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Zenome: A human touch to searching the Internet



By [MATHEW INGRAM](#)

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Have you ever been frustrated with how little you can find on a subject when typing it into a search engine such as **Google** or **Yahoo**? In many cases the results are a lot of shopping-oriented links and pages that try to lure you in by pretending they have what you want, but very few links that contain something relevant to your search topic.



John Connolly and fellow Montrealer Zsolt Szigetvari know the feeling, and they're building what they say is a solution: A Web directory known as Zenome.com.

Unlike Google -- which uses a Web-crawling computer running a series of algorithms to search for specific keywords on Web pages, as well as measuring how many sites link to those pages to gauge their popularity -- Zenome uses human editors, who decide which links are the best fit for a given search topic.

Mr. Connolly says he and Mr. Szigetvari, both professors at Concordia University,



John Connolly, co-founder of Zenome.com, says the Web directory employs editors to determine what sites relate to a search topic. Photo: John Morstad/The Globe and Mail

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believe "there's no comparison to the human intellect" when it comes to determining relevance. Algorithms such as Google's try to find "an analog of relevance" through external links, says Mr. Connolly, but "we know it's relevant because a person has actually read it and said it is."



Zenome's basic design, a directory with a number of pre-set categories and human editors who review the listings in each one, is similar to the Open Directory Project (ODP), which is an offshoot of the Mozilla open-source software foundation (developers of the popular Firefox Web browser). But Mr. Connolly says the way Zenome is structured is meant to overcome some of the problems that have plagued the ODP.

The open directory has "kind of fallen on hard times," he says. The project has indexed about 4.5 million sites in hundreds of thousands of categories, has more than 9,000 editors, "and it has become very fractious. They are inundated with spam, and so people who are trying to get sites listed are waiting up to six months and getting frustrated."

In an attempt to avoid some of these problems, the founders of Zenome (whose name came from the idea of indexing the digital genome, like the Human Genome Project did for DNA) decided to pay editors to review and approve links.

What led to the idea behind Zenome, he says, was the frustration that both professors felt when they assigned research projects to students. "They would go to a search engine like Yahoo or Google and say okay, I did my research. And I would say: 'No, you didn't; all you got were a bunch of results that were based on popularity, not substance.' "

This is precisely where Mr. Connolly says Zenome has an advantage over automated search engines that can easily find sites containing a list of keywords, but have trouble gauging the relevance of those websites to the context of the search being conducted. He says that search engines use software to try and "guess what people had in mind when they put together their pages, but [software] can't understand content like people can."

There are other people-driven directories out there, such as About.com (bought recently by The New York Times for \$410-million U.S.), Zeal (which is owned by Looksmart Ltd.), Bluefind and Rubberstamped.org. Some of these sites also pay editors to collect links, but Mr. Connolly says most are motivated primarily by

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advertising revenue.

"We'd like to attract some, but that's not the main purpose," he says. Most of these sites charge for their listings, "and as soon as you do that, you start to attract the wrong sort of people."

Gary Price, a librarian and editor of SearchEngineWatch.com, says he agrees that people are a necessary part of getting relevant information from the Internet. "There is still absolutely a role for human beings in searching for information."

According to Mr. Price, some of the best indexes of information on the Internet are compiled and maintained by librarians, either paid or on a volunteer basis -- such as the Librarians' Index to the Internet (<http://www.lii.org>) and Infomine (infomine.ucr.edu).

"These sites take some of the things that librarians have always used to determine whether to buy a book and apply that to links."

Even Google sometimes uses people, if a recent Internet report is to be believed: according to someone who claims to have taken part in a Google testing program, the search giant periodically hires human beings to review the reliability of its searches in an attempt to improve its engine.

This isn't surprising, says Mr. Connolly, since even an industry leader such as Google has to constantly be looking for ways to improve -- just as people who are searching for information should be looking at several different search engines or indexes instead of just one.

In that sense, he says, Zenome doesn't want to compete with Google.

"We see it as more of a symbiotic relationship. We're just another arrow in the quiver."

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