

The author

Mark Shores is Assistant Director and Associate Librarian at Rentschler Library, Miami University Hamilton campus.

Keywords: Country information, reference resources, electronic resources

Abstract

Abstract

Purpose: This article aims to summarize the quality and usefulness of several free online and subscription resources for finding information on countries of the world.

Design/Methodology/approach: Describes several free and commercial sources that can be used for doing research on countries of the world and recommends their use for specific clientele.

Findings:

Originality/Value:

Introduction:

Whether you are a soon-to-be world traveler or a student doing a presentation on world cultures, there is copious amounts of free and subscription-based information available on countries of the world. This article will go over some of the standard online subscription and free resources and some that were heretofore unknown to this reviewer. For the purposes of this article, I have limited my analysis to resources that provide basic statistical and narrative information, along with descriptions of cultures. For the purpose of brevity, online tools for gathering comprehensive data on a country's economics and demographics are not included here. Information on cultures of the world, like marriage customs, family structure, sports and recreation, is not now freely available as we will see below.

Libraries supporting advanced programs in political science, business, and international relations will, of course, still be best served by also offering access to subscription tools, but the general reader does have options that are free, and libraries that support them have low-cost, yet high-quality options. Of course, very few of the free tools have the features that students come to expect, like ready-made citations and the ability to email information. Free resources are not typically as comprehensive in that they do not have additional information on a country's territories or republics (i.e. provinces of Canada) like the subscription tools do.

Open Access Resources

CIA World Factbook - <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>

The CIA World Factbook may be the best known free resource on countries of the world. It does not include much narrative information on each country (267 different "world entities" as of this writing) but researchers can count on up-to-date facts and figures, as each country profile is updated weekly. Classified versions of the Factbook were first published in 1962, but copies for sale to the public only began in 1975, according to their "About" page. The first Internet version of the Factbook was made available in 1997. The 2015 paperback version has a list price of \$16.95 and is available from Amazon, the U.S. Government Printing office and other vendors. The timeline of the Factbook's history shows that new content has been added, like data for "Mother's Mean Age at First Birth" in 2013 and a map of the World's Oceans in 2013. Each entry is divided up into Geography, People and Society, Economy, Energy, Communications, Transportation, Military. A section titled "Transnational Issues" describes things like territorial disputes with other countries and information about the trafficking of illicit drugs. Extra content includes country rankings, flags, and regional and world maps. If you are not sure what particular statistical category means, like "dependency ratio", a handy glossary defines it for you, though this glossary could be more clearly labeled. Appendices offer information on international

weights and measure, geographic codes, and selected international environmental agreements. Want to compare the nations with the largest area or military expenditures as part of GDP (Gross Domestic Product)? The “Guide to Country Comparisons” has it. One overall downside is usability: the font used throughout most of the Factbook is tiny and users must toggle sections up and down to see content.

Country Studies (Area Handbooks)

<http://www.loc.gov/collections/country-studies/about-this-collection/>

Though they are book-length and written by social scientists, the Country Studies collection is not all inclusive (only 83 countries are included) and most titles have not been updated since the late 1990s. They were originally published as part of the Federal Research Division of the Library of Congress, with funding provided by the Department of the Army. The lack of breadth is because the collection was intended to provide information on lesser known parts of the world. Each title is available as a downloadable PDF from the Library of Congress website. Many libraries still have the print versions as well. For instance, the country study on Russia is still owned by over 1,300 libraries in the United States, according to WorldCat. Each title includes a historical overview as well as chapters on the physical environment and population; Ethnic, Religious and Cultural Setting; Economy; Society and Its Environment; Government and Politics, Armed Forces, Foreign Relations and more. Country Studies are probably mostly of use to scholars or researchers who do not require up-to-date information.

Background Notes - http://www.state.gov/www/background_notes/index.html

At one time, Background Notes, published by the U.S. Department of State, was a go-to free resource for up-to-date information on countries of the world and helpful tips for travelers to those countries. But now the State Department only provides current updates on diplomatic relations between the United States and other countries. Most of the traditional entries have not been updated since the year 2000; some are a lot older than that. They provide basic information on geography,

government, people, the economy, political conditions and more. There is no report on some countries like Angola, Seychelles, Bhutan and Algeria. One version of these reports is included in EBSCO's subscription database Academic Search Premier/Complete, MasterFILE and others under the title "Background Notes on Countries of the World" The most recent updates in EBSCO are dated 2003 but it is unclear how these differ from the information on the State Department website.

EveryCulture.com - <http://www.everyculture.com>

Everyculture.com offers free access to the four-volume "Countries and their Cultures," last published in 2001 by Macmillan Reference (an imprint of Cengage Learning). The content is apparently now owned by an Illinois company, Advameg, which also operates City-data.com and many other reference information websites. (See <http://www.advameg.com/>) Curiously, EveryCulture.com does not mention the former print and online (via the Gale Virtual Reference Library) version by name, but the content is exactly the same, albeit with advertisements and the inclusion of social media content like tweets about a country's culture, and user-submitted comments. By now, some of the information is outdated (population figures are 15 years old as of this writing) but useful information on Social Stratification, Gender Roles and Statuses, and Etiquette is not available in subscription resources like Europa World Plus, or the free CIA World Factbook. The bibliography at the end of each entry is somewhat outdated by now, but it is extensive. Some libraries still offer access to "Countries and their Cultures" through the Gale Virtual Reference Library, which offers more functionality, like citation tools, emailing options and the ability to print and download PDF's.

Encyclopedia of the Nations - <http://www.nationsencyclopedia.com>

This appears to be content from an older version of the *Worldmark Encyclopedia of the Nations*, currently in its 13th edition (2012) from Gale Cengage Learning. Some of the data in this free online version from Advameg, Inc. (See above in EveryCulture.com) appears to be anywhere from eight to 12 years out-of-date. For example, the History of Egypt entry only covers up to the year 2003, leaving out

major events of the “Arab Spring” and the downfall of Hosni Mubarak. All of the content exactly corresponds with the print version with sections on Transportation, Local Government, Judicial System, Labor, Agriculture, Income, Mining, Forestry, Domestic Trade, International Cooperation, and more. The site also includes information on World Leaders, the United Nations and its related agencies. The World Leaders information is out-of-date, along with information about the heads of different United Nations agencies, but the World Statistics section seems to have some current data on things like population, health and education. If one can handle lots of banner advertisements and pop-ups, this Encyclopedia of Nations is useful, with the caveat that the most current information is to be had elsewhere.

Wikipedia - <http://en.wikipedia.org>

Notwithstanding Wikipedia’s reputation for accuracy and authority, this reviewer would be remiss in not mentioning it as a source for some current statistics and narrative information on countries of the world. Only a few of the dozen country entries checked were not flagged by Wikipedia editors for the usual issues with lack of citations, not enough sources cited, or lack of contributions by experts in the field. A typical country page in Wikipedia includes sections include history, geography, politics, economy, demographics, and culture. The list of references for Iceland’s entry in Wikipedia numbers over 200 and includes a nice mix of citations to government sources, United Nations websites, books, news sources like CNN.com, and other websites. Extra features, like a sound clip that pronounces a country’s name, is available in Wikipedia and not in other sources. It goes without saying that students and researchers shouldn’t stop at Wikipedia. It is lacking in detailed data, like amount of arable land, crude oil imports, amount of electricity generated, birth rate, percentage of population in urban areas - all of which are available in the CIA World Factbook. Still, the end user is familiar and comfortable with the layout and look of a Wikipedia page, and librarians can (and should) always stress the importance of consulting the References, External Links, and items for Further Reading.

Subscription Resources

CountryReports.org - <http://www.countryreports.org>

Founded in 1997, CountryReports.org is an affordable, high-quality online resource on countries of the world. Information on each country is a nice mix of narrative sections and data presented in bar graphs and pie charts. An annual subscription for universities is \$175 with add-on bundles for editions in Spanish, German, French editions ranging between \$10-18. The cost for public libraries is \$150 with an additional \$6 for I.P. authentication. Different pricing is also available for elementary, middle and high schools, school districts, businesses and personal subscriptions. The opening page for each country's entry has left-hand side menu items, includes Customs and Culture, History, Demographics, Geography, Government, Maps, National Symbols, Current Events, Events and holidays. Content is updated frequently, depending on the specific section. The "About" page states that each country's entry is reviewed in its entirety at least once a year. As of this writing, the entry for Nigeria had links to CNN.com stories about election results from the previous day. The country history section offers a shorter article and an "expanded" section that goes into more detail. The strength of CountryReports is the ability to see a visual representation of data about each country. The Demographic Comparison tool lets you dynamically create graphs comparing a country against another using many data points, like education expenditures, infant mortality, urban population to name just a few. Other data is presented in tables with slightly contrasting colors to aid in ease of reading. The fun content (recipes from each country, national anthem lyrics, photos, etc.) and the effective use of visual representation of data would be more attractive to librarians serving middle- and high-school students. A "Teacher Activities" section has quizzes and other ways to incorporate CountryReports.org into the curriculum. Some functionality that is missing include ready-made citations to entries, the ability to email content, and more specific sources

or bibliographies for further reading. Nonetheless, this is a good, low-cost resource for high school and undergraduates needing information on world cultures.

Statesman's Yearbook - Pricing and information at <http://www.statesmansyearbook.com/>

Another go-to resource for information on countries of the world, the Statesman's Yearbook, includes an online version that is typically included with the purchase of the print volume (\$350 at the time of this writing, according to the publisher's website.) Extra content that comes with the online version includes previously published volumes back to 1864, economic overviews for every country in the world, and timelines and essays on special topics. Both print and online versions cover 194 countries of the world with basic information on history, climate, current government leaders, defence, economy, energy and natural resources, industry, international trade, communications, social institutions, religion and current diplomatic representatives. Each entry includes a short list of sources for further reading. The history sections are strong, with longer narratives that are accessible to the general reader. Statesman also provides information on republics and territories. You cannot look up Saskatchewan, Canada or Wales in the CIA World Factbook. As for the online version of Statesman's Yearbook, this reviewer last used it 2013 and found it lacking in basic functionality that end users come to expect, like the ability to email content. Statesman's Yearbook is still a go-to resource for ready reference as the narrative sections are shorter than Europa and it is updated annually in print and online.

Europa WorldPlus - Pricing and information at <http://www.europaworld.com>

Routledge's Europa World Year Book (which has been published since 1926) offers political and economic information on over 250 countries. Though online pricing was not available at the time of

writing, past reviews in *Choice: Current Reviews for Academic Libraries* show pricing much, much higher than CountryReports.org. The print version is listed at \$1,845 on the publisher's website. The opening screen lets you browse by region on the left, or select a country from an A-Z list at the top right. Like CountryReports, a navigation menu on the left side of the page displays sections on Physical and Social Geography, History, Economy, Country Statistics, as a map and an image of the country's flag. A section titled "Directory" has sections for Government and Politics, Society and Media, and Business and Commerce, provides contact information for religious organizations, media companies, government institutions, embassies, along with short narrative sections for some categories. Curiously, basic information about education and railways in a country are tucked away in the "Directory," where a user wouldn't think to look. The historical and economic information is where Europa has an advantage over other sources. The history of Bangladesh, for instance, would amount to 28 pages and over 22,000 words if printed out. Many of the articles were written by historians and political scientists with advanced degrees but some are unsigned. Other history sections are shorter and are not signed. Options to email content and copy/paste citations are also available. Research libraries supporting academic programs in international relations and international business, for example, may opt for Europa World Plus, because of its long, detailed sections on the economy of a country, plus more detailed data on things like imports and exports. Europa does not provide details on a country's culture like CountryReports.org or Everyculture.com does.

Basic information about a country and its culture is freely available on the Internet, and with a enough resourcefulness and information literacy skills, a researcher can gather copious amounts of high-quality information without setting foot in a library. The only question is how current will all of the information be? Regular updates are usually the province of subscription resources, as is very detailed data on a country's economic activity. For that reason, serious researchers in political science, economics, and international relations, however, will still need access to consult the richer content of a

library's subscription resources, like Europa World Plus, Statesman's Year Book and possibly even print collections. Some standard print reference resources are now freely available online, albeit with no information on their provenance (see Everyculture.com above). Novice researchers without access to subscription resources will need to exercise the usual caution by evaluating the country information they find for free online, but fortunately high-quality, trustworthy options are available.