

## **Real Life, Real Users, and Real Needs: A Study and Analysis of User Queries on the Web**

Major Bernard J. Jansen  
Department of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science, United States Military Academy  
West Point, New York 10996 USA  
jjansen@acm.org

Amanda Spink  
School of Library and Information Sciences, University of North Texas  
P.O. Box 311068, Denton TX 75203 USA  
spink@lis.admin.unt.edu,

Tefko Saracevic  
School of Communication, Information and Library Studies, Rutgers University  
4 Huntington Street, New Brunswick, NJ 08903 USA  
tefko@scils.rutgers.edu

**Please Cite:** Jansen, B. J., Spink, A., and Saracevic, T. 2000. Real life, real users, and real needs: A study and analysis of user queries on the web. *Information Processing and Management*. 36(2), 207-227.

[Go to Publication List](#)

**ABSTRACT.** We analyzed transaction logs containing 51,473 queries posed by 18,113 users of *Excite*, a major Internet search service. We provide data on: (i) **sessions** - changes in queries during a session, number of pages viewed, and use of relevance feedback, (ii) **queries** - the number of search terms, and the use of logic and modifiers, and (iii) **terms** - their rank/frequency distribution and the most highly used search terms. We then shift the focus of analysis from the query to the user to gain insight to the characteristic of the Web user. With these characteristics as a basis, we then conducted a failure analysis, identifying trends among user mistakes. We conclude with a summary of findings and a discussion of the implications of these finding.

### **INTRODUCTION**

A panel session at the 1997 ACM Special Interest Group on Research Issues In Information Retrieval conference entitled "Real Life Information Retrieval: Commercial Search Engines" included representatives from several Internet search services. Doug Cutting represented *Excite*, one of the major services. Graciously, he offered to make available a set of user queries as submitted to his service for research. The analysis we present here on the nature of sessions, queries, and terms resulted from this offer. Interestingly, the authors expressed their interest independently of each other, then met via email, exchanged messages and data, and conducted collaborative research exclusively through the Internet, before ever meeting in person at a Rutgers conference in February 1998, when the results were first presented. In itself, this is an example how the Internet changed and is changing the conduct of research. We will argue in the conclusions that real life Internet searching is changing information retrieval (IR) as well. While Internet search engines are based on IR principles, Internet searching is very different then IR searching as traditionally practiced and researched. Internet IR is a different IR, with a number of implications that could portend changes in other areas of IR as well.

With the phenomenal increase in usage of the Web, there has been a growing interest in the study of a variety of topics and issues related to use of the Web. For instance, on the hardware side, Crovella and Besravros (1996) studied client-side traffic; and Abdulla, et. al., (1997) analyzed server usage. On the software side, there have been many descriptive evaluations of Web search engines (e.g. Lynch 1997). Statistics of Web use appear regularly (e.g. Kehoe et. al. 1997, FIND/SVP, 1997), but as soon as they appear, they are out of date. The coverage of various Web search engine services was analyzed in several works. A recent article on this topic by Lawrence and Giles (1998) attracted a lot of attention. The pattern of Web surfing by users was analyzed as well (Huberman et. al. 1998). However, to date there has been no large-scale, quantitative or qualitative study of Web searching.

*How do they search the Web? What do they search for on the Web?* These questions are addressed, as far as we can ascertain, for the first time in a large scale and academic manner in this study. Given the recent yearly exponential increase in the estimated number of Web users, this lack of scholarly research is surprising and disappointing. In contrast, there have been an abundance of user studies of on-line public access categories (OPAC) users. Many of these studies are reviewed in Peters (1997). Similarly, there are numerous studies of users of traditional IR systems. The combined proceedings of the International Conference on Research Issues in Information Retrieval present many of these studies. In the area of the Web users, however, there were only two narrow studies that we could find. One focused on the THOMAS system (Croft, Cook, and Wilder 1995) and contained some general information about users at that site. However, this study focused exclusively on the THOMAS Web site, did not attempt to characterize Web searching in a systematic way, and is devoted primarily to a description of the THOMAS system. The second paper was by Jones, Cunningham, and McNab (1998) and focused again on a single Web site, the New Zealand Digital Library, which contains computer science technical reports. Given the technical nature of this site, it is questionable whether these users represent Web users in general. Beyond these two articles, we could find no others. Obviously, there is a surprising lack of studies focusing on Web users, which is interesting given the numerous user studies in the OPAC and IR system areas and the current, almost ubiquitous nature of the Web.

In this paper, we report results from a major and ongoing study of users' searching behavior on the Web. We examined a set of transaction logs of users' searches from *Excite* (<http://www.excite.com>). This study involved real users, using real queries, with real information needs, using a real search engine. The strength of this study is that it involved a real slice of life on the Web. The weakness is that it involved only a slice – an observable artifact of what the users actually did, without any information about the users themselves or about the results and uses. The users are anonymous, but we can identify one or a sequence of queries originating with a specific user. We know when they searched and what they searched for, but we do not know anything beyond that. We report on artifactual behavior, but without a context. However, the observation and analysis of such behavior provides for a fascinating, surprising, and sometimes unexpected insight about the interaction between users and the search engines on the Web. More importantly, this study provides detailed statistics on Web user behavior that is currently lacking. It also provides a basis for comparison with similar studies of user searching of more traditional IR and OPAC systems.

The Web has a number of search engines. The approaches to searching, including algorithms, displays, modes of interaction and so on, vary from one search engine to another. Still, all Web search engines are IR tools for searching highly diverse and distributed information resources as found on the Web. They all follow the basic principles of IR and human-computer interaction. But by the nature of the Web resources, they are faced with different issues requiring different solutions than the search engines found in well organized systems, such as in DIALOG, or in lab experiments, such as in the Text Retrieval Conference (TREC). Moreover, from all that we know, Web users spans a vastly broader and thus probably different population of users (Spink, Bateman, and Jansen 1998) and information needs, which may greatly affect the queries, searches, and interactions. Thus, it is of considerable interest to examine the similarities and/or differences in Web searching compared to traditional IR systems. In either case, it is IR, but it is potentially a very different IR. Given the estimated size of the Web user population, the probable impact on other IR system user populations is high.

The significance of this study is the same as all other related studies of IR interaction, queries and searching. By axiom and from lessons learned from experience and numerous studies:

“The success or failure of any interactive system and technology is contingent on the extent to which user issues, the human factors, are addressed right from the beginning to the very end, right from theory, conceptualization, and design process to development, evaluation, and to provision of services.” (Saracevic, 1997).

## **RELATED IR STUDIES**

In this paper, we concentrate on users' *sessions*, *queries*, and *terms* as key variables in IR interaction on the Web. While there are many papers that discuss many aspects of Web searching, most of those are descriptive, prescriptive, or commentary. Other than the two mentioned previously, we could not find any studies of Web searching similar to this one, containing data on searches, thus we have nothing to compare our study. However, there were several studies that included data on searching of existing, mostly commercial, IR systems, and we culled data from those to

provide for some comparison between searches as done on the Web and those as done on IR systems outside the Web. A representative sample of such studies is reviewed.

The studies cited below concentrated on different aspects and variables related to searching, using different methodologies, thus, they are difficult to compare. Still, each of them had data on the *mean number of search terms* in queries constructed by the searchers under study as follows:

- Fenichel (1981): Novice searchers: 7.9. Moderately experienced: 9.6. Experienced: 14.4
- Hsieh-yee (1993): Familiar topics: Novices: 8.77. Experienced: 7.28. Non-familiar topics: Novices: 9.67. Experienced: 9.00
- Bates (1993): Humanities scholars: 14.95
- Spink & Saracevic (1997): Experienced searchers: 14.8.

The studies indicated that searches by various populations contain a range of some 7 to 15 terms. As will be discussed below, this is a considerably higher range than the mean number of terms found in this study that concentrated on Web searches from the Excite search engine.

### **BACKGROUND ON *EXCITE* AND DATA**

Founded in 1994, Excite, Inc. is a major Internet media public company which offers free Web searching and a variety of other services. The company and its services are described at its Web site, thus not repeated here. Only the search capabilities relevant to our results are summarized.

*Excite* searches are based on the exact terms that a user enters in the query, however, capitalization is disregarded, with the exception of logical commands AND, OR, and AND NOT. Stemming is not available. An online thesaurus and concept linking method called Intelligent Concept Extraction (ICE) is used, to find related terms in addition to terms entered. Search results are provided in a ranked relevance order. A number of advanced search features are available. Those that pertain to our results are described here:

- As to search logic, Boolean operators AND, OR, AND NOT, and parentheses can be used, but these operators must appear in ALL CAPS and with a space on each side. When using Boolean operators ICE (concept-based search mechanism) is turned off.
- A set of terms enclosed in quotation marks (no space between quotation marks and terms) returns answers with the terms as a phrase in exact order.
- A + (plus) sign before a term (no space) requires that the term must be in an answer.
- A - (minus) sign before a term (no space) requires that the term must NOT be in an answer. We denote plus and minus signs, and quotation marks as modifiers.
- A page of search results contains ten answers at a time ranked as to relevance. For each site provided is the title, URL (Web site address), and a summary of its contents. Results can also be displayed by site and titles only. A user can click on the title to go to the Web site. A user can also click for the next page of ten answers. In addition, there is a clickable option *More Like This*, which is a relevance feedback mechanism to find similar sites.
- When *More Like This* is clicked, *Excite* enters and counts this as a query with zero terms.

Each transaction record contained three fields. With these three fields, we were able to locate a user's initial query and recreate the chronological series of actions by each user in a session:

1. **Time of Day:** measured in hours, minutes, and seconds from midnight of 9 March 1997.
2. **User Identification:** an anonymous user code assigned by the *Excite* server.
3. **Query Terms:** exactly as entered by the given user.

Focusing on our three levels of analysis, sessions, queries, and terms, we defined our variables in the following way.

1. **Session:** A session is the entire series of queries by a user over time. A session could be as short as one query or contain many queries.

2. **Query:** A query consists of one or more search terms, and possibly includes logical operators and modifiers.
3. **Term:** A term is any unbroken string of characters (i.e. a series of characters with no space between any of the characters). The characters in terms included everything – letters, numbers, and symbols. Terms were words, abbreviations, numbers, symbols, URLs, and any combination thereof. We counted logical operators in capitals as terms, however, in a separate analysis we isolated them as commands, not terms.

The raw data collected is very messy. Users entered terms, commands and modifiers in all kinds of ways, including many misspellings and mistakes. In many cases, *Excite* conventions were not followed. We count these deviations as mistakes and report them in the failure analysis portion of the paper. For the most part, we took the data ‘as is,’ i.e., we did not ‘clean’ the data in any way – these queries represent real searches by real users. The only normalization we undertook in one of the counts (unique terms without case sensitive) was to disregard capitalization, because *Excite* disregards it as well. (i.e. *TOPIC*, *topic* and *Topic* retrieve the same answers; *Excite* does not offer automatic stemming, thus *topic* and *topics* count as two unique terms, and ‘?’ or ‘\*’ as stemming commands at the end of terms are mistakes, but when used counted as separate terms). We also analyzed a cleaned set of terms, that is we removed term modifiers such as the + or – signs. We took great care in derivation of counts, but because of the ‘messiness’ of data there still may be errors – we estimate the error rate of the results at less than 1%. This paper extends finding finds from (Jansen, et. al. 1998a, b, c).

## SESSIONS

First, what is the pattern of user queries? We looked at the number of queries by a specific user and how successive queries differed from other queries by the same user. We classified the 51,474 queries as to *unique*, *modified*, or *identical* as shown in [Table 1](#). A unique query was the first query by a user (this represents the number of users, including an error). A modified query is a subsequent query in succession (second, third ...) by the same user with terms added to, removed from, or both added to and removed from the unique query. Unique and modified queries together represent those queries where user did something with terms. Identical queries are queries by the same user that are identical to the query previous to it. They can come about in two ways. The first possibility is that the user retyped the query. Studies have shown that users do this (Peters 1997). The second possibility is that the query was generated by *Excite*. When a user views the second and further pages (i.e., a page is a group of 10 results) with the same query, *Excite* provides another query, but a query that is identical to the preceding one.

Query Type	Number	Percent of all queries
Unique	18,098	35
Modified	11,249	22
Identical	22,127	43

**Table 1: Unique, Modified, and Identical Queries.**

The unique plus modified queries (where users actively entered or modified terms) amounted to 29,437 queries or 57% of all queries. If we assume that all identical queries were generated as request for viewing subsequent pages, then 43% of queries come as a result of desire to view more pages after the first one. Modifications and viewing are further elaborated in the next two tables.

## Modifications

Some users used only one query in their session, others used a number of successive queries. The average session, including all three query types, was 2.84 queries per session. This means that a number of users went on to either modify their query, view subsequent results, or both. The average session length, ignoring identical queries, was 1.6 queries per user. [Table 2](#) lists the number of queries per user. This analysis includes only the 29,337 unique and modified queries. We ignored the identical queries in order to concentrate only on those queries where users themselves did something to the queries. A big majority of users did not go beyond their first and only query. Some 67% of users had one and only query. Query modification was not a strong trend. This is contrary to experiences in searching of regular IR systems, where modification of queries is very much a way of doing things. Having said this, however, 33% of the users did go beyond their first query. Approximately, 14% of users had three or more queries. These percentages of 33% and 14% are not insignificant proportions of system users. It indicates that a high percentage of Web users do not fit the stereotypical naïve Web user that one commonly hears about. These

sub-populations of users should receive further study. They could represent sub-populations of Web users or be harbingers of increased query modification on the Web.

Queries per user	Number of users	Percent of users	Queries per user	Number of users	Percent of users
1	12,068	67	10	17	0.09
2	3,501	19	11	7	0.04
3	1,321	7	12	8	0.04
4	583	3	13	15	0.08
5	287	1.6	14	2	0.01
6	144	0.80	15	2	0.01
7	79	0.44	17	1	0.01
8	32	0.18	25	1	0.01
9	36	0.20			

**Table 2: Number of Queries Per User.**

We also examined how user modified their queries. These results are display in [Table 8](#). Here we concentrate on 11,249 queries that were modified. Modification is reflected by either an increase or a decrease in the number of terms from one user's query to that user's next query (i.e. successive query by the same user at time T and T+1). Zero change means that that the user modified one or more terms in a query, but did not change the number of terms in the successive query. Increase or decrease of one means that one term was added to or subtracted from the preceding query. Percent is based on the number of queries in relation to all modified (11,249) queries.

Increase in terms	Number	Percent	Decrease in terms	Number	Percent
0	3909	34.76			
1	2140	19.03	-1	1837	16.33
2	1068	9.50	-2	937	8.33
3	367	3.26	-3	388	3.45
4	155	1.38	-4	181	1.61
5	70	0.62	-5	76	0.68
6	22	0.20	-6	46	0.41
7	6	0.05	-7	14	0.12
8	10	0.09	-8	8	0.07
9	1	0.01	-9	2	0.02
10	4	0.04	-10	6	0.05

**Table 3: Changes in number of terms in successive queries.**

We can see that users typically do not add or delete much in respect to the number of terms in their successive queries. Modifications to queries are done in small increments, if at all. The most common modification is to change a term. This number is reflected in the queries with zero (0) increase or decrease in terms. *About one in every three queries that is modified still had the same number of terms as the preceding one.* In the remaining 7,338 successive queries where terms were either added or subtracted about equal number had terms added as subtracted (52 to 48%) - thus users go both ways in increasing and decreasing number of terms in queries. *About one in five queries that is modified has one more term than the preceding one, and about one in six has one less term.*

### Viewing of Results

*Excite* displays query results in-groups of 10. Each time that a user accesses another group of 10, which we term another page, an identical query is generated. We analyzed the number of pages each user viewed and the percentage that this represented based on the total number of users. The results are shown in [Table 4](#).

Pages viewed	Number of users	Percent of all users	Pages viewed	Number of users	Percent of all users
1	10,474	58	21	3	0.02

Pages viewed	Number of users	Percent of all users	Pages viewed	Number of users	Percent of all users
2	3,363	19	22	4	0.02
3	1,563	9	23	5	0.03
4	896	5	24	7	0.04
5	530	3	25	4	0.02
6	354	2	26	7	0.04
7	252	1	27	2	0.01
8	153	0.85	28	3	0.02
9	109	0.60	29	1	0.01
10	85	0.47	32	4	0.02
11	75	0.41	33	1	0.01
12	47	0.26	40	1	0.01
13	31	0.17	43	1	0.01
14	29	0.16	49	1	0.01
15	25	0.14	50	2	0.01
16	28	0.15	55	1	0.01
17	13	0.07			
18	4	0.02			
19	14	0.08			
20	9	0.05			

**Table 4: Number of Pages Viewed Per User.**

The mean number of pages examined per user was 2.35. Most users, 58% of them, did not access any results past the first page. Were they so satisfied with the results that they did not need to view more? Were a few answers were good enough? Is the precision that high? Are the users after precision? Or did they just give up? Using only transaction logs, we cannot determine. But in any case, this result combined with the small number of queries per session, has interesting implications for recall and may illustrate a need for high precision in Web IR algorithms. For example, using a classical measurement of precision, any search result beyond the tenth position in the list would be meaningless for 58% of Web users. Another impact could be partially relevant documents. Given the hypertext nature of the Web, maybe partially relevant documents (Spink, Greisdorf, and Bateman 1998) in the top ten were used as a jumping off point to find a relevant one. For example, a user looking for a faculty member's homepage at a university does not retrieve the faculty's homepage in the top ten but gets the university homepage. Rather than continue search engine via the searching, the user starts browsing beginning with the university page.

## QUERIES

From the session level of analysis, we then moved to the query level. The basic statistics related to queries and search terms are given in [Table 5](#).

No. of users	Total no. of queries	Non-unique terms	Mean of terms Range	Unique terms with case sensitive	Unique terms without case sensitive
18,113	51,473	113,793	2.21 0-10	27,459	21,862

**Table 5: Numbers of users, queries, and terms.**

We analyzed queries based on length (i.e., number of terms), structure (use of Boolean operators and modifiers), and failure analysis (deviations from published rules of query construction). We also identified the number of users of Boolean and modifiers.

## Length

On the average, a query contained 2.21 terms. [Table 6](#) shows the ranking of all queries by number of terms. Percent is the percentage of queries containing that number of terms relative to the total number of queries. Web queries are short. About 62% of all queries were one or two terms. Less than 4% of the queries had more than 6 terms. As mentioned, we could not find any other data on Web searches from a major Web search engine, thus, the only

comparisons are with the two smaller studies by Croft, Cook, and Wilder (1995) and Jones, Cunningham, and McNab (1998). The query length is similar to results from these two studies. This deviates significantly from traditional IR searching. As we showed above, the mean number of search terms in searching of regular IR systems ranged from about 7 to 15. This is about three to seven magnitudes higher than found in this study, and our count is on the high side, because we counted operators as well. Admittedly, the circumstances and context between searches done by users of IR systems such as DIALOG and searches of the Web done by the general Internet population may be vastly different, thus this comparison may have little meaning. But still, it is interesting to make the comparison and indicates major differences in the characteristics of the user populations, which can have major impacts on system design.

### Relevance Feedback

A note should be made on queries with zero terms (last row of [Table 6](#)). As mentioned, when a user enters a command for relevance feedback (*More Like This*), the *Excite* transaction log counts that as a query, but a query with zero terms. Thus, the last row represents the potentially largest number of queries that used relevance feedback, or a combination of those and queries where user made some mistake that triggered this result. Assuming they were all relevance feedback, only 5% of queries used that feature – a small use of relevance feedback capability. In comparison, a study involving IR searches conducted by professional searchers as they interact with users found that some 11% of search terms came from relevance feedback (Spink and Saracevic, 1997), albeit this study looked at human initiated relevance feedback. Thus, the relevance feedback on the Web is used half as much as in traditional IR searches. This in itself warrants further study, particularly given the low use of this potentially highly useful and certainly highly vaunted feature.

Terms in query	Number of queries	Percent of all queries
10	185	0.36
9	125	0.24
8	224	0.44
7	484	0.94
6	617	1
5	2,158	4
4	3,789	7
3	9,242	18
2	16,191	31
1	15,854	31
0	2,584	5

**Table 6: Number of terms in queries. (N queries = 51,473).**

### Structure

Next, we examined the structure of queries, focusing first on how many of the 51,473 queries explicitly utilized Boolean operators or modifiers and present this in [Table 7](#). The Number column lists the number of queries that contained that particular Boolean operator or modifier. The next column is the percentage that number represents of all queries. Incorrect means the number of queries containing a specific operator or modifier that was constructed not following *Excite* rules – they could be considered as mistakes. The last column is the percentage of queries containing a given operator or modifier that were incorrectly constructed. We discuss the failures in a later section.

From [Table 7](#), at least one thing is obvious – Boolean operators were not used much, with AND being the predominate Boolean operator by far. Croft, Cook, and Wilder (1995) did not report this information. These numbers were significantly lower than those reported by Jones, Cunningham, and McNab (1998), and significantly lower than studies of searches from IR systems and OPAC systems. Modifiers were used a little more, with the ‘+’ and ‘”’ (i.e., phrase searching) being used the most. The implications of this are amazing. For example, based on what we reviewed so far in this paper, we have a large set of queries that are extremely short, seldom modified, and very simple in structure. Yet, the vast majority of users never viewed anything beyond the first 10 results. Is the recall and precision rate of *Excite* that good? Is something else at work here?

Operator or modifier	Number of queries	Percent of all queries	Incorrect	Percent incorrect
AND	4094	8	1,309	32
OR	177	0.34	46	26
AND NOT	105	0.20	39	37
( )	273	0.53	0	0
+ (plus)	3,010	6	1,182	39
- (minus)	1,766	3	1,678	95
“ ”	3,282	6	179	5

**Table 7: Use of Boolean operators and modifiers in queries (N queries = 51,473).**

### Number of Users

In [Table 8](#), we examine how many of the 18,113 users, opposed to the number of queries, used any Boolean logic (first four rows) or modifiers (last three rows) in their queries (regardless of how many queries they had). We relate these numbers to the number of queries. Incorrect means the number of users committing mistakes by not following *Excite* rules as stated in instructions for use of these operators and modifiers. Percent incorrect is proportion of those users using a given operator or modifier incorrectly or as a mistake.

Operator or modifier	Number of users using it	Percent of all users	Incorrect	Percent incorrect
AND	832	5	418	50
OR	39	0	11	28
AND NOT	47	0	9	19
( )	120	1	0	0
+ (plus)	826	5	303	30
- (minus)	508	3	362	38
“ ”	1,019	6	32	0

**Table 8: Use of logic and modifiers by users (N users = 18,113).**

The user population that incorporated Boolean operators was very small. Only 6% of the 18,113 users used any of the Boolean capabilities, and these were used in less than 10% of the 51,473 queries. A minuscule percentage of users and queries used OR or AND NOT. Only about 1% of users and ½% of queries used nested logic as expressed by a use of parentheses. The ‘+’ and ‘-’ modifiers were used by about the same number of people that used Boolean operators. Together ‘+’ and ‘-’ were used by 1,334 or 7% of users in 4,776 (9%) queries. The ability to create phrases (terms enclosed by quotation marks) was also seldom used – only 6% of users and 6% of queries used them. From this, it appears that a small number of users account for the occurrences of the more sophisticated queries, indicating that there is little experimentation by users during the session. About 5% of the users account for the 8.5% of queries that contained Boolean operators. We discuss the ramifications of this finding for system design later in the paper.

### Failure Analysis

Next, we turn to a discussion of the surprisingly high number of incorrect uses or mistakes. However, as will be seen, there are a number of judgment calls on what constitutes a mistake. When they used it, a whopping 50% of users made a mistake in use of the Boolean AND; 28% in uses of OR, and only 19% in uses of AND NOT, but only 47 users, a negligible percent, used AND NOT at all. The most common mistake was not capitalizing the Boolean operator, as required by the *Excite* search engine. For example, a correct query would be: information AND processing. The most common mistake would be: information and processing.

When we look at queries, 32% contained incorrect use of AND, 26% of OR, and 37% of AND NOT. ‘AND’ presents a special problem, so we did a further analysis. We had 4,094 queries that used AND in some form (as ‘AND,’ ‘And,’ and ‘and’). Some queries had more than one AND. Altogether, there were 4,828 appearances of all forms of AND: 3,067 as ‘AND’, 41 as ‘And,’ and 1,720 as ‘and.’ If considered as Boolean operators, the last two or 1,761 instances were mistakes. Most of them were, but not all. In a number of queries ‘and’ was used as

conjunction e.g. as in query *College and university harassment policy*. Unfortunately, we could not distinguish the intended use of 'and' as a conjunction from that as a mistake, thus our count of AND mistakes is on the high end.

There was a similarly high percentage of mistakes in the use of plus and minus operators – respectively 30% and 38%. Most of the time, spaces were used incorrectly. Minus presents an especially vexing problem, because it is also used in phrases such as *pre-teen*. Thus, our count of mistakes is at the high end. It is easy to see that Web users are not up to Boolean, and even less to follow searching rules. At the very least, system redesign seems to be in order. The most common mistake was stringing all the terms of the query together, as in a mathematical formula. For example, a correct query would be: +information +processing. The most common mistake would be: +information+processing. There were also many occurrences of leaving a space between the modifier and the term (e.g., + information + processing). Consistent spacing rules between Boolean operators and term modifier may solve this problem. In the use of Boolean operator, a space between the operator and the term is required. With the use of term modifiers, the space must not be there.

There were also a high number of queries that incorporated searching techniques, which Excite does not support. These failures can be classified as carry over from other search engines, including those from other Web, OPAC, and IR systems. For example, there were 26 occurrences of the proximity operator NEAR. There were 79 uses of the ':' as a separator for terms. There were numerous occurrences of '.' used as a term separator. The symbol '&' was used in-lieu of the Boolean AND over 200 times. These symbols are common in many other search engines.

## TERMS

We then separate the queries into terms. A term was any series of characters bounded by white space. There were 113,793 terms (all terms from all queries). After eliminating duplicate terms, there were 21,862 unique terms that were non-case sensitive (in other words, all upper cases are here reduced to lower case). In this distribution logical operators AND, OR, NOT were also treated as terms, because they were used not only as operators but also as conjunctions. We discussed already the case of 'and.' and presented the figures for various forms of the term, thus subtraction can be easily done. We discuss terms from the perspective of their occurrence, their fit with known distributions, and classification into some broader subject headings.

## Occurrences

We constructed a complete rank-frequency table for all 113,793 terms. Out of the complete rank-frequency-table we took the top used terms i.e. those that appeared 100 times or more, as presented in [Table 9](#).

Term	Frequency	Term	Frequency	Term	Frequency
and (incl. 'AND', & 'And')	4828	&	188	estate	123
Of	1266	stories	186	magazine	123
The	791	p****	182	computer	122
Sex	763	college	180	news	121
Nude	647	naked	180	texas	119
Free	610	adult	179	games	118
In	593	state	176	war	117
Pictures	457	big	170	john	115
For	340	basketball	166	de	113
New	334	men	163	internet	111
+	330	employment	157	car	110
University	291	school	156	wrestling	110
Women	262	jobs	155	high	109
Chat	256	american	153	company	108
On	252	real	153	florida	108
Gay	234	world	152	business	107
Girls	223	black	150	service	106
Xxx	222	porn	147	video	105

Term	Frequency	Term	Frequency	Term	Frequency
To	218	photos	142	anal	104
Or	213	york	140	erotic	104
Music	209	A	132	stock	102
Software	204	Young	132	art	101
Pics	202	History	131	city	100
Ncaa	201	Page	131	porno	100
Home	196	Celebrities	129		

**Table 9: Listing of Terms Occurring More Than 100 Times (\*\*\*\* = expletive).**

The 74 terms that were used 100 or more times in all queries had a frequency of 20,698 appearances as search terms in all queries. They represent 0.34 % of all unique terms, yet they account for 18.2 % of all 113,776 search terms in all queries. If we delete the 11 common terms that do not carry any content by themselves (*and, of, the, in, for, +, on, to, or, & a*) that altogether had 9,121 occurrences, we are left with 63 subject terms that have a frequency of 11,577 occurrences – that is 0.29% of unique subject terms account for 10.3% of all terms in all queries. Interestingly, the high appearance of ‘+’ represents also a probable mistake – the inclusion of space between the sign and a term, as required by *Excite* rules. Similarly, ‘&’ was used often as a part of an abbreviation, such as in *AT&T*, but also as a substitute for logical AND, as in *ontario & map*. In the latter case, it is a mistake and would appear as a separate term.

On the other end of the distribution we have 9,790 terms that appeared only once. These terms with frequency of one amounted to 44.78% of all unique terms and 8.6% of all terms in all queries. The tail end of unique terms is very long and warrants in itself a linguistic investigation. In fact, the whole area of query language needs further investigation. There are no comprehension studies of what terms, the distribution of those terms, the modification of those terms, etc. of Web queries. The potential benefit to IR system developers, Web site designers, could be immense.

### Term Categories

In order to ascertain some broad subjects of searching, we classified the 63 top subject terms into a set of common themes. Admittedly, such a classification is arbitrary and each reader can use his/her own criteria. Still a rough picture emerges. These subjects are displayed in [Table 10](#).

Category	Terms selected from 63 terms with frequency of 100 and higher	Frequency for category	Percent of freq. -63 terms	Percent of all terms
Sexual	<i>sex, nude, gay, xxx, pussy, naked, adult, porn, anal, erotic, porno</i>	2862	24.72	2.51
Modifiers	<i>free, new, big, real, black, young, de, high, page</i>	1902	16.42	1.67
Place	<i>state, american, home, world, york, texas, florida, city</i>	1144	9.88	1.01
Economic	<i>employment, jobs, company, business, service, stock, estate, car</i>	968	8.36	0.85
Pictures	<i>pictures, pics, photos, video</i>	906	7.82	0.80
Social	<i>chat, stories, celebrities, games, john</i>	804	6.94	0.71
Education	<i>university, college, school, history</i>	758	6.54	0.67
Gender	<i>women, girls, men</i>	648	5.59	0.60
Sports	<i>ncaa, basketball, wrestling</i>	477	4.12	0.42
Computing	<i>software, computer, internet</i>	437	3.77	0.38
News	<i>magazine, news, war</i>	361	3.12	0.32
Art	<i>music, art</i>	310	2.68	0.72

**Table 10: Subject categories for terms appearing more than 100 times.**

A lot of terms, about 25% of highest used terms, dealt with some or other sexual topic, however, that represents less than 3% of all terms. Of course, if one classifies some more terms further down the distribution in the category *Sexual* the percent will be higher. We perused the rest of the terms and came to the conclusion that no more than some two dozen of other terms will unmistakably fall in that category. If we added them all together the frequency of terms in *Sexual* will increase but not that much, and particularly not in relation to thousands of terms in other categories that are widely spread across all frequencies. In other words, *as to frequency of appearance of terms among the 63 highest frequency terms those in category Sexual have highest frequency of all categories, but still three out of every four terms of 63 highest frequency terms are not sexual; if extended to the frequency of use of all terms we estimate that 39 out of 40 of all terms used are not sexual.*

While the category *Sexual* is certainly big, in comparison to all other categories in no way does it dominate searching. We cannot say that if we categorized the frequency of appearance of all the unique terms that category *Sexual* will even remain the highest category. Considering the sheer huge size of remaining terms, it probably will not. Interest in other categories is high. Of the 63 highest terms, 16% are modifiers (*free, new, big...*), 10% deal with places (*state, american ...*), 8% with economics (*employment, jobs ...*), and the rest with social activities, education, sports, computing, and arts. In other words, Web searching does cover a gamut of human interests. It is very diverse. In light of this, the stereotypical view of the Web user searching primarily for sexual information may not be valid.

There are two other groupings not listed in the table that should be noted. First, there were 1,398 queries for various uniform resource locators (URL). Although, no one URL made the top of the list, if lumped together as a category, it was one of, if not, the largest. The second group was searching for multimedia documents (e.g., images, videos, and audio files). There were 708 queries for these multimedia files, with many of the terms looking for specific formats.

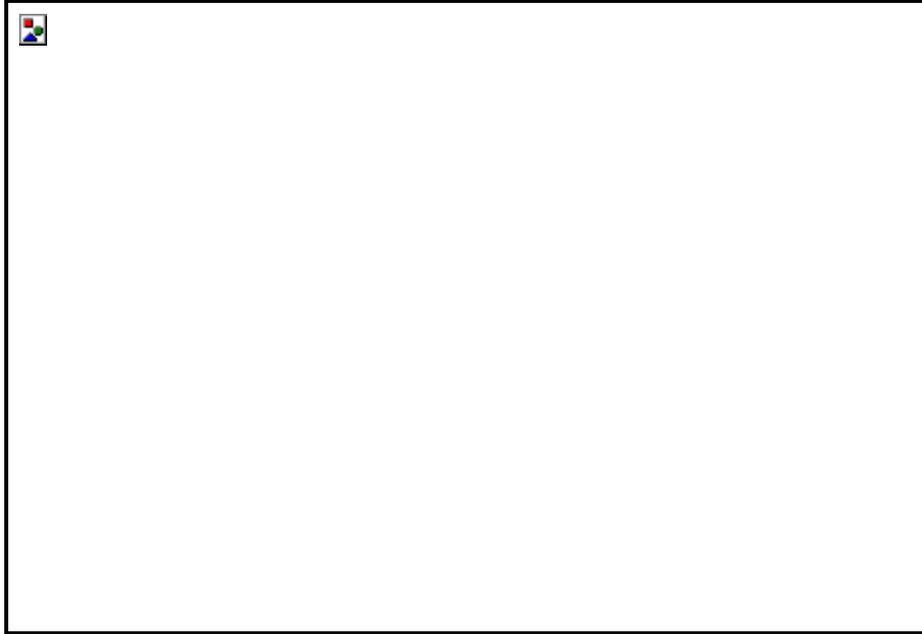
### **Distribution of Terms**

We constructed a graph of rank – frequency distribution of all terms. This graph is shown in [Figure 1](#). The resulting distribution seems to be unbalanced at ends of the graph, the high and low ranking terms. In the center and lower regions, the graph follows the traditional slope of a Zipf distribution representing the distribution of words in long English texts. At the beginning, it falls off very gently, and toward the end it shows discontinuities and an unusually long tail, representing terms with frequency of one. A trend line is plotted on the figure with the corresponding equation. The trend line is approximately that of the Zipf distribution. A proper Zipf distribution would be a straight line with slope of  $-1$ . The trend line does not plot well for the higher frequency terms due to the large number of terms occurring only once or twice. This may have an impact of the providers of information for Web search engines.



**Figure 1: Rank vs. Frequency (log) of All Terms.**

We wondered if the number of modifiers (e.g., '+', '-', ',', etc.) and the number of queries with all terms strung together (e.g., +information+processing+journal) could be affecting the rank – frequency distribution. That is, the number of modifiers, stray characters, and run-on terms, were creating such a long tail of single occurrence terms. Therefore, we decided to clean all terms and re-plot the rank – frequency graph. By cleaning terms, we removed all modifiers and separated all terms that were obviously strung together. Due to varying nature of the terms, this could not be done automatically. For example, one could not just remove all '+' from all terms because with c++ , that is the programming language, the '+' is not a modifier but rather part of a valid term. In the cleaning process, all 113,793 terms were qualitatively examined. In most cases, a decision would clearly be made on whether or not to clean the term. In cases where there was doubt, the term was not modified. Once clean, we again generated a rank – frequency (log) plot. This rank – frequency plot is shown in [Figure 2](#).

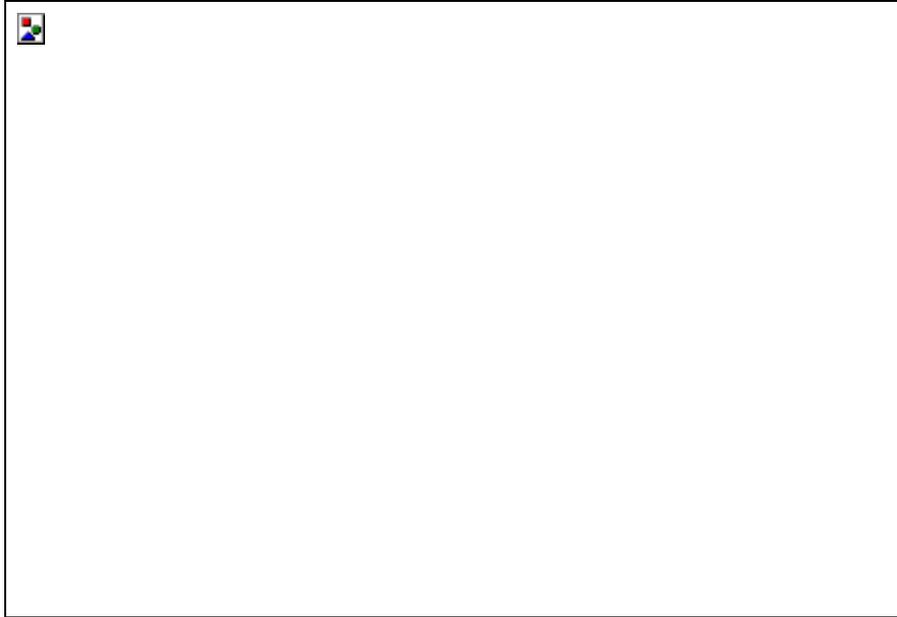


**Figure 2: Rank (Log) vs. Frequency (Log) of Cleaned Terms.**

Overall, the graph exhibits the same characteristics as before, a few terms off the scale, a fairly broad middle, ending with of several plateaus and a long tail of terms used only one time. The only noticeable change is in the length of the plateaus, some are shorter and some are longer. The trend line again is approximately that of the Zipf distribution, with only a slight increase in slope. Again, the tails of the graph no way resembles a Zipf distribution. This has implications for Web search engines and Web site designers and warrants further study of the ends of the rank – frequency distribution. Also, for researchers, this shows that there is little benefit in expending the energy to clean terms, as the change in the distribution is slight. A comparison of the original and the cleaned data appears in [Table 11](#). [Figure 3](#) is the original and cleaned rank – frequency (log) plots overlaid along with the trend lines.

<b>Measure</b>	<b>Original</b>	<b>Cleaned</b>	<b>Percent Change</b>
Total Terms	113,793	117,608	3.35
Unique Terms	21,862	18,942	-13.36
Terms Occurring Once	9,790	7,805	-20.28
Terms Occurring 100 Times or More	73	91	24.66

**Table 11 : Comparison of Original and Cleaned Terms.**



**Figure 3 : Rank (Log) - Frequency (log) Plots of Original and Cleaned Terms.**

### SUMMARY

The analysis involved 51,473 queries from 18,113 users, having all together 113,776 terms, of which 21,862 were unique terms disregarding capitalization. We provide the highlights of our findings:

- The most users did not have many queries per search. The mean number of queries per user was 2.8. However, a sizable percentage of users did go on to either modify their original query or view subsequent results.
- Web queries are short. On the average, a query contained 2.21 terms. Queries in searching of regular IR systems are some three to seven magnitudes larger. About one in three queries had one term only, two in three had one or two terms, and four in five had one, two or three terms. Less than 4% of the queries were more than 6 terms.
- Relevance feedback was not used that much. About one in 20 queries used the feature *More Like This*. In comparison with professionally assisted IR searching, relevance feedback is used half as much on the Web.
- Boolean operators were not frequently used. One in 18 users used any Boolean capabilities, and of those users that used them, every second user made a mistake, as defined by *Excite* rules. As to the queries, about one in 12 queries contained a Boolean operator, and in those AND was used by far the most. About one in 190 queries used nested logic. About one in every three queries that used Boolean operators or a parentheses was not entered as required by *Excite*. Web searchers are reluctant to use Boolean searches and when using they have great difficulty in getting them right
- The '+' and '-' modifiers that specify a must for presence or absence of a term were used more than Boolean operators. About 1 in 12 users used them. About one in 11 queries incorporated a '+' or '-' modifier. But a majority of uses were mistakes: about two out of three uses of these operators were incorrect. The ability to create phrases (terms enclosed by quotation marks) was seldom used – about one in 16 queries contained a phrase, but mistakes were negligible.
- Most users searched one query only and did not follow with successive queries. The average session, ignoring identical queries, was 1.6. About two in three users had a single query, and 6 in 7 did not go beyond two queries.
- On the average, users viewed 2.35 pages. Over half of users did not access result beyond the first page. More than three in four users did not go beyond viewing two pages
- The distribution of the frequency of use of terms in queries was highly skewed. A few terms were used repeatedly and a lot of terms were used only once. On the top of the list, the 63 subject terms that had a frequency of appearance of 100 or more, represented only one third of one percent of all terms, but they

accounted for about one of every 10 terms used in all queries. Terms that appeared only once amounted to a half of unique terms.

- There is a lot of searching about sex on the Web, but all together it represents only a small proportion of all searches. When the top frequency terms are classified as to subject the top category is *Sexual*. As to the frequency of appearance, about one in every four terms in the list of 63 highest used terms can be classified as sexual in nature. But while sexual terms are high as a category, they still represent a very small proportion of all terms. A great many other subjects are searched, and the diversity of subjects searched is very high.

## CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

We investigated a large sample of searches on the Web, represented by logs of queries from *Excite*, a major Web search provider. However, we consider this study just as a beginning. We have begun the analysis of a new sample of over 1 million queries. We will compare the results from this study with those of the larger study to isolate similarities and/or differences. In this larger study, we will address many of the research questions raised in this paper.

While Web search engines follow the basic principles of IR, Web search users seem to differ significantly from users of traditional IR systems, such as those represented by users of DIALOG or assumed (and highly artificial) users of TREC. It is still IR, but a very different IR. Web users are certainly not comfortable with Boolean operators and other advanced means of searching. They certainly do not frequently browse the results, beyond the first page or so. These facts in themselves emphasize the need to approach design of Web IR systems, search engines, and even Web site design in a significantly different way than the design of IR systems document preparation as practiced to date. They also point to the need for further and in-depth study of Web users. For instance:

- The low use of advanced searching techniques would seem to support the continued research into new types of user interfaces, intelligent user interfaces, or the use of software agents to aid users in a much simplified and transparent manner.
- The impact of large number of unique terms on key term lists, thesauri, association methods, and latent semantic indexing deserves further investigation – the present methods are not attuned to the richness in the spread of terms.
- The area of relevance feedback also desires further investigation. Among others, the question of actual low use of this feature should be addressed in contrast to assumptions about high usefulness of this in IR research. If users use it so little, what is the impetus for testing, such as in TREC, on relevance feedback in the present form? This is one of the examples where users are voting with their fingers, and research is going the other way?
- In itself, the work on investigation and classification of a large number of highly diverse queries presents a theoretical and methodological challenge. The impact of producing a more refined classification may be reflected in making browsing easier for users and precision possibly higher – both highly desirable features. Also, research into the language of Web queries would be of benefit to producers of information and data for Web users.

To end with a general question. Certainly, the Web is a marvelous new technology. The fact that the authors of this paper met and collaborated via the Web is an indication of the Web potential impact. People have always been unpredictable in how they will use any new technology. The impact that new technology has on existing systems is also unpredictable. It seems that this is the case with the Web as well. In the end, it all comes down to the users and the uses people make of the Web. Maybe they are searching the Web in ways that designers and IR researchers have not contemplated or assumed, as yet. Aren't they? With further, we will see.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Graham Spencer, Doug, Cutting, Amy Smith and Catherine Yip of Excite, Inc. in providing the data and information for this research. Without the generous sharing of data by Excite Inc. this research would not be possible. We also acknowledge the generous support of our institutions for this research.

## REFERENCES

Abdulla, G., Fox E.A., & Abrams, M. (1997). Shared User Behavior on the World Wide Web. *Proceedings of the WebNet'97*, 54-59.

- Bates, M.J., Wilde, D. N. and Siegfried, S. (1993) An analysis of search terminology used by humanities scholars: The Getty online searching project report. *Library Quarterly*, 63 (1), 1-39.
- Croft, W. Bruce, Robert Cook, and Dean Wilder. (1995) Providing Government Information on the Internet: Experiences with THOMAS. Proceedings of Digital Libraries '95 Conference, 19-24.
- Crovella, M. E. & Bestavros, A. (1996). Self-similarity in World Wide Web traffic evidence and possible causes. *Proceedings of ACM SIGMETRICS*, 126-137.
- Fenichel, C. H. (1981). Online searching: Measures that discriminate among users with different types of experience. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science*, 32, 23-32.
- FIND/SVP (1997) *The 1997 American Internet User Survey*. <http://www.cyberdialogue.com/isg/internet>
- Hsieh-ye, I. (1993). Effects of search experience and subject knowledge on the search tactics of novice and experienced searchers. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science*, 44(3), 161-174
- Huberman, B. A., Pirolli, P, Pitkow, J.E, & Lukose, R.M. (1998) Strong regularities in World Wide Web surfing. *Science*, 280 (5360), 95-97.
- Jansen, Bernard J., Amanda Spink, Judi Bateman, and Tefko Saracevic. (in press) Searchers, the Subjects They Search, and Sufficiency: A Study of a Large Sample of Excite Searches. To be published in *Proceedings of WebNet 98 Conference*.
- Jansen, Bernard J., Amanda Spink, Judi Bateman, and Tefko Saracevic. (1998) Real life information retrieval: a study of user queries on the Web. *SIGIR Forum*, vol. 32, no. 1, pp. 5-17
- Jansen, Bernard J., Amanda Spink, and Tefko Saracevic. (1998) Failure Analysis in Query Construction: Data and Analysis from a Large Sample of Web Queries. *Proceedings of the Third ACM Conference on Digital Libraries*. 289-290.
- Jones, Steve, Sally Jo. Cunningham, and Rodger McNab. (1998) Usage Analysis of a Digital Library. Proceedings of the Third ACM Conference on Digital Libraries. 293-294.
- Kehoe, C., Pitkow, J., & Morton, K. (1997). *GVU's 8<sup>th</sup> WWW user survey*. Atlanta, GA: Graphic, Visualization, and Usability Center, Georgia Tech Research Center. [Http://www.gvu.gatech.edu/user\\_surveys](http://www.gvu.gatech.edu/user_surveys)
- Lawrence, S. and Giles, C.L. (1998). Searching the World Wide Web. *Science*, 280 (5360), 98-100.
- Lynch, C. (1997). Searching the Internet. *Scientific American*, 276. .50-56.
- Peters, Thomas A. (1993) The History and Development of Transaction Log Analysis. *Library Hi Tech*. 42: 11:2 (1993) 41-66.
- Saracevic, T. (1997). Users lost: Reflections on the past, future, and limits of information science. *SIGIR Forum*, 31 (2) 16-27.
- Spink, Amanda, Judi Bateman, and Bernard J. Jansen (in press) User' Searching Behavior on the Excite Web Search Engine. To be published in *Proceedings of WebNet 98 Conference*.
- Spink, Amanda, H. Greisdorf, and Judi Batemaa (in press) From Highly Relevant to Not Relevant: Examining the Different Regions of Relevance. Information, Processing and Management.
- Spink, A. & Saracevic, T. (1997). Interactive information retrieval: Sources and effectiveness of search terms during mediated online searching. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science*, 48<sub>2</sub> (8), 741-761.