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Internet addresses: just how reliable are they?


First, I assembled the internet addresses listed in each issue (4 to 5 issues per month for The Lancet, and one issue per month for the Canadian Family Physician and la revue Prescrire), and tested each one using an internet connection. I classified the results as follows: successful, if I immediately obtained the relevant document; semi-successful, if I found the document but with difficulty; semi-failure, if I obtained a different document from the one mentioned in the reference; complete failure, if I obtained an error message.

I limited the search time for each reference to 5 minutes; if I did not find the document within this time period, I considered the search to be a failure.


Results. I compared the results for the three journals and for the different time periods, with the last period corresponding to the immediate validity of the references.

Discussion. Regardless of the journal, the average success rate never exceeded 75% for any time period. The immediate validity test done in March and June 2004 included failures and semi-fails for some references at the time of publication.

In comparison to the other two journals, the electronic addresses given in la revue Prescrire were often incomplete, leading only to the home page rather than directly to the document concerned, making it necessary for the reader to complete the search. This may explain the lower failure rate I obtained for la revue Prescrire, as the other two journals usually gave addresses leading directly to the document in question.

These results suggest that biomedical journal editors should pay more attention to the reliability and accuracy of electronic references, so that they offer the same guarantees as traditional paper references.

Éléonore Dupont
Medical student
France