AlterNet. *Access:* http://www.alternet.org.

AlterNet is an online magazine featuring articles published in alternative and independent news sources. First launched in 1998, AlterNet is a project coordinated by the Independent Media Institute, a nonprofit organization committed to "strengthening and supporting independent and alternative journal-

AlterNet.org

ism and to improving the public's access to independent information sources."

AlterNet includes a database of more than 7,000 stories from more than 200 sources and is described as a "mix of news, opinion, and investigative journalism on subjects ranging from the environment, the drug war, technology, and cultural trends to policy debate, sexual politics, and health issues."

Access to archived articles is free. Recent issues of AlterNet and its articles are displayed on the "Archives" page. However, visitors must use the search engine provided by AlterNet to access previous issues. Keyword searching is the default option offered by AlterNet, and controlled vocabulary is not used. Once a search is executed, a "search tips" option is available. Another interesting AlterNet option is the ability to search "Other Alt Sites."

A good feature included on AlterNet, which has become somewhat of a standard with news sites, is the option to subscribe to weekly headlines and newsletters. This is an effective tool for users who want to keep up-to-date on a variety of sources.

The Web site also offers another standard found in other news Web sites—discussion forums. Here, users are able to voice their opinions and debate with other users on a variety of topics.

The construction of the Web site makes it very easy to use. Although there is a lot of information presented, the site remains easily navigable. The basic format of the magazine's "front page" stays unchanged week to week by offering recurring sections, such as "Quote of the Week," "Columnists," "The Content Files," "Fact of the Week," "Report of the Week," and "Multimedia."

AlterNet is one of several resources for alternative and independent news, but its attractive and consistent Web design makes it more efficient to use than many of the other sites. It is an exceptional tool for keeping up-to-date with the alternative side of a hot issue.—*Colleen Lougen, Mount Saint Mary College (N.Y.), lougen@msmc.edu*

General Accounting Office. *Access:* http://www.gao.gov.

The General Accounting Office (GAO) is a legislative branch agency whose primary purpose is to investigate and gather information for members of Congress. In carrying out its mission, GAO produces a plethora of reports, studies, and analysis on just about any issue in which the federal government is involved.

GAO describes itself as the "investigative arm of Congress." While the agency is involved in formal legal investigations and the formulation of accounting and auditing standards for agencies, it is the agency's investigative work that is of primary interest to most government information users.

Assisting Congress in its oversight function of federal agencies, GAO investigates agencies by examining their use of public funds and evaluating programs and services. Congressional committees, and occasionally individual members, generally initiate investigations. The results of investigations usually take the form of reports and/or testimony before the Congressional committees. While some reports may gather information on a detailed aspect of a particular program, oth-

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ers provide comparative data on similar programs in both the federal and state level agencies, and still others present a broad overview of a public policy area. Agriculture and food, civil rights, education, energy, financial management, national defense, natural resources, and justice and law enforcement are just a few of the subject areas covered by GAO reports.

GAO's Web site is now the primary source for accessing the agency's reports. The site offers daily postings of newly released reports, including an e-mail alert service, and also has several options for searching. The link "Find GAO Reports" leads to a database of report abstracts back to 1975. Searches can be performed by report number, titles, abstracts, agency/organization names, or subject terms. Addi-

tional limits may be placed by date or by topical category. Results may be sorted by date, title, topic, or report number. When available, direct links to the full-text reports are provided. If the report is not available electronically, a form appears so that the report can be ordered from the agency. It should be noted that the full-text report files, usually in PDF format, can be large and may take a long time to load.

One drawback of the GAO reports database is the lack of instruction on how to format searches. When searching for the phrase *tax refund*, 175 hits were retrieved. In scanning the list of titles, *tax refund* as a phrase was nowhere to be found. After some trial and error, it became clear that words are automatically searched with the "or" Boolean operator, unless quotation marks are put around the phrase. No explanation of the search engine can be found, and, in fact, a link to online help results in an "under construction" message.

There is also a link from the "Find GAO Reports" page for searching the full text of reports. The link takes the user to a search screen with the logo, "Search by Inktomi." Advanced searching and help are offered from this page and searches can be limited by "Le-

gal Products," "Reports Archive," and "GAO Reports."

Also on the "GAO Reports" page is a link to "Search GAO archives," which takes the user to the GPO Access database and provides an alternative route for accessing GAO reports. This database provides full-text reports back to 1995. Searches by report number, title, full text, and subject terms are available.

As it does with its other databases, the Government Printing Office provides initial guidance for constructing searches on its main search screen. It also has a "Helpful Hints" document to provide more in-depth instruction on formulating searches. A link to this document is also provided on the GAO Web site, but when checked, the link was broken.

Clearly, GAO needs to clean up the broken and outdated links on its Web site and finish the work on its online help documentation. There needs to be more clarification on when to use "Find GAO reports" and when to use "Search GAO Archives" for full- text searching. It is not clear why it is necessary to have two options. However, these criticisms do not detract from the overall value of the Web site. Whichever option is used, it is relatively easy to retrieve reports on just about any subject.

Besides the GAO reports, the site provides a number of other interesting features, such as "Legal Products," "Other Publications," and "FraudNet."

The breadth of coverage and ease of use makes the GAO Web site an excellent place to search for information about public policy issues and the federal government, no matter what the topic.—*Arlene Weible, Washington State Library, aweible@statelib. wa.gov* ■

Call for reviewers

Reviews for the "Internet Reviews" column are sought. Manuscripts should be approximately 400 words and may be submitted electronically to editors Joni Roberts (jroberts@willamette.edu) and Carol Drost (cdrost@willamette.edu).

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