CHAPTER 3

Conducting Other Types of Research

You've enrolled in a film class, and your professor has just finished discussing movies that depict historic battles. In class, you've watched *Black Hawk Down, Band of Brothers,* and Frank Miller's *300,* all films based on historical wars and real people. Your instructor has assigned a paper about these films and how war is depicted in them. She wants you to cover the impression of war these films leave with the viewer, but she doesn't require research as a mandatory element. You don't know much about these wars or what actually occurred, however, so you've decided to look into the historical events behind these films to see how the fictional accounts compare to historical accounts.

Because the paper doesn't require scholarly sources, you decide to skip the library and look elsewhere. After all, you're researching for your own sake, not necessarily for academic sources to quote in your paper. There are plenty of options. You could start, of course, by searching the Web. It is a vast and endless source of information, and surely you'll find hundreds of sites on these battles. You also have other options. You could look to the print media. If you go back to the time when the films were originally released, you'd find newspaper reviews and magazine articles discussing these movies (and in the case of all three of these particular films, you can track down the books they were originally based on); in the case of *Black Hawk Down* and *Band of Brothers,* you could even find articles on the battles themselves in the times they were fought. Even the airwaves can be of help. Cable channels sometimes do research into the backgrounds of popular films like these and produce television documentaries comparing the fictionalizations to the historians' accounts and even providing interviews if there are survivors.

There are thousands of avenues that never require a person to set foot in a library to track down information. We turn to these sources on a regular basis. This type of research is perhaps the most common research ever done, and most of us consider it such a part of daily life that it doesn't "feel" like research at all. It's not something that is academic in scope, just something to ease a curiosity or inform us about the world at large.

This type of daily research is a key tool in becoming more competent at finding and evaluating information. You need to learn the skills of searching through mundane systems, such as the general Internet, print media, and television and radio. Although

much of the research discussed in this chapter is nonscholarly and should not be used directly in a truly academic paper, it still has a place in college life. These sources provide starting points to begin the research process and help generate ideas. By understanding some basics of navigating the mediated world in which we live, we can come much closer to true information competency.

RESEARCH INTO POP CULTURE: NET DOMAINS

A fast way to learn something about a website is to look at its domain. The domain is the final part of the URL (short for Universal Resource Locator, the web address), and it is commonly a three-letter title that is preceded by a period (typically called a "dot"). The typical website ends in a .com domain, usually referred to as a "dotcom." This is the most common website in existence, and it's typically not scholarly, so many professors suggest that you avoid using these public websites in your papers. However, other types of websites (such as educational websites hosted by universities and professional academic organizations) are great for research. Following is a list of different types of web domains and some thoughts on when you should use them.

.com

Who publishes them: Typically, individuals and corporations. These are the most populous sites on the Internet and exist for countless reasons: some to inform, some to make money—and some to misinform, so be careful.

When to use them: They are great places to go for some prewriting and topic generation, but most .coms are sources you should be wary of when looking for material to use in your paper.

.gov

Who publishes them: Government organizations (such as the FDA, FCC, White House, etc.)

When to use them: Often such organizations publish statistics and yearly reports full of useful information. Usually, these sites contain information that is published with citations and verification of where the information came from.

.org

Who publishes them: Nonprofit organizations (such as FactCheck.org, Amnesty International, Greenpeace, Doctors Without Borders, Reporters Without Borders, and various charities).

When to use them: These are useful sources for topic generation and getting some initial ideas. These sites can sometimes be used in papers because they often have their facts verified and typically provide citations showing where the information on the site is from, so you can track it down yourself. The only downside is that sometimes these sites can be one-sided on a given issue and may slight opposing viewpoints.

.edu

Who publishes them: Educational institutions such as colleges, universities, and high schools.

When to use them: These can be good sites for you to use in a paper. Many are published by the world's leading institutions of higher learning, and they often contain information that comes from scholarly sources and studies. Sometimes, however, these sites will be written by students and published as part of assignments, so you should check up on the author(s) before trusting them enough to use in a paper.

Other domain types

There are several other types of Net domains you may run into. They include .net, .tv, .biz, .info., which are often connected to businesses of various types, and various abbreviations for different countries (such as .eu for Europe and .uk for the United Kingdom).

THE WORLD WIDE WEB

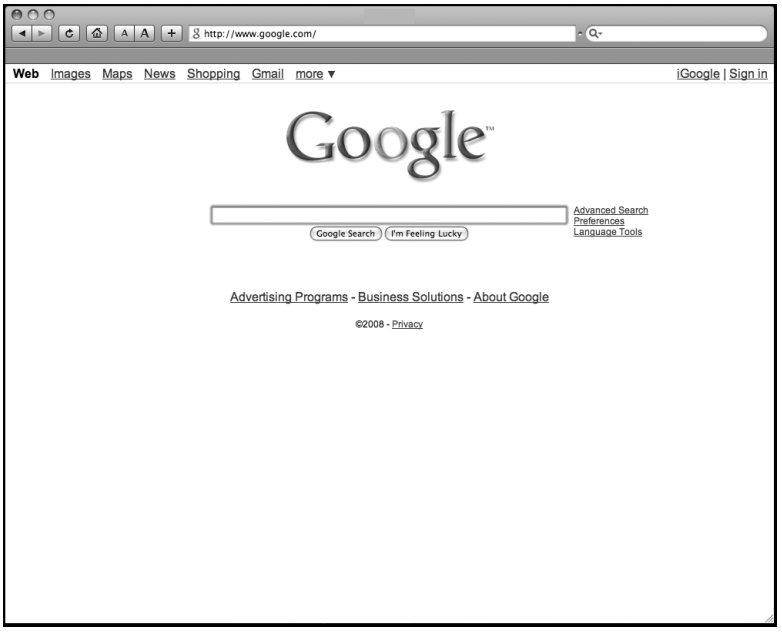
The Internet is a global network of millions of computers, and the part you are probably most familiar with is called the World Wide Web. The Web is a system of hyperlinked files that we access through a **Web browser** (such as Mozilla's Firefox, Apple's Safari, or Microsoft's Internet Explorer). The Web is an endless series of sites and resources; becoming skilled in its use—which frequently means recognizing what to ignore—is a vital part of modern-day information competency.

Search Engines

After you open your Web browser and secure a connection to the Internet, you need a **search engine.** Search engines are Web resources that enable you to search the Internet for whatever information you are looking for. When you sign on to the Internet, a search engine is often part of your start-up page. You are undoubtedly familiar with at least one search engine and may even have one bookmarked or set as your home page. Google.com and Yahoo.com are probably the two biggest, but other engines such as the America Online keyword search system are also very popular.

Search engines are indiscriminate resource tools that can take you as easily to biased sites, pornography, and shady money-making schemes as they can take you to respectable information. Information and disinformation will come to you in waves, unfiltered and without reliable ranking. It is up to you, the savvy Net user, to determine what's worth reading and what is pure garbage.

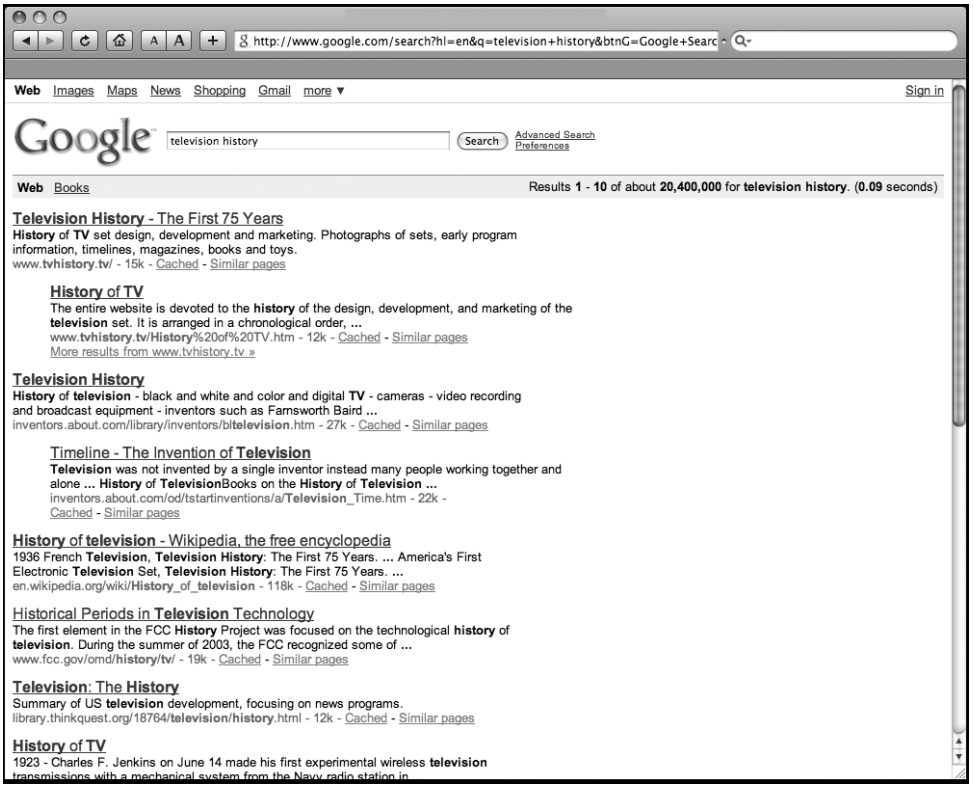
Following are some images of a typical search engine. The first shows Google, the most widely used search engine on the Net. You can customize your own version of Google to contain specific elements that attract you (headlines, weather, entertainment, etc.), but the basic Google web page is a no-frills affair consisting of little more than a box to type in search terms.



After you enter your search term, you click the Google Search button to initiate your search. You will be directed to a list of all the sites that the software matched to your search query; these results are often called **hits.** An example of a search for "Television History" appears on the next page. This is a list of all the sites that Google's software found to match these two search terms. The list is a series of hyperlinks with brief descriptions next to them. You should be able to quickly scroll through the hits to find what interests you and ignore the rest.

Note that toward the top, it says the results displayed are one through ten of about 20,400,000. This means that there are over 20 million "hits" for this search term. If this were your search, you'd want to reduce this number to something more manageable. If you add a term to expand your original query from "Television History" to "Cable Television History," the results drop to 23 million, and if you change it to "Cable Television Advertising History," the results drop to 1.3 million. More than a million hits are still far

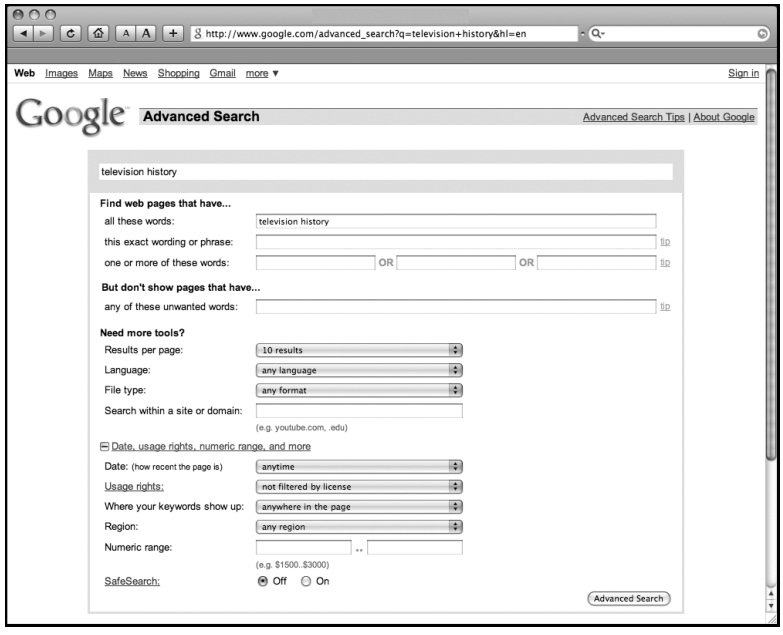
too many to reliably read, though, so refining your search even more will be necessary for such a broad topic. (For more ideas, see the section on Boolean Logic in Chapter 2.)



One of the unique features of Google is its I'm Feeling Lucky button. This button changes the results of your search. Instead of getting a list of all the sites you could go to, the software takes you to the first site on the list. This severely limits your results, but at times, it can be handy if you want to know the most popular site for a given search term. Note their terminology here: "I'm Feeling Lucky." This implies that you'll have to be very lucky to get what you are after on the first attempt. Web searches take time if you want to find quality material on your subject, and Google acknowledges this by suggesting that getting what you were after on the first site you find is a matter of dumb luck.

Another feature of Google and many other search engines is the Advanced Search option (see page 50). This allows you to refine your search in many ways. The next image shows that you can limit your search by a specific language, a particular type of file format, a date of publication, even domains (so you could search only in YouTube, for example). This type of refined search helps you to filter out the millions of sites that could clog your results page, and it helps you find just the information that will be useful.

Another popular search engine is Yahoo.com. Yahoo is a source for news updates, free email accounts, and searching the Web. Many people come to sites like Yahoo for their daily news and information, and many use Yahoo's search engine for every trip



around the Web. You'll notice below that everything from shopping to weather and from news to music is all found here on Yahoo's home page. As with all search engines, you enter the term(s) you want to scour the Web for, and click the appropriate button (for Yahoo, it's the Web Search button) to get your results.

Search Types

With both the Yahoo and the basic Google images shown earlier, note that atop the search bar, you find several tabs that allow you to perform specific searches. Each type of search yields wildly different results. Explore these different types of searches and see what is most appropriate for the types of results you're hoping to find. Following is a list of some of the major types of searches you can perform.

WEB

This type of search is the most common and will scour the entire Internet for any websites containing the search terms you've used. Search engines all generate their results using different means, so you may want to scroll through the hits instead of merely clicking the first one. You may also want to search using multiple search engines or meta search engines (see pp. 52–53) to fully explore your topic.

IMAGES

If you are looking for an image of a particular historical figure, landmark, or even a celebrity, you can select to search only for images. This option typically finds the picture and loads it on your screen without actually taking you to the site it was originally found on.

VIDEO

Similar to the Image search, this search type yields only videos to view with your computer. Most videos are free to view, but many will take you to "mature" websites you may prefer to avoid.

NEWS

This is a very helpful research tool for academic work. This search option looks through only journalistic news pieces posted on the Web—all other websites are ignored. Normally, the hits will link you to the stories themselves. Some of the sites require you to be a subscriber to the original newspaper or magazine, but many will let you access the story for free or by merely registering for a free account.

MAPS

You can limit your search to maps and directions. This may have a limited place in your more formal research, but it is very handy in daily life. Popular sites include MapQuest, Google Maps, and Yahoo! Maps.

LOCAL

This search is similar to a web search, a news search, or even a map search, but it provides results for an area that you specify (typically by ZIP code). This is very handy for staying up on local events or doing academic research on issues in your hometown.

Ways to Confirm Information

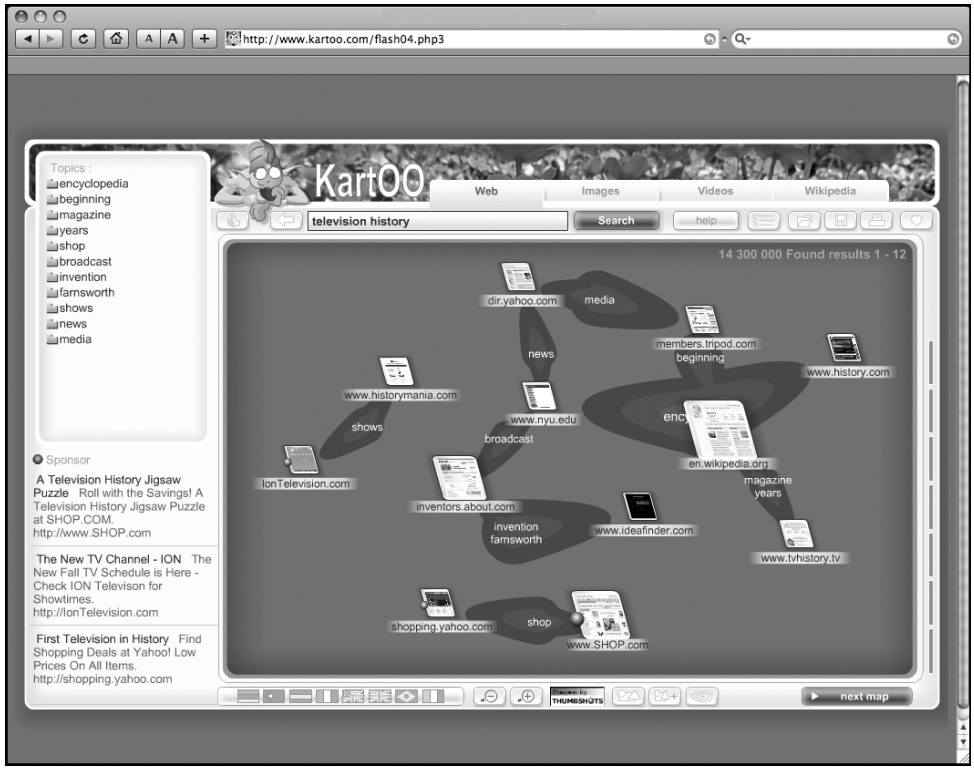
Searching on the Net can yield good results, but it is not short on pitfalls. Much of the information you'll find will be woefully biased or even outright dishonest. Whether

your search is for academic research or for personal information, you should get in the habit of verifying any information you come upon. For more information on how to evaluate and qualify your sources, see Chapter 4. Following, however, are a few tips for verifying information found on the Web.

- **Look for the .edu domain.** This means that a school, college, or university is responsible for publishing this on the Web. You can usually find the original author as well as contact information for the author on educational sites, and the information tends to be much more reliable because people's scholarly reputations are on the line when they publish such a site.
- **Search using multiple search engines.** Every search engine uses different parameters to determine what sites it finds and lists for you, and you'd be wise to search on a variety of engines. If you use different engines, you may be exposed to different websites. The most popular sites will all be near the top of each engine's list of hits, but you will nonetheless see a surprising amount of variety as you read further down the lists.

Meta Search Engines (Metacrawlers)

Several search engines bill themselves as "meta search engines." These engines don't actually search the Web themselves; they search the resources of multiple search engines



by sending a query to several search engines at once and combining the results. Your results will be more varied and come from more databases, so these are good resources when you are searching for something that's hard to find on the Web. The downside is that you may get far too many hits to be useful, or you may find that the filters used by the meta search engine are cutting out sites you'd have liked to be informed of.

Some of the more popular meta search engines are Dogpile, Excite, Vivisimo, Metacrawler, Kartoo, and Mamma. Many of the metacrawlers come up with innovative graphic organization to manage the many hits they get. On page 52 is a picture of the results for a search on "Television History" from Kartoo. Kartoo innovated a way to organize search results as a "map," and when you scroll over one particular file, the links it makes to other files all appear. Also, on the left side, a bar appears full of topics similar to your search parameter, so you can see other relevant subjects that you may not have thought of.

Research Tip: Vocabulary Check

When studying research writing, one word that comes up quite a lot is "cite." So, too, does the word "site." This can get confusing for many students. What's the difference?

Cite is the word used to describe how you give credit to any information you get from an outside source. Example: *Be sure you cite all your quotes, or you are plagiarizing.*

Site is the word used to describe a place or location, such as a website or a job site. Example: *One of my favorite sites on the Net is theonion.com.*

Sight is the word used to describe vision. Example: *She has extremely good eye sight.*

Miscellaneous Sites of Interest

Following is a list of some sites that may be of interest to you as a researcher and everyday viewer of the Web.

Allmusic (http://www.allmusic.com/). As the name implies, Allmusic is a database of music. It contains detailed listings of musicians and their music, with detailed biographies of the artists, full discographies, and references to other artists they influenced or were influenced by. Two other parts of this database are called Allgames and Allmovies. Allgames is a list of summaries of video games and their histories, and Allmovies gives detailed synopses of movies and biographies of actors; however, unlike IMDb, it lacks thorough lists of everyone involved in these projects. Sidebars tells several facts about the films, including original box office receipts and keywords and themes associated with them.

Bartleby.com: Great Books Online (http://www.bartleby.com/). Named after Herman Melville's title character in "Bartleby, the Scrivener," the site

describes itself as "the most comprehensive reference publisher on the web, meeting the needs of students, educators, and the intellectually curious." Bartleby.com is known for its fully downloadable books and resources, and it lists categories under four broad subject headings: Reference, Verse, Fiction, and Nonfiction.

CIA World Factbook (https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/). The World Fact Book is a database published online by America's Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). This database contains important information about every country on Earth, from the biggest to the smallest. It allows users to select a nation and find up-to-date census information on statistical data on issues such as capital cities, total population, ethnic percentages, major imports and exports, diseases, type of governance, and even finances, such as the Gross Domestic Product. Although this website is not written by scholars, it is funded by one of America's largest intelligence-gathering agencies, and the data presented here is thought to make up one of the most accurate such databases released to the public.

Encyclopedia of Life (http://www.eol.org). The EOL is an online encyclopedia whose lofty goal is to catalog detailed pages for each of the 1.8 million known species on Earth. Though still in its infancy, this site promises to be useful to scientists and the general public alike, stating that "It can be a handy field guide that people take with them on hikes on a personal digital assistant. It can tell you all the plants that might be found in your neighborhood" and serve "as a catalog, database, and learning tool about every organism that has ever lived on the planet. In the same way that dictionaries help literacy, the Encyclopedia can help biodiversity literacy." This site will be monitored, edited, and written by scholars, but eventually there will be a place for everyone to update the entries, like a peer-critiqued wiki. EOL's creators hope that the full encyclopedia will be completed by 2018.

FactCheck.org: Annenberg Political Fact Check (http://factcheck.org/). FactCheck is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization whose purpose is to reduce the inaccuracies, confusion, and deliberate deception that confront voters. It monitors statements made by "major U.S. political players" in debates, speeches, interviews, advertisements, and news releases. According to its mission statement, "Our goal is to apply the best practices of both journalism and scholarship, and to increase public knowledge and understanding." FactCheck.org is a project of the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania.

FindLaw Academic Law Reviews and Journals (http://stu.findlaw.com/journals/). This is a law journal search engine, with journals and academic law reviews organized by topic, such as Constitutional law, criminal law, cyberspace law, military law, and tax law. It offers an introduction to legal citation and is designed for law students, but it is useful for anyone writing a paper on a topic concerning law.

History News Network (http://hnn.us/). How can history be "news"? These lines from HNN's mission statement give us some idea: "Among the many duties we assume are these: To expose politicians who misrepresent history. To point out bogus analogies. To deflate beguiling myths. To remind Americans of the irony of history. To put events in context. To remind us all of the complexity of history. Because we believe history is complicated our pages are open to people of all political persuasions. Left, right, center: all are welcome." Its several main departments include a Hot Topics page and a Students Shortcut page. The latter has links to many resources, such as live chats with professionals from the Library of Congress, comprehensive lists of reference sites, primary sources covering U.S. history, an indexed, searchable database of more than 5,000 U.S. and world history sites, guidance on how to "do" history, and a special section on 9/11.

HowStuffWorks (http://www.howstuffworks.com/). HowStuffWorks was founded in 1998 by a professor with the delightfully appropriate name of Marshall Brain. The site promises that "No topic is too big or too small for our expert editorial staff to unmask." The range of topics is huge—go straight to their home page, and you'll see their choices of a couple of dozen topics for the day, with headings like "How the Patriot Act Works," "How Pirates Work," and "How Archeology Works." The range is enormous, with articles on why our stomachs growl, along with articles on electric cars, government watch lists, and serial killers. *Time* magazine has named it one of the "25 Web Sites We Can't Live Without."

IMDb (http://www.imdb.com/). The International Movie Database is a thorough database of the film, television, and video game industry. You can search this database by title, actor, director, and producer; members of a movie's crew, such as editors, camera operators, and gaffers, are also listed here. If a person has been in a movie or voiced a game, there is a very good chance that he or she will be listed and that a brief biography may be included. IMDb even provides lists of the works of authors whose books, plays, or short stories have been adapted for movies, such as William Shakespeare or Jane Austen.

Innocence Project (http://www.innocenceproject.org/). If you want to do research on the criminal justice system, this site will give you some interesting perspectives and information. There are actually several Innocence Projects in the United States, but this site is the national organization. It was founded in 1992 by two law professors to assist prisoners who could be proven innocent through DNA testing. More than 200 people in the United States have been exonerated by DNA testing, including a number who spent years on death row. The site includes a section explaining and giving statistics on the seven most common causes of wrongful convictions, including eyewitness misidentification, unreliable or limited science, and the use of "snitches." There are also profiles of people who have been exonerated.

Library of Congress (http://www.loc.gov/index.html). The Library of Congress's website is an amazing research resource. The LOC is the world's largest library, boasting more than 130 million items and over 500 miles of shelf space. Every year, the LOC scans more and more documents and posts more and more recordings for full web access. If you are near the Washington, D.C. area, you should go to this library for one of the finest research experiences imaginable (but for the rest of us, its website will have to do).

Luminarium Anthology of English Literature (http://www.luminarium.org/). Created and maintained by Annina Jokinen, this award-winning site features works from the Medieval period up through the Restoration, along with biographies and links to critical essays and information. The site also hosts the Luminarium Encyclopedia, which has the ambition of becoming the "Who's Who and What's What in Medieval and Renaissance England."

Nieman Watchdog: Questions the Press Should Ask (http://www.niemanwatchdog.org/index.cfm). The Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard University was founded in 1938 "to promote and elevate the standards of journalism in the United States." Its website states, "Great questions are a key to great journalism. But often, in the press of deadlines, the flood of raw information, manipulated news, deliberate misinformation and just plain junk, great questions are hard to develop. Reporters and editors need to know what's happening, why it happened, who's involved, who's affected and what happens next. . . ." This site suggests penetrating, critical questions a responsible press should ask about national and international issues and provides commentary, discussions, interviews, and links to articles.

OpenSecrets.org (http://opensecrets.org/about/index.php). This is the site for the Center for Responsive Politics, a nonpartisan, independent, nonprofit research group that tracks money in U.S. politics and studies its effect on elections, public policy, and citizens' lives. According to its mission statement, it "aims to create a more educated voter, an involved citizenry and a more responsive government." Its awards and honors include several Webby Awards, a National Press Club award for "Distinguished Contribution to Online Journalism," and inclusion on *Time* and *Forbes* best websites lists.

ScienceDirect (http://www.sciencedirect.com). This site promises "more than a quarter of the world's scientific, medical and technical information online." It lists categories under four broad subject headings: Physical Sciences and Engineering, Life Sciences, Health Sciences, and Social Sciences and Humanities, and it boasts more than 2,000 peer-reviewed journals. You have to register to use it, but registration is free and allows you various specialized search capabilities, and you can scan 75 million article abstracts.

Slashdot (http://slashdot.org/). Slashdot is a news website offering "News for nerds. Stuff that matters." Slashdot is a regularly updated holding of news stories from around the Web, all dealing with gadgets and technology. If you need information on games, hardware, software, computers, or networking,

this is the place to go. Slashdot is famous for its active community of regular users who post on every news story. Every story on its site can also be linked here via RSS feed, and the site has an "ask Slashdot" section where users can post tech questions and get answers back quickly. (RSS stands for Really Simple Syndication. An RSS document, usually called a "feed," "web feed," or "channel," can contain a summary of content from an associated site or the full text. RSS feeds are used for frequently updated content such as news headlines.)

Snopes.com (http://www.snopes.com/). Do gang members really drive with their lights out as an initiation rite and then kill motorists who flash their headlights at them? Do iPods and cell phones really make lightning strike injuries to people more severe? Can Internet users really get cash rewards for forwarding an email to test an AOL email-tracking system? ("PLEEEEEEASE READ!!!! It was on the news!") Did Al Gore really claim that he "invented the Internet"? Snopes.com researches widely circulated rumors, urban legends, "strange news stories," gossip, "old wives' tales," and similar items. When someone emails you a claim, an alert, or a political rumor, you should check it out here before believing it or passing it along. (The answers to the four questions are #1, No; #2, Yes; #3, No; and #4, No.)

Space.com (http://space.com/). This site is a storehouse of articles, images, video, and links involving all things outer space. Topics such as science news, NASA, the International Space Station, the Hubble telescope, astronomy, technology, space flights, SETI (the search for extra terrestrial life), and the Mars rovers are all covered here. In 2003, this site was recognized by the Online News Association for its superb coverage of the space shuttle *Columbia* disaster.

SurLaLune Fairy Tale Pages (http://www.surlalunefairytales.com/). Created and maintained by Heidie Anne Heiner, this site describes itself as "A portal to the realm of fairy tale and folklore studies featuring 45 annotated fairy tales, including their histories, similar tales across cultures, and over 1,400 illustrations." This is a wonderful starting site for anyone doing folklore or fairy tale studies, especially if they are interested in cross-cultural variants. It offers more than 1,500 folktales and fairy tales from around the world. FAQ sections on children and fairy tales, women and fairy tales, and Disney and fairy tales list numerous books on these subjects.

The Pew Research Center (http://pewresearch.org/). The Pew Research Center is a nonpartisan organization that conducts public opinion polls and social science research on issues and trends affecting America and the world. The Center's work is carried out by eight projects, each with its own website accessible from the site: The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press; Project for Excellence in Journalism; Stateline.org, a news source that tracks and analyzes policy trends in the fifty states; Pew Internet and American Life Project; Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life; Pew Hispanic Center; Pew Global Attitudes Project; and Social & Demographic Trends.

The Victorian Web (http://www.victorianweb.org/). This award-winning site has been put together by scholars from several institutions and countries with an interest in the culture, politics, authors, literature, social history, religions, philosophies, science, and gender issues of the Victorian period. The site offers a wealth of information in more than 28,000 documents. It also includes material on some authors who predate the Victorian period but were influential to it, such as Jane Austen, William Wordsworth, Jonathan Swift, and Alexander Pope.

The Webby Awards (http://www.webbyawards.com). The Webby Award, established in 1996, is the "leading international award honoring excellence on the Internet." The Webbys are presented by the International Academy of Digital Arts and Sciences, a "550-member body of leading Web experts, business figures, luminaries, visionaries and creative celebrities." Browsing through the annual lists of award winners can lead you to some informative, provocative, and fun sites. In 2008, Stephen Colbert won the Webby's 2008 "Person of the Year" award for his innovative use of the web for interaction with his show's fans, "from Google bombing to make him the top search result for 'greatest living American' to challenging the 'truthiness' of Wikipedia."

VoS: Voice of the Shuttle (http://vos.ucsb.edu/). This site is excellent for research in the humanities and social sciences, with deep research links (as of this writing) in twenty-eight categories, including Art, Media Studies, Gender and Sexuality, Cyberculture, Literature, and Politics and Government. There are also links to a variety of resources, such as scholarly journals, "zines" (small press publications and alternative newsletters), conferences, listservs, newsgroups, libraries, and museums. VoS is "woven" by the University of California, Santa Barbara's Alan Liu with the help of graduate students and other contributors.

Wikipedia (http://www.wikipedia.org/). The term "wiki" means quick in Hawaiian, making it an apt name for websites that let anyone add to, edit, modify, and even delete content. Wikipedia is a wildly popular wiki encyclopedia that was started in 2001. As we write this, it boasts more than 9 million articles in more than 250 languages, with 75,000 active volunteer "wikipedians" working on additions and revisions, but it also warns, "Because Wikipedia is an ongoing work to which, in principle, anybody can contribute, it differs from a paper-based reference source in important ways. In particular, older articles tend to be more comprehensive and balanced, while newer articles more frequently contain significant misinformation, unencyclopedic content, or vandalism. Users need to be aware of this to obtain valid information and avoid misinformation that has been recently added and not yet removed." There is no central editor or mechanism of true peer review. Thousands of people comb through entries daily to check for errors, jokes, or bias, but there can still be errors (both massive and minor) in every entry you read. Many professors frown on its use in any academic setting, so understand that the likelihood of encountering mistakes here makes this a

shoddy tool for serious research. However, in daily life, this site can be helpful because it has entries on every topic imaginable, and it can point you in the direction of scholarly research through its own citations. Just remember not to take anything here at face value.

News Websites

We've come a long way from town criers, who were the first news delivery systems. They used to walk town streets ringing bells and "crying" out official public announcements. Widespread literacy and the invention of printing presses created newspapers, broadcast technology brought us radio and television news, and now we have the Internet. With more and more people getting their news exclusively from the Net, news websites have become increasingly thorough. They have stories that are updated by the minute; they also have opinion pieces and blogs that help give different perspectives on the news. These sites are increasingly high tech, innovating podcasts and streaming videos, and many traditional newspapers and televised news shows now have their own news sites. Most news sites are free, but some will ask you to register with them to give them accurate records of their users.

Following are some of the biggest and best sources for news on the Web, including the sites of the five highest-circulating newspapers in the United States:

Yahoo News: http://news.yahoo.com/

Google News: http://news.google.com/

BBC News: http://news.bbc.co.uk/

CNN: http://www.cnn.com/

MSNBC: http://www.msnbc.msn.com/

USA Today: http://www.usatoday.com/

The Wall Street Journal: http://online.wsj.com/public/us

The New York Times: http://www.nytimes.com/

The Washington Post: http://www.washingtonpost.com/

The Los Angeles Times: http://www.latimes.com/

PRINT MEDIA AND NEWS

Although you may feel completely natural using the Internet, a vast number of people still get information about the world from print sources. Newspapers, popular magazines, and even newsletters are very common ways to get information. Make sure that in your research and your daily life, you rely on more than one medium of information; in other words, even if the Web is your comfort zone, take a look at what the print media has to offer for some more variety about the information of our world. Typically, journalists who write articles for highly regarded print news sources have strict standards and do research to verify leads before going to print. Thus, in most cases, the traditional press is viewed as more reliable than what is posted exclusively on the

Web—of course, the Web versions of print media contain much of the same information. (For more information on news media, see Chapter 18.)

Local Newspapers

Your city (or a larger city nearby) is sure to print a daily newspaper. This is a great resource for several things: 1) Local News. If there is a hot political issue in your hometown, and you need to research it, your local paper is the most logical place to turn. For your academic work, this may be the only source for local statistics, political races, and even information on crime. 2) Recent and Current Events. If something has happened recently (within the last month or two), and you want to use it in an essay or research paper, the only likely sources are going to be local newspapers (which may have online versions). 3) Entertainment and the Arts. A major reason to get a paper is to see what entertainment is happening in your town. Art shows, movie times, concerts, and many other interesting events can be reliably tracked down in your local paper.

Major Newspapers

Several major newspapers are distributed all across America, not just in their hometowns. *USA Today*, the *Wall Street Journal,* the *New York Times,* the *Washington Post,* and the *Los Angeles Times* are the nation's most widely circulated papers, and they are published from coast to coast. Similarly, you can find regional papers, such as the *San Francisco Chronicle,* which is popular for all of the Pacific Northwest, or the *Chicago Sun-Times,* which you can find throughout the Midwest.

These papers have many more resources than local papers, and they can usually afford more investigative journalists (including high-caliber reporters who win awards, such as the Pulitzer Prize, for their work) and more in-depth reporting. Just as with local papers, if there is a recently broken story, these newspapers are the only place to find information (books and scholarly journals won't be in print for a year or more after a newsworthy event takes place, but the newspaper will go to print the next morning). These national papers often break major stories that concern the entire country, such as the 2007 *Washington Post* series on the terrible conditions veterans endured at Walter Reed Army Medical Center.

The major papers are very powerful sources of news, and to maintain mastery over information competency, you must visit them from time to time. However, don't simply return over and over to news outlets and papers that spin stories in ways that fit your preferred worldview. The key to being truly well-informed is to look at a variety of sources and to see for yourself what information different sources leave out of their articles and editorials.

Popular Magazines

Many popular magazines lack the journalistic seriousness of major newspapers. Whereas a newspaper (in theory) exists primarily to disseminate news, magazines tend to focus more on entertainment and lifestyle issues. However, many serious and informative magazines do exist, including those that feature articles on news and culture alongside literature and the arts, such as the *Atlantic Monthly* and the *New Yorker*.

Wired, Scientific American, National Geographic, and *Rolling Stone* are more specialized magazines that also offer serious reporting on various issues. The *Columbia Journalism Review* and the *American Journalism Review* focus on reporting and editorials about the news media. These magazines are considered to define their respective industries. In scholarly research, your professors may not want you to use these sources because the articles are not generated using scholarly methodology, but for information about the world around us, they can't be beat.

News Magazines

Some magazines exist somewhere between the casual entertainment of the popular magazine and the rigorous journalistic standard of a major newspaper, such as *US World and News Report* and *News Weekly*. Also, the news sections of magazines like *Time, Newsweek,* and *The Economist* are as rigorously reported as those in most major newspapers. They are great sources for real world information, but you may want to verify their findings with some independent research before using them in your papers, the same as you would for stories in newspapers.

TELEVISION, RADIO, AND BROADCAST NEWS

The airwaves are another source for finding information. Though television is a much more passive medium than the options listed previously (you just sit around and watch it instead of actively tracking it down and reading through it), it can still be an effective way to gather information about our world. The obvious choice is to watch the news for facts and information, but don't underestimate the ability of some shows on cable channels or on the radio to inform us. National Public Radio is noteworthy for its in-depth news coverage and even for breaking stories through its own investigative reporters. But remember the Golden Rule of Research: consult as wide a variety of reputable sources as possible. Never rely on information presented in just one broadcast or in just one medium.

Local News

Much like local newspapers, local televised news broadcasts are very helpful when you're trying to find information about your community. Local politicians are regularly interviewed, and roving news cameras are able to capture footage of everything from city council meetings to street crime and traffic jams. If you have any reason to research local events, you should get in the habit of closely monitoring the evening news. Consider recording it and sifting through it later at a higher speed if you're serious about using the local news as an information resource. Try to record all the local news stations for different perspectives and to develop a feel for the types of information each favors or skips and for any tendencies to slant certain types of news stories.

Network and Cable News

The major television networks (ABC, NBC, CBS) produce big-budget news shows that are broadcast nationally. These shows cover events of national importance and

have the budgets to send reporters around the world in search of major stories. Similar to these network news broadcasts are programs on the big cable news networks such as CNN and MSNBC. These networks have large budgets and a global reach as well, but they are easier to access because they run twenty-four hours a day and repeat major stories every hour. Again, if you're researching a breaking news story that wouldn't be in print yet, the televised news is one of the best resources for you. A VCR or DVR to record these broadcasts can be your best friend when you're trying to gather information, be it academic or personal. Be warned, though, that many cable news networks are thought by media critics to have strong political biases. (For more on the news media and possible "spin," see Chapter 21.)

Television News Magazines

News magazines are television shows that focus on the news in a longer format. Instead of focusing on breaking news stories and trying to get them to you the moment after they happen, these magazine shows take their time and produce detailed, in-depth news segments with background information and interviews designed to present differing perspectives. A typical television news story will be only a few minutes long, but the news magazine stories will last fifteen minutes to an hour or more. Really hard-hitting journalism can occur in this format. The news magazine format was born with CBS's successful *60 Minutes*. *60 Minutes* and PBS's *Frontline* are widely considered the highest quality news magazines, with the most journalistic integrity and with coverage of important stories that may be neglected by other television news shows (though *60 Minutes* also frequently airs human interest stories and profiles of celebrities, like Stephen Colbert, Bill O'Reilly, and Will Smith). *Dateline* and *20/20* are also popular news magazines. You can visit these programs' websites for videos of some of their stories, links to related information, and, in some cases, podcasts. Apple's iTunes store offers subscriptions to many news shows in podcast format for free.

Educational Television

Many cable networks focus on educational shows that give us accounts of crucial moments in history, in-depth biographies of famous people, and facts about the world in general. Networks such as The Discovery Channel, The History Channel, The Documentary Channel, The Biography Channel, and A&E thrive on this type of programming. Other networks, such as HBO and PBS, are also famous for award-winning educational documentaries. When you are interested in an issue, check the programming guide of these channels, or, better yet, visit their websites. Most will keep detailed archives of their past shows and documentaries. You may have to rent or buy the material you track down, but it can often be worth it if information is your goal. Sometimes important programs are available through video and DVD rental outlets. As with news programs, you can visit these networks' websites for videos, links to related information, and podcasts.

Radio

An old standard in mass media communication is the radio, and there are thousands of radio shows out there that do a good job of passing along information (but just as

many that don't). With the tumultuous start of satellite radio, radio is a changing medium. Most radio stations focus on popular music, but they often have news segments; however, these segments are likely to focus on local news and tend to be fairly shallow. For gathering information on the radio, the daily news broadcasts and programs of National Public Radio (NPR) can be particularly helpful. NPR is an internationally acclaimed producer of noncommercial programming. Because it is an independent, nonprofit membership organization, its programming isn't dictated by advertisers and ratings. You can also visit NPR's website for transcripts of some of its stories, links to related information, recorded broadcasts, and podcasts. Apple's iTunes store offers free subscriptions to many of NPR's shows in podcast format.

Another format is "talk radio," typically found on the AM band. Talk radio is very popular with a lot of people, featuring highly opinionated hosts and citizens who call in to discuss various current events. Think of talk radio as, essentially, a collection of oral blogs. As such, these shows have the same potential weaknesses of blogs. Anybody can say anything with no ethical or editorial oversight. The news and information you find in this format is almost always unabashedly biased, usually toward the extremes of right or left, based on the personality of the hosts and the owners of the stations. If you find such shows entertaining, enjoy them—just don't consider them good sources for information or examples of critical thinking. (If you have to do an assignment for a logic class on formal and informal fallacies, they're a gold mine.)

Research Tip

With the exception of the programming produced by nonprofit organizations such as PBS and NPR, all television and radio programs exist only as long as they draw good ratings and attract and maintain advertising revenue. We aren't accusing the majority of television and radio news programs of superficiality or dishonesty, we are just noting that factors related to profits and financial risks determine what stories are reported and how they are framed. You are better off with scholarly, verifiable, peer-edited sources, as discussed in Chapter 4, especially if you plan to use them in your papers. (For a more thorough discussion of the financial issues that guide the media, see Section 3, the Anthology of Readings.)

Documentaries

Documentaries occupy a niche of their own. They sometimes air on television, but they aren't generally made by television networks. Some are made by directors such as Ken Burns and Errol Morris, who devote their careers to in-depth explorations of various subjects; others are made by people who are trying to draw the world's attention to a particular topic of importance to them. They can be good sources of information.

Be careful, though—some documentary makers are more interested in propaganda than in the truth, and with new technologies, documentary filmmaking has grown so cheap that virtually anyone can make one. Even people who are trying to be scrupulously

honest cannot show you the "whole" truth; they might shoot hundreds or thousands of hours to create films that are usually less than two hours long. They exercise judgment over what to keep and what to cut, and, in the hands of people whose primary purpose is to shape your perceptions, a film can seem to prove whatever case the filmmaker wants.

You should evaluate documentaries as rigorously as any other vehicle for information. Reading multiple reviews in journals and magazines (avoiding those that are clearly politically slanted) is a good way to find out how worthwhile a documentary is. In fact, reviews can themselves be sources of information when the reviewer has a background in the subject. Documentaries may not be sources that you can use in a paper, but they can give you a feel for a topic and put a human face on issues, as well as suggest areas for research. They can also be riveting. For example, the 2001 Academy-Award-winning *Murder on a Sunday Morning* follows the story of an African American teenager picked up and arrested for the brutal murder of a white tourist in Florida. The director, Jean-Xavier de Lestrade, showed up at a courthouse one day to start work on a film on the American justice system, and he and his crew followed the case from the beginning to the end, not knowing how it would turn out. This film raises penetrating questions about eyewitness testimony, racial issues, and police and prosecutorial tactics and evidence gathering.

The other Oscar-winning documentaries of the decade (through the 2008 awards) are *One Day in September,* about a Palestinian terrorist group's taking of Israeli hostages at the 1972 Olympic games in Munich, directed by Kevin MacDonald (2000); *Bowling for Columbine,* which explores America's unique relationship with guns, directed by Michael Moore (2002); *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara,* featuring interviews with the former Secretary of Defense during the Vietnam War, directed by Errol Morris (2003); *Born into Brothels: Calcutta's Red Light Kids,* about the impoverished children of Indian prostitutes, directed by Ross Kauffman and Zana Briski (2004); *March of the Penguins,* about the annual journey of Emperor penguins as they march in single file to their breeding ground, directed by Luc Jacquet (2005); *An Inconvenient Truth,* about Al Gore's campaign to raise awareness about global warming, directed by Davis Guggenheim (2006); and *Taxi to the Dark Side,* an exploration of U.S. torture practices in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Guantánamo Bay, directed by Alex Gibney (2007). Documentaries such as these offer information, entertainment, and food for thought on issues that are often highly controversial. No matter what side you take on an issue, they are fantastic sources for anyone trying to generate topics for a paper because they likely cover several major arguments on their subject matter.