single picture in it about Hawaii (see Figure 1), and there was only one image file for a "Van Gogh" search. All the other search services discussed here yielded substantial results for these two searches. The positive aspect is that the image results are presented in thumbnails. The main Yahoo! search template does not offer any filtering options for media type, so you would probably pick up a lot of irrelevant text files.

The lack of any audio searching capability is very surprising when music on the Web is the rage, and Yahoo! has been treating music sites very well in its classified directory since day one. Its direct search capabilities are a different story from the browsing capabilities. You can't even recognize that the search engine is from Inktomi, which has numerous options for text searching and nifty filters for types of files in general (i.e., audio, video, image) and for file format (i.e., .jpg, .gif, .tif, .fpx). Yahoo! did not implement any of Inktomi's multimedia filters, and it is almost useless for multimedia searching.

### Lycos

Lycos has a browsable and searchable gallery of 80,000 images divided into typical categories. The gallery is a subset of the PictureNow Web site, which has a good collection of fine art reproductions and photo materials. In the Lycos Image Gallery section (<http://www.lycos.com/picturethis>) the results are displayed as thumbnails with pictographic information (image title, size, etc.). This mode of presenting results is excellent.

Lycos also offers filters in the advanced search mode (<http://lycospro.lycos.com>) to find sites with image or sound files covering 18 million images and an unspecified number of sound files on the Web. As the sound and image filters are radio buttons, they are mutually exclusive, so it is not possible to use them simultaneously to find sites with images or sound clips (let alone with both) of, say, the band Dire Straits (see Figure 2). You have to run two separate searches, one for sound and one for images. Recently, a radio button labeled MP3 was also added. Obviously, MP3 is a subset of the sound files, but, given its popularity, Lycos may not have wanted to roll it under the Sound option but instead put it right in your face and in the face of the

music industry. Lycos deserves credit for being the first mainstream search service to directly and prominently offer the MP3 search feature and face a legal challenge. Video searching is not available.

### Excite

Excite has inserted a hotlink—in a rather slipshod fashion—in the Advanced Search template to its Audio/Video search screen, which implicitly restricts searches to sites that have RealAudio/RealVideo files ([http://www.excite.com/search\\_forms/real\\_audio\\_video\\_search](http://www.excite.com/search_forms/real_audio_video_search)). This domain restriction may not be clear to users. If you want to search for other multimedia files you must choose in the Excite Links section the Multimedia Web Sites link or go through the Excite Directory (Computers & Internet/Internet/Multimedia). For audio and video searches there is a filtered template that lets the users limit their queries to sites that have AVI, MPEG, Real Audio/Video, QuickTime, and/or WAV files (see Figure 3). Unfortunately, there is no easy way to search for images, especially by file format.

### HotBot

HotBot has always been the best search site for multimedia searching. It has had

special filter boxes for images, audio, and video on its home page for years (see Figure 4). On the simple search screen, the radio button filter for audio has been replaced by the filter box of the most popular format, MP3. This is not logical—although understandable in light of the interest in MP3—as this file format belongs to the Advanced Screen where file extensions can be specified for all the audio/visual file searches. It is also the best in terms of results sets. For the rather specific search about Van Gogh's painting *Chair with a Pipe*, it returns 88 hits, which runs circles around the other search engines except for Snap, which returns 110 hits. You can only get to the Advanced Search Screen through the HotBot home page (<http://www.hotbot.com>), but the link is obvious.

### Microsoft Network (MSN)

Microsoft licensed the Inktomi search engine just a few months ago and has already announced that it will be replaced by the AltaVista search engine. AltaVista is a good one, but certainly not better than the Inktomi engine. There must have been reasons other than technical ones for this decision.

The multimedia filters are on the Advanced Search page, which, in a visually pleasing format, offers all the options of the Inktomi search engine (see Figure 5). Unfortunately, the Advanced Search Screen option appears only once you have made a simple search (<http://search.msn.com>).

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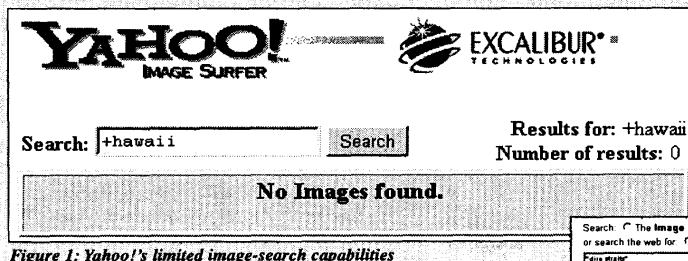


Figure 1: Yahoo!'s limited image-search capabilities

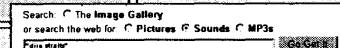


Figure 2: Lycos' image and sound search template

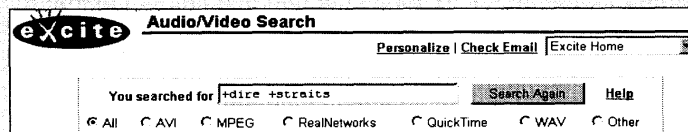


Figure 3: Excite's audio/video search template

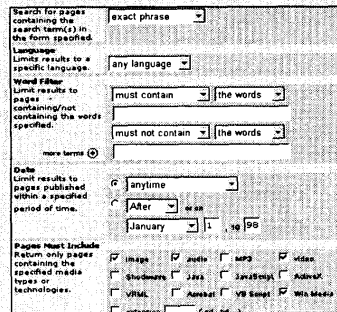


Figure 4: HotBot's search template options for multimedia files

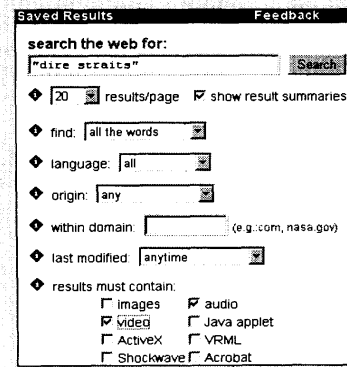


Figure 5: MSN's multimedia filters

# COMTEX, Clickshare Join in First Test of News/Info Delivery Site

Comtex Scientific Corporation and Clickshare Service Corporation have announced a strategic alliance aimed at testing a new system for "a la carte" news and information purchase from independent sources across the Internet with one-ID, one-bill, privacy-protecting simplicity.

"Publishers and other content providers are increasingly concerned about finding additional ways to generate revenue over the Internet," said Charles W. Terry, president and CEO of COMTEX. "We think the ability of the Clickshare technology to support one-bill, one-ID, one-registration access and aggregated transactions will facilitate the proliferation, and acceptance of, higher-value, not-free content."

The agreement between COMTEX and Clickshare is for a minimum of 2 years. The effort is intended to research what types of pricing and information appeal to general and specialized consumers. Publishers can enroll in Clickshare now.

Under the alliance, visitors to the Web site address <http://www.pubshare.com> will be able to purchase access to real-time news provided by COMTEX Custom Wires and COMTEX Newsroom for a trial monthly fee of \$1, plus an introductory rate of 5 cents for each story read—or 50 cents for 20 minutes of unrestricted access. With the Clickshare service, users will also soon be able to access music and specialized services using Pubshare.com as their home base for billing and portal services.

An exclusive feature of Clickshare's proprietary distributed user-management technology allows audience owners such as publishers, ISPs, telcos, banks, and retailers to offer their customers Clickshare-enabled content, without having to turn over to Clickshare or content providers sensitive name, address, or account information about their customers. "This 'privacy-protected demographics' feature is unique," said Clickshare president Bill Densmore.

Densmore said the COMTEX alliance was the first of several relationships with publishers and Internet "audience owners" (ISPs, billing agents, affinity groups) to be finalized. "As a first partner, COMTEX is ideal because of its relationships with most of the world's premier information providers, and because it can deliver in a single feed a broad base of consumer and business-oriented intelligence. From this base, we intend to build topic and geographic-specific premium content for a growing base of information consumers.

"Clickshare allows Net portals, financial institutions, and other billing entities and publishers to make money and increase customer satisfaction," said Densmore. "Customers will be able to access information at any Clickshare-enabled site and pay for it via one bill to their home base. Clickshare service providers can confidently send their users to other Web sites, without having to send the user's name, credit-card number, or address at the same time.

"Beginning today, information consumers who want to use Pubshare.com will register via an affiliate Web site, or can ask their existing ISP, portal, or billing agent to offer Clickshare's one-bill access to information as an added benefit," said Densmore. Pricing and terms may vary by service provider, once a trial phase is completed.

Source: COMTEX Scientific Corp., Alexandria, VA, 703/820-2000; <http://www.comtexnews.com> and Clickshare Service Corp., Williamstown, MA, 413/458-8001; <http://www.clickshare.com>.

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or by way of our Web page located at <http://www.infotoday.com>.

## Internet Insights

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### Snap

Snap is a relative newcomer, but with the Inktomi search engine and a very large database, it is an excellent tool for locating multimedia files (<http://www.snap.com>). It offers almost identical functions as HotBot, but all the filtering criteria are available from the search template on the Snap home page, and in a much better color scheme than HotBot's rather ugly trademark green screen (see Figure 6). The multimedia filters are not as well implemented as in HotBot because the options are on a pull-down menu that requires the use of the Control key to select two or more formats. Snap had the most results for every test question in all the categories.

### AltaVista

AltaVista was among the first to offer image searching using tag specifications, as in "img:rembrandt.gif." Later it made this function into a more appealing special search function, AV Photo Finder, and in April it enhanced this function further and renamed it to Photo & Media Finder (see Figure 7). Of course, photo is a medium, but AltaVista wanted to keep up with the Joneses, and in many respects it really outperforms them.

It is clear that this multimedia capability is still very much centered on images—even the URL gives it away: <http://image.altavista.com>. However, the search template clearly distinguishes image, audio, and video files as search criteria, and also offers an option to limit the search to a premiere collection only. There is no explanation as to what is included in the premiere collection, but beyond Corbis, there may be other sites with substantial image collections.

The Options hotlink takes you to a page that lets you specify your choices—but again, only for images. A unique feature in AltaVista

Figure 6: Snap's multimedia filters

Figure 7: AltaVista's Photo & Media Finder search template

is the option to run a filtered or unfiltered search—in other words, the latter could include X-rated images and video snippets.

AltaVista provides the best multimedia information about the files found, including the file format, the file size, the color depth (for images), and the duration (for audio and video) in a consistent format. In the case of image and video searches, the results are immediately displayed in thumbnail formats, so you don't waste time clicking on a site that mentions Van Gogh, but shows the picture of a fan of Van Gogh and his favorite cat instead of the artist's self-portrait. This is vastly different from the other search engines' listings

(except for the Lycos Image Gallery and Yahoo!'s ImageSurfer), and is perfect for image searching.

The plummeting prices of multimedia creation software and peripherals (such as photo scanners and hard drives) and the free Web site offers are enticing for users who put up video clips, songs, and images on the Web by the thousands—legally and illegally. Many sites have been shut down for copyright infringement, but the search services still list them. Finding the needle in the haystack has become easier in some of the search services, but the process is still far from perfect. Special multimedia search

engines are popping up, and they may be more efficient in separating the chaff from the wheat. For the best of the genre, see the multimedia search engines used on multimedia-rich Web sites like CNN and Sony.

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