

Web searches for religious topics on the rise

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Religion is not just for churches, synagogues or mosques anymore -- it's a topic that is being actively searched for online, according to researchers at Penn State.

The researchers examined how people use search engines to locate religious information online. They analyzed more than 5.5 million searches collected from three Web search engines between 1997 and 2005 to investigate attributes of religious searching on the Web.

The religious landscape within the United States has been described as increasingly secularized and factionalized. However, Jim Jansen, associate professor, information sciences and technology and his colleagues, Andrea Tapia, assistant professor, information sciences and technology and Amanda Spink, professor, Queensland University of Technology, Australia, found from looking at religious Web searching behaviors that no evidence of secularization exists, and that religious and religious-related interests held steady and were generally mainstream.

They also found that the results dispelled the stereotype that religious people are not as accustomed to technology as non-religious people.

"Our results showed that people searching for these religious topics were just as tactically skilled as the general Web population," said Jansen.

"This actually fits well with the historical use of technology by religious groups and organizations."

There was a general increase in religious searching over time, which may

be due to the advancement in technology, increased availability of religious content online and a change in the Web population.

"In the days of the earlier data sets, there were limited topics online," Jansen said. "As the Internet and Web became more main stream, a cornucopia of topics emerged -- religion was one."

Jansen also evaluated how well search engines delivered relevant content in response to religious queries, finding that the search engines preformed poorly.

"I don't believe it is an intentional bias on the part of the search engines," he said. "It is probably due to the localized nature of many religious [Web](#) sites. Small businesses face similar issues in trying to get ranked within the search engines."

Source: Pennsylvania State University ([news](#) : [web](#))

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