Internet Resources on Aging: Ten Top Web Sites

Joyce A. Post, MSLS
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You can now go to well over 800 different sites on the Internet devoted exclusively to aging. Almost 96% of these are World Wide Web (WWW) sites. Four percent are e-mail discussion groups, also known as listservs, their original name. The remainder are forums and chat rooms within the commercial online services (America Online, CompuServe, etc.) and the freenets, USENET newsgroups, and bulletin board systems (BBS).

There are now so many sites that it is becoming increasingly difficult to keep up with them and to know which ones are worth finding and returning to. Which ones are the best? What are the characteristics of a good site?

Objective standards do exist for reviewing and rating Web sites (Collins, 1996). These go beyond whatever criteria the “Magellan” type Web reviewing sources use, which Collins says seem to be based largely on the concept of “cool.” Things to consider are:

• Content: Is it unique as well as accurate? Does it have substance and depth; is it rich? Is it practical and reliable? Is it current? Is it updated regularly?
• Authority: What is the credibility of the person or organization providing the site? What expertise do they bring to it?
• Organization: Does it take more than three successive choices at a site to get to something useful or interesting? Is the way a site is organized easily grasped? Is it broken down into logical and digestible parts?
• Graphics: Is there a sense of style and color coordination? Is the page layout easy to follow? Is the arrangement of the links uncluttered? Is the text legible? Is the background unobtrusive?
• Accessibility: Is the site available on a consistent basis? Are dead-end links few in number?
• Search Engine: If one is present, are there clear instructions for using it? Are the results of a search well formatted and easily understood, and are they ranked by relevancy?
• Use of Unique Internet Features: Are there interactive e-mail connections? If there is animated content does it serve a purpose?

With the above criteria in mind, I have selected ten top aging sites. The choices were difficult and are described below in no particular order. Some were chosen because of their comprehensiveness, others because of the way they present their information, and others because they are the only site that pulls together a specific type of information. The information given below is current at the time of this writing; it may have changed by the time this is published.

Maine Bureau of Elder and Adult Services (http://www.state.me.us/beas/dhs_beas.htm)

This is the State Agency on Aging (SAA) in Maine. It was the first SAA to have a home page and is still one of the best. When you connect to this site you are presented with a well designed (in frames-based format), colorful, and largely intuitive home page. It had been updated on the day I connected to it.

There are 15 boxes of specific types of information to select. The “Resource Directory” is probably the most useful box. Within it are 46 different topics to select, ranging from “Adult Day Care” to “Volunteer Opportunities.” When I selected “Adult Day Care,” I received a town-by-town list of facilities offering this service. A final third selection at any town gives contact information for contacting that AAA.

The “Area Agencies on Aging” (AAA) topic in the “Resource Directory” lists the five AAAs in Maine and provides direct links to the two AAAs that have their own home pages. Since Maine has only five AAAs, a map showing their locations is perhaps not necessary. Many of the larger state SAAs use maps and Nebraska’s SAA home page, called “Nebraska AgeLink” (http://age1.ndoa.state.ne.us), for example, provides a good map showing the precise location of each of their AAAs with a direct link from each map location to information for contacting that AAA.

1This is the sixth in a series of columns on the Internet by Joyce A. Post, Librarian at the Philadelphia Geriatric Center, 5301 Old York Road, Philadelphia, PA 19141. E-mail: post@hsc.org

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There is a link from the “Resource Directory” box to download the entire Maine “Resource Directory” as a Microsoft Word document.

Other types of information are found by selecting other boxes from the Maine SAA home page. Legislative updates for Maine are available. A few of the other SAAs include Federal Register information as well. (See the Michigan SAA home page at: http://mass.igw.wayne.edu). Information about RFPs and RFIs and other funding and demonstration opportunities, an organization chart of the Maine SAA, and links to other WWW sites are available by selecting the obvious box.

The “Reports” box has a detailed monthly tabular breakdown of the number and types of services provided by the SAA. Demographic statistical information at “A Profile of the Older Population in Maine” is also available, but there are no obvious choices to select to find it. It is buried in the “Overview” box and then under “Statistics.”

There are two opportunities to interact with this site by e-mail. One is through a “Request for Information” form and the other is through the “Elder BBS” where people can post messages about the elderly population in Maine.


This is the most current and comprehensive directory of all Internet sites on aging and its related topics. The compiler, Bruce Craig at the United States Administration on Aging (AOA), states that it includes, at this writing, over 1,000 resources. All of them are hot-linked. The Directory is updated weekly, and keeping a list of this size updated this frequently is a Herculean task.

The Directory was first compiled in May 1995 and at that time was a listing of some federal agencies, the state and area agencies on aging, and the local service providers administered by the AOA, a division of the United States Department of Health and Human Services, that had home pages. This group of federally supported federal/state/local aging agencies and service providers is known as the “Aging Network” (AN). (Go to the Mid-Florida Area Agency on Aging home page at http://www.mfaaa.org for a good overview and an organization chart of the AN. This site is also an example of an excellent Area Agency on Aging home page). Craig’s Directory’s very comprehensive and up-to-the-minute coverage of the home pages of AN organizations is its greatest strength.

The need for this Directory to be true to its supporting agency leads to some difficulties for the user because of the way it is organized. All of the AN sites are kept together and are listed in the first major section of the Directory. But the Directory has expanded well beyond its original AN emphasis and now includes extensive listings of other types of aging resources such as academic institutions offering gerontology programs, international sites, and sites devoted to 27 (at this writing) other related topics such as: Alzheimer’s disease, long-term care insurance, wellness, elder abuse, libraries and databases, etc. All these other types of resources are listed after the AN section.

The problem for the user comes when a specific type of service, adult day care centers for example, end up being listed in two different places. Those supported by the AN are listed in that section and those sponsored by other types of organizations are listed after that in the other sections. To continue with the above example, adult day care centers at medical centers are listed after the AN section in the adult day care section. Internal cross-references and indexes are provided to help with this problem, but that means an additional step for the user. The user really wants, perhaps, to be able to go to a single list of all the types of aging services available in a geographic area.

At this writing, the AOA host computer is limited technically and their home pages cannot be designed to take advantage of interactive graphic images or boxes. This site’s excellence comes from its very comprehensive content rather than its internal organization or its use of graphic images as links.

GoldenAge.Net (http://elo.mediasrv.swt.edu/goldenage/script.htm)

This site is included here because it is the best place for links related to the long-term care industry. There are many sites devoted to aging services, caregiving, and consumer information on aging, but until Donna McCafferty created this page in October 1995 as her Honors Thesis Project at Southwest Texas State University, there wasn’t a good place that brought together links dealing with the administrative aspects of long-term care.

There is some animation: a running line across the bottom of the home page and a fascinating rocking chair and its shadow that mirror each other perfectly. Whenever the name “GoldenAge.Net” appears, it is in a very bright yellow that was almost illegible to this writer. The user quickly determines that this yellow text is simply the name of the home page and that it isn’t too crucial if it cannot be read; however, it is still annoying. The last time this site was updated was two and a half months prior to the time this writer looked at it.

The home page begins with lists of retirement communities, assisted living and long-term care facilities with home pages, but these lists are incomplete and should not be viewed as comprehensive.

The best links here are to the home pages for such corporations as Del Webb and the Sun Healthcare Group, the developers of software for managing long-term care facilities, the academic institutions that offer programs in long-term care administration, consultants in long-term care, and long-term care commercial and marketing sites. One would like to see the compiler concentrate on being comprehensive in these areas.

Two links from this home page deserve special mention. The first, “LTC Today” (http://www.
longtermcaredotcom), is a news service for the industry. New general, legislative, and regulatory news summaries are posted each week. This is one of the few places this type of information can be found on the Web. Users, however, should not rely on this site alone to stay well informed and up-to-date, since it is composed largely of news releases from PR Newswire. This is a case where the printed news magazines like “McKnights Long-Term Care News” and “Contemporary Long Term Care” are still the best sources for industry news even though they are issued monthly rather than weekly. The design of this home page is very easy on the eye and there is an archive of previous summaries.

The second link is to “Seniors on the Net: Home pages of Cyber Citizens that Rock” (http://elo.mediasrv.swt.edu/goldenage/seniors.htm), also compiled by Donna McCafferty. The moving rocking chair is here. This site could also be considered a top site since it is the only place that pulls together the personal home pages of seniors. A more complete discussion of this site will be found in the Internet column of the October 1996 issue of The Gerontologist (Post, 1996).

The ALZHEIMER Page (http://www.biostat.wustl.edu/ALZHEIMER)

This site is supported by a National Institute on Aging grant and is sponsored by the Washington University Alzheimer’s Disease Research Center in St. Louis, Missouri. It is one of the earliest sites on the Internet devoted to Alzheimer’s disease and includes hot links to nearly 100 other sites devoted to Alzheimer’s disease and dementia.

The site began in the Spring of 1994 as the ALZHEIMER e-mail discussion group. This is still an excellent resource for those caring for people with this disease. Postings range all the way from caregivers who pour out their daily feelings and frustrations and empathetic responses to them from other subscribers, to substantive, authoritative information from the professionals on the list. The discussion group averages about 15 messages a day.

All of the messages back to May 1994 have been archived into a browsable, searchable file that is a real treasure trove of information. You can search by concept (I entered “wandering around at twilight”) or key word (I entered “sundowning”) and, in this example, the search engine retrieved many messages that were quite substantive. There was little duplication in the messages retrieved with the two ways I entered my request.

Links to other Alzheimer’s disease sites are found in the “Aging & Dementia Web Resources” section of this home page. There are over 30 caregiver links; the section on “Clinical Care Guides” includes a link to the Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center document on “Screening for Dementia.” The “Research Discussions and Opportunities” section includes a link to “The Nun Study,” and the “Commercial Products and Services” section has links to about 15 books, publishers, videos, etc., including one on “Video Respite.” There are also links to 17 personal home pages. The “Miscellaneous” section includes a link to an Alzheimer’s disease site in Italy that itself has over 100 links. And there is a link to the home page of an organized “Alzheimer’s Disease Search and Rescue” service in Virginia that looks for people with this disease who have disappeared. This site includes, among other things, cumulated, detailed statistics of the 42 searches performed by this service that would satisfy any serious researcher.

Eldercare Web (http://www.ice.net/~kstevens/ELDERWEB.HTM)

This site includes links to more than 100 resources arranged in nine major sections. It is maintained by Karen Stevenson Brown, a CPA. You can connect directly to her by e-mail and you can link to her home page. The site was updated 15 days before I last looked at it. It is almost always included in lists of top sites on aging.

You can spend a lot of time here, getting quickly mired in pursuing successive links, and perhaps not finding what you really want. This is particularly frustrating in the “Health Care” section, to which a typical user might turn to look for something about a specific disease or medical problem. Looking for a document to read on menopause, for example, illustrates the difficulty. There is no disease or problem listing under “Health Care”; instead there are links to other health-related sites.

Choosing the “MedWeb” link connects the user to that site in general, but unless he or she takes the time to explore it further, they will not discover that there is a specific “MedWeb: Geriatrics” home page (http://www.gen.emory.edu/MEDWEB/keyword/Geriatrics.html) where there is a list of specific diseases/problems. Again, menopause is not listed, but there is a “Gynecology and women’s health” section with two links, one of which is “MedAccess. Who? What? Where?: Resources for Women’s Health & Aging.” Here, finally, the user finds menopause on a list, but selecting it provides only five paragraphs of text and a list of organizations and publications.

After all this, the user has still found relatively little and may abandon the effort as a good example of the argument that it is hard to find anything of much use on the Internet. Hopefully, instead, he or she would turn to the Magellan search engine provided near the bottom of the “Eldercare Web” home page. Entering “menopause” in the “enter query” box retrieves over 700 resources, many of which are substantial, factual, authoritative documents that are easily identified.

There are some other problems with using this site. Some actual documents will be found right away, but often there is no information included with them, such as when they were written, or by whom, or where they were published, to establish credibility. The few links to elder law topics that are included are in the “Financial” section, not the “Law & Legislation” section to which the user might typically turn.
first. And the user might not guess that the “Social, Mental & Spiritual” section is where links to caregiver resources will be found.

All this is not meant to discredit this extensive, complex site, but only to suggest some tips for using it and to warn of a possible high frustration level.

Caregiver's Resource Homepage
(http://www.geocities.com/Athens/1330)

This site brings together more caregiver resources on the Internet than anywhere else. It includes links to 10 general caregiving sites; eight sites about publications, books and videos on caregiving; and 18 sites for specific types of caregiving (Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease, etc.). The site also includes good suggestions for compiling one's own list of local caregiving resources from phone books and community agencies. The site is managed by Jim and Marlene Sherman, who have many years of experience in providing geriatric services and publishing, and who have published a number of good caregiving books.

I compared the resources listed at this site with those listed in the caregiving sections of “The ALZHEIMER Page” and “Eldercare Web” described above. The latter didn’t have any that were not already on the Shermans’ home page; “The ALZHEIMER Page” had six substantial sites that were not included here. This site was last updated four months before this writer last looked at it. It has made a good start in pulling together an important type of resource, and it is hoped that the Shermans will update it soon and continue to maintain it in a timely fashion after that.

GeroWeb Virtual Library on Aging
(http://www.iog.wayne.edu/GeroWeb/GeroWeb.html)

This site is available from the Institute of Gerontology at Wayne State University. Along with Bruce Craig's home page described above and this author's "Internet and E-Mail Resources on Aging" (http://www.aoa.dhhs.gov/aoa/pages/jpostlst.html), it is the third of the three earliest and still most comprehensive listings of Internet Resources on Aging.

When it was started in April 1994 it was called simply "GeroWeb" and its lists of rapidly expanding links were grouped in five sections: Universities, where degree and other curriculum programs in gerontology and geriatrics were listed; Government Agencies, which included state and local members of the Aging Network; Biomedical Research/Health Care; Organizations; and Other Sources. Its strength has always been its coverage of academic programs in gerontology and geriatrics. The site is constantly being updated and now includes close to 500 different links.

Early in 1996 "GeroWeb's" format was converted from one of listings to one that is now searchable and browsable. Its name was also expanded to reflect this change. Because of this major change in its format, it is still under construction and experiencing some difficulties with its links and servers.

Search engines are useful because they eliminate the problem of where to list items that overlap category boundaries. In what category, for example, would the home pages of the cooperative university and Veterans Administration Geriatric Research, Education and Clinical Centers (GRECCs) in Baltimore, Salt Lake City, Little Rock, and Bedford, Massachusetts go — in a university section, a research section, a geographic section, a government section, or somewhere else?

But search engines have their own problems. They do not all work the same way. Good ones include information on how to use them, plus some options for selecting how you want to display retrieved items. Good ones should also list the most relevant items first, and give some indication of whether it makes any difference if you enter, to continue with the above example, "geriatric clinical," "geriatric and clinical," or "geriatric or clinical." When I entered these various combinations of Key Words in GeroWeb's search engine, I got different results in each case. I also got different results when I entered "GRECC" and when I entered "geriatric research education and clinical center."

Search engines also require the user to know something about what it is he or she is looking for. Many people really just want to look at a list, and this is when using a browse feature is the best way to proceed.

Senior Sites (http://www.seniorsites.com)

At this time there is no single site on the Internet that pulls together all the nursing homes, assisted living facilities, retirement communities, and continuing care retirement communities with home pages. You will find Web sites that list only facilities in a specific geographic area or only specific types of facilities. Some organization home pages list only their member facilities. Some commercial sites include facilities but only if they pay a fee to be listed.

"Senior Sites" has a nice organizational structure for its home page into which United States nonprofit senior housing facilities, which it includes, can be placed. By this criteria, however, it could still not be the type of all-inclusive site mentioned above. The design of their home page is very pleasing and easy on the eye. The graphic images are sharp and the colors are vivid without being overwhelming. It is sponsored by the California Association of Homes and Services for the Aging.

The "Find a Facility" section of "Senior Sites" lists many facilities by state and county, more than any other Internet site. But it does not list all facilities and it is not clear to the user exactly which nonprofit facilities are included and which ones are not. The most complete listings are still found in the printed "Directory of Nursing Homes" (the 1996 edition has 2,303 pages) and its companion volume, the printed "Directory of Retirement Communities" (the 1996 edition has 1,442 pages). You can find ordering information for these directories on the Internet at the home page of their publisher, HCIA (http://www.hcia.com), but not their content.
The listings in the "Find a Facility" section include the number of nursing care beds, assisted living units and senior housing units at each facility as well as information for contacting that facility. There is also a "Facility Expanded Listing" section that at this writing includes only facilities in California. Using the search engines here I located, for example, a facility in Monterey county that offered respite care.

"Senior Sites" has a section that lists the national and state associations of homes and services for the aging, but it is somewhat out of date at this writing. It does not include, for example, hot links to the new home pages of the American Association of Homes and Services for the Aging (http://www.aahsa.org) or the Pennsylvania Association of Non-Profit Homes for the Aging (http://www.panpha.org).

"Senior Sites" also has two good sections for information on "Making the Right Choice" and "Answers to Common Questions." "Senior Sites" should not be confused with "Seniors-Site" (http://seniors-site.com), a home page with consumer information for seniors.

Healthtouch

This is a good resource for two types of health information. The section on "Health Information: Older Americans" (http://www.healthtouch.com/level1/leaflets/102179/102179.htm) has the full text of over 100 documents on over 20 health topics of interest to older adults: heart conditions, eyes, depression, nutrition, medications, pain, the prostate, etc. (But not menopause.) These documents are really links to electronic versions of original documents or parts of documents produced by such organizations as the SPRY (Setting Priorities for the Retirement Years) Foundation, the National Council on the Aging, the consumer editions of the Clinical Practice Guidelines produced by the Agency for Health Care Policy and Research, and other organizations such as the American Dietetic Association, the American Optometric Association, and the National Institute of Neurologic Disorders and Stroke.

The section called "Drug Information" (http://www.healthtouch.com/level1/p_dri.htm) is a search engine where you can enter the name of a prescription or an over-the-counter drug and receive information about the proper way to use it and learn about possible side effects.

"Healthtouch" is produced by a commercial company called Medical Strategies, Inc.

"Ask NOAH about: Aging" (http://www.noah.cuny.edu/aging/aging.html) is another place to go to for full text documents on health topics in aging, including menopause. It includes about 50 documents. NOAH stands for New York Online Access to Health and is sponsored by the City University of New York. There is little duplication in the documents available from this site and those available from "Healthtouch" because NOAH selects its documents from different sources: the Age Pages produced by the National Institute on Aging (NIA) and NOAH's own resources.

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Both "Healthtouch" and "Ask NOAH about" include documents on many other health topics not related to aging.

Administration on Aging (AOA)
(http://www.aoa.dhhs.gov)

This is the home page of the United States Federal agency that administers the Aging Network (AN) described above. Many different types of resources are available here: the full text of the NIA Age Pages, the full text of the "Resource Directory for Older People" (a directory of organizations that provide services to the aged), information about the AN, AOA press releases, some demographic and statistical compilations on the aged, selected downloadable .gif images of the aging that were published in 1975-1995 issues of AOA's magazine "Aging," and a "What's New" section.

There are links to AOA's National Aging Information Center (NAIC) (http://www.ageinfo.org) where you can search AOA's "Eldercare Locator" by zip code (http://www2.ageinfo.org/naicweb/elderloc/elderdb.html) to find out where to go for community-based help for older persons. NAIC also provides access through a search engine to a database of AOA program and policy materials in aging.

In addition to making Bruce Craig's and this author's directories of Internet resources on aging described above available, the AOA home page also hosts two very good online resources produced by Saadia Greenberg at AOA. "Online Resources for Financial and Retirement Planning" (http://www.aoa.dhhs.gov/aoa/pages/finplan.html) provides links to seven Internet resources on retirement planning and to 16 on financial planning for retirement. "Guide to Online Resources: Internet Development for the Aging Network" (http://www.aoa.dhhs.gov/aoa/pages/guidrev.html) includes links to over 50 Internet resources on Web site development, search engines, Internet service providers, and the Internet for beginners.

References
NOMINATION FOR EDITOR

The Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences

The Gerontological Society of America Publications Committee is seeking nominations for the position of Editor of the Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences for a four-year term to become effective January 1, 1998. The Editor will make appointments to the editorial board and, together with that board, will develop policies in accord with the scope statement generated by the Publications Committee and approved by Council. The Editor will work with reviewers and has the final responsibility for the acceptance of articles for the Journal. The editorship is a voluntary position. Candidates must be members of The Gerontological Society of America and dedicated to developing a premier journal in the field of the social sciences.

Nominations and applications may be made by self or others but must be accompanied by a curriculum vitae and a statement of willingness to accept the position. Deadline for nominations is February 1, 1997. They should be addressed to:

Bettie L. Donley
Director of Publications
The Gerontological Society of America
1275 K Street, NW, Suite 350
Washington, DC 20005-4006

SCOPE STATEMENT:
Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences

Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences publishes articles using a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches encompassing quantitative, qualitative, experimental, and nonexperimental research. Authors are encouraged to submit manuscripts in areas such as anthropology, demography, economics, epidemiology, geography, political science, public health, social history, social work, and sociology.