

# Newspaper Services and the Decision-Making Process

Sam Berner  
March 18, 2001

---

## 1. A Brief Outline of Specialisation Field

I specialise in providing information to immigration lawyers. This may seem a very narrow field, but in actuality it encompasses a whole range of subjects: from human rights abuses to religious concepts, from government policies regarding illegal non-citizens to what is a culturally acceptable proof of a genuine marital relationship among the members of some tiny ethnic enclave. As a result, the information I gather assists more than just the legal profession: policy makers within city councils, welfare workers with organisations dealing with people from Non-English-Speaking backgrounds and cultural workers promoting diversity are also among my clientele. So are members of the public – asylum seekers trying to evidence their claims and a plethora of organisations working with them.

So far, my main sources of information include, but are not limited to, press releases and news from organisations that deal with human rights issues, multiculturalism and law. I do most of my initial research online, using

- a number of 'favourite' search engines such as Northern Lights, Yahoo, and Alta Vista.
- human rights websites with search engines such as Amnesty International [[www.ai.org](http://www.ai.org)] and Human Rights Watch
- a number of media databases such as EBSCO, IDEAL, ELECTRONIC JOURNALS, etc.
- law websites such as LAW SEARCH (Australian), AUSTLII, CITEC and LEXIS-NEXIS
- general news searchable databases such as 1st Headlines [<http://1stheadlines.com/>], NewsIndex [<http://www.newsindex.com/>], CNN [<http://www.cnn.com>], the British Broadcasting corporation [www.bbc.com](http://www.bbc.com), etc.

When doing offline research, I rely heavily on databases available from local state libraries, universities and organisations. I have, over the past few years, also accumulated a digitised library of 'country information' that is currently being used as the core of a bigger project undertaken by me at a local Legal Community Service.

Although I am not in a decision-making position, the information I locate, analyse and re-package provides a tool for decision making. Most of the value lies in events that have already happened, as opposed to predictions of the future (although in some refugee law cases, the probabilities of events recurring is also a matter of importance). Therefore, the main category of a "valid" information source is its lack of bias and reputation for objectivity. I can't say that many newspapers possess these categories.

When using information from a newspaper/newswire source, it is a trend in Australian legal establishment to take USA sources seriously – even if there is enough to prove otherwise. For the best interest of the client therefore, information brokers and providers limit themselves to USA media: CNN being one of the more respected ones. On the other hand, the social services and non-profit organisations tend to abhor USA information sources as heavily biased, thus producing a situation wherein one and the same information request from two different sources has to be tackled in two different ways.

Another important aspect of my job is cross-cultural interpretation. Australia perceives itself as a multicultural country espousing diversity, and facilitating communication across cultural boundaries is vital for the success of the country's multicultural venture. When providing information from

international news, I have to interpret it in a way that would make it 'meaningful' to the local recipient. The same applies to information passed in the opposite direction.

## 2. An Overview of Newspaper Sources Available On the Internet:

The Internet Public Library [<http://www.ipl.org/reading/news/>] also provides an extensive list of links to national newspapers around the world that can be searchable both by geographic location and by title of publication. Another good website to locate online newspapers is OnlineNewspapers.com [<http://www.onlinenewspapers.com/>]. Yahoo directory of News and Media [[http://dir.yahoo.com/News and Media/](http://dir.yahoo.com/News_and_Media/)], although far from perfect, allows also for search by subject.

I have chosen, for this opinion paper, to investigate the two general news websites provided: The Times and The New York Times. I am already a subscriber to the second of these two, and have to admit that I don't find it very useful in my work. That may be just a temporary view, however, which could change as I have more opportunity to work with this news medium.

My investigation concentrates on the **ease** with which I can locate **relevant** and **objective** items of information on these two publications. To supplement my findings, I have compared these two newswires with two different news provider on which I rely heavily in my work: the CNN and the BBC. Although both are not newspapers, the differences between its modus operandi and that of papers that have opted for electronic versions are quickly becoming blurred. Both are updated regularly (CNN and BBC more often so), both cover the same areas of expertise (local USA and international news), both to some extent depend on newswire services such as Reuters and AP, and both have their own reporters posted throughout the world. The difference is that news on CNN and BBC is value-added. Their sites are heavily littered with multimedia. This may be of value for the casual, bored surfer or someone with no access to cable TV; however, for the purposes of report writing and news analysis, multimedia is useless. The choice of these two cable networks is based on their origins as compared with the newspapers under investigation. CNN and New York Times are USA-based, while both BBC and the Times are established UK media.

The New York Times [<http://www.nytimes.com/>] has a number of good characteristics:

- Its archive dates back six years, and time rangers are permitted
- The search engine has a good Help file
- The search engine accepts Boolean operators
- Searches can be done through full-text, headlines, summary or by author or within a particular section of the newspaper
- Results are sorted by relevance or date
- There is an option for pay-as-you-read, instead of the more murky subscription to the whole
- The website has activated cookies support, and remembers the user
- There is a FAQ site explaining the archives and their use
- The website's features are easy to access and comprehend; navigation is excellent.

The measure of relativity was a search done on the following Boolean phrase (Egypt AND "human rights") as this is part of an information request I am currently working on. New York Times came up with 7 news items for the past 30 days, none of which was relevant. The slight change of search term to ("human rights in Egypt"), still produced 7 news items, only one which was relevant.

By comparison, using the first search term, the CNN website search produced 5 news items for the same period of time, none of which was relevant. The search engine did not recognise the Boolean operator 'AND' looking for it as part of the keyword search. The second search term did not fare any better. The "Search Tips" page informed me that when looking for multi-worded phrases, I should have placed a hyphen between the words, so I modified the term to (Egypt human-rights). The search considered this as a (Egypt OR (human NEAR rights)) search. However, I still got exactly the same result. I then tried organising the items by Relevance instead of Date, and found that the first three items were relevant, but too old to be of value.

If we take into account the clutter on the CNN website, the fact that the archive cannot be accessed and that there are no “advanced search” options, it has to be said that The New York Times is superior in its search technology. However, all news items on CNN, no matter how far they go back in time, are for free, which is a redeeming feature.

The British Sunday Times’ first look doesn’t do it merit. Embedded in the middle of the already small monitor, it does not assist comfortable browsing. The Times website has the following characteristics:

- the archive dates back to only one and a half year
- the search engine accepts only certain Boolean operators – "AND" and the inverted commas
- the search can be date specific
- searches can be done within particular sections of the paper

Applying the search terms (Egypt AND “human rights”) procured one, and at that highly irrelevant, item. It is, of course, possible that Britons don’t discuss such gruesome subjects in their weekend edition. The term “cricket” produced 46 results in comparison.

The Sunday Times website has a tiny link to The Times, its weekday edition. The site is much easier to read than both The New York Times and The Sunday Times; there is much less clutter. There is an option of quick search at the top of the page, and a link to a much more refined search engine at the bottom.

The Times website has the following excellent features:

- the archives are divided into three section by date
- search can be either simple or advanced
- both the simple and advanced search engines accept the Boolean operators +, - and ""
- the advanced search engine allows searchers to select date and section of the paper, the way results will be displayed, the number of results requested and relevance ranking.
- results can be displayed by date or relevance
- articles are free

A search for the terms (+Egypt +”human rights”), using the “simple search” option produced seven news items, rated by relevance. Unfortunately, only one item was remotely relevant, four were different versions of the same report, and two were totally irrelevant, although they scored a high relevance percentage. The search results open in a separate browser window, but clicking on the title takes one back to the first browser. I can’t say I prefer this over the Alt + <- system common to other similar sites.

Using the same search terms with the advanced search engine produced, to my great disappointment, only 6 news items: the first one was remotely relevant, four were again copies of the same irrelevant report, and the last item was totally irrelevant. There was no difference between items polled by simple search and those polled by advanced search.

Last, I proceeded to evaluate the British Broadcasting Company website. I have to admit that I was surprised by the websites new look, much less sombre than before. Mass production is catching up with the establishment, obviously. The site still retains its high readability, though: there is enough white space between columns, and option for a text-only browsing. If we compare the USA sites to the UK ones, we get the impression that Americans have a *horror vacuum*.

The website has a Search Tips page, which states the limitations of the BBC.com search engine. Boolean search is not supported, neither are inverted commas. The engine supports the + and – signs, but there is not much more to it, apart from having the option of searching a particular section of the website. The use of search terms (+Egypt +human rights) procured 2363

documents matching one or more words, in Russian, Arabic, Spanish and English (there is no option for selecting languages). The first 40 were irrelevant, as they only had the word "Egypt" mentioned in them once, but that seemed enough for the search engine to give them a 100% relevance.

### **3. Conclusion**

The conclusion is that whereas newspapers are important sources of information, for them to be useful for a researcher they have to be accessible in their entirety. Before going online, in the good old days of microfiche and microfilm, librarians ensured that when a researcher looked at an index, he/she could find relevant material easily. With the demise of the old technology (bespectacled humanoids) and the advent of the new one (computers), the amount of information may have multiplied, but the ease of finding it hasn't. There is a lot to be done to raise the online newspaper searchable database to the level of an even mediocre library index.

Newspapers are useful as information disseminators in that they have a wide readership and currency. However, at least in democratic countries, they are often unaccountable for errors and misinformation. Decision makers can use them to stay "in touch" with the world, but I doubt that in the legal field professionals would base their decisions on news items from such unspecialised publications. One has to be, therefore, extremely wary when using newspapers – without such tools as media analysis one falls into the danger of providing not facts, but biased opinions masquerading as such.