

Surfing the Web

Searching for Puerto Rico in the World Wide Web

BY MARIA BIRD PICO Special to The STAR

What happens if one of the 445.9 million members of the Internet population decides to conduct a World Wide Web search on Puerto Rico? They would be exposed to a diverse number of specks on the Caribbean island depending on the search language and search engine.

One thing is certain: U.S. government foes would get suspicious once they realize that, in at least two major search engines, the Web site of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) shows up among the first with Puerto Rico-related information, even topping the search results of askjeeves.com. But there is no reason to panic. Rather than any top secret data on the U.S. possession, the Web site takes the searcher to its World Factbook, a widely used reference tool on all countries.

Last Monday, though, one of the first Puerto Rico search results on Google, the largest and most used Web search engine, was a news item published by Iran's Tehran Times about the U.S. Navy jet wreckage off Vieques. The item was no where in sight when The STAR checked again two days later. (Search results vary every second.)

Finding out the most relevant information on a certain subject is tricky because most search engines rank the query findings by how often the keywords appear in a Web site. In addition, some engines allow advertisers to pay to be among the first search findings when specific keywords are used.

This summer, the Federal Trade Commission urged search engines to adopt the agency's recommendations of making clear to users whenever advertisers get preferential treatment during a search. The FTC stepped in following last year's complaints from Commercial Alert, a Ralph Nader-backed consumer watchdog group, about ad-driven search results on the Internet.

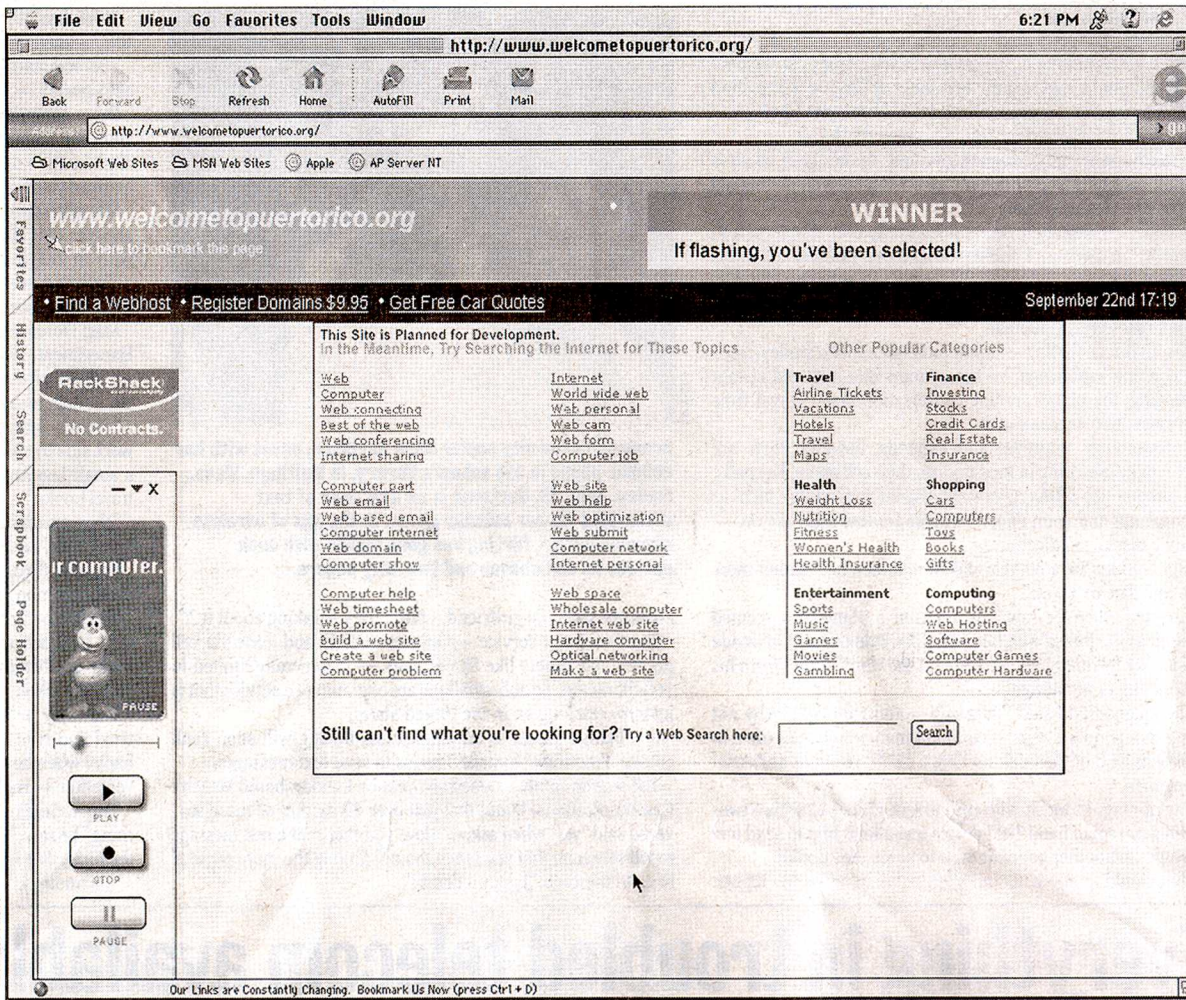
Google is considered to be the fastest and most reliable search engine thanks to its practice of clearly identifying advertisers and patented technology for quick access to its index of two billion web pages. Google's search engine is programmed to conduct simultaneous calculations to choose the most relevant information, which includes assessing a Web page's importance by the vote (in the form of links) it receives from important Web pages.

During the STAR search, it took Google 38 seconds to dig out 2.98 million items on Puerto Rico.

The first one was Expedia, an online travel agency that Google makes clear is a "sponsored link" (advertiser). Although the hit summary reads "save on Puerto Rico vacations at Expedia," Puerto Rico is nowhere in sight once the page is accessed. The surfer would have to choose a Caribbean vacation destination. (A Bahamas tourism package is offered as a "sampler.")

Leaving Expedia out, Google delivered a Tennis Magazine news item, featured on ESPN's Web site, on playing tennis in Puerto Rico.

The Puerto Rico-exclusive site that topped almost all searches was welcometopuertorico.org, a general information Web site, devel-



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oped by Magaly Rivera, a native of Puerto Rico who resides on the U.S. mainland. In Google, this not-for-profit site is followed by the Web site of the University of Puerto Rico and the CIA.

Google surfers asking for information on "Puerto Rico tourism" had the option of accessing the Puerto Rico Tourism Co. official site (gotopuertorico.com,) which placed third after Expedia and escapetopuertorico.com.

Yahoo searchers would get a more cultural taste of the island. During last Wednesday's STAR query, the first of 230 Web site matches was the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History (amERICANhistory.si.edu.) Puerto Rico is mentioned because the museum features Teodoro Vidal's 3,200-plus artifact collection that documents the island's history since the 1700s. The online Puerto Rico Magazine (prmag.com) ranked third, right after the UPR. A Puerto Rico tourism site, escapetopuertorico.org, finally showed up next.

English vs. Spanish

After conducting Web searches in Spanish and English, it becomes obvious that English-language content on Puerto Rico predominates, at least in the indexes of the major search engines.

Altavista's English-language option, for instance, displayed 760,999 results, while the Spanish yield was only 74,590. And the results are very disparate. The English search delivered the welcometopuertorico.org Web site on the top slot, followed by Juris International (jurisint.org.) "an international trade law database" that features the Puerto Rico Bar Association.

Use the language of Miguel de Cervantes and the results are different: the UPR web site ranked first. But in the Spanish version of Yahoo, the P.R. Children's Museum topped results, followed by La Tertulia, a Rio Piedras bookstore, Celpage and Motorola de Puerto Rico. The Alianza de Padres no Custodios de Puerto Rico has a strong voice, showing up as the seventh item on this particular search engine.

How do the keywords Puerto Rico fare when the Yahoo search is conducted in Japanese? The first of 1,625 Japanese items on Puerto Rico is a Web site selling board games (thegamegallery.net.) Amid all the Japanese characters we could spot the name of San Juan in a board game titled Puerto Rico.

That welcometopuertorico.org tops the search results of another search engine, Lycos, does not come as a surprise. But the No. 2 slot is occupied by a newcomer, at least when com-

pared to the findings of other search engines: the Employers Mutual Association of Puerto Rico (emplotmut.com,) a company that conducts background checks for job applicants and prospective tenants. Continue surfing on Lycos and the next stop is the UPR's Department of Pharmacology and Toxicology.

Top search results for business

What if international businessmen want to find out about Puerto Rico as a prospective investment site? If the World Wide Web surfers are unwilling to go further down the search results until spotting an official Commonwealth Web site, they would need to try different keywords to further explore the subject.

In most search engines keywords like "investing in Puerto Rico" and "Puerto Rico industrial benefits" delivered mostly old and short news stories about a particular manufacturer. The use of the keywords "Puerto Rico business" fared better, at least in Lycos where the top result was the Web site of one of Puerto Rico's main manufacturers: Bacardi Corp. Next in line were Kings Uniform and Industrial Laundry and the online store, Antojitos.com. Google, on the other hand, displayed the Puerto Rican Federal Affairs Administration Web site, a good starting point.