

Crawling the Internet to track infectious disease outbreaks

July 8 2008

Could Internet discussion forums, listservs, and online news outlets be an informative source of information on disease outbreaks? A team of researchers from Children's Hospital Boston and Harvard Medical School thinks so, and it has launched a real-time, automated data-gathering system called HealthMap to gather, organize and disseminate this online intelligence. They describe their project in this week's *PLoS Medicine*.

"Web-based electronic information sources," say John Brownstein and colleagues from the HealthMap project, "can play an important role in early event detection and support situational awareness by providing current, highly local information about outbreaks, even from areas relatively invisible to traditional global public health efforts."

However, information overload and difficulties in distinguishing "signal from noise" pose substantial barriers to fully using this information. To overcome these problems, the authors created the freely accessible HealthMap Project (www.healthmap.org), which they describe as a "multistream real-time surveillance platform that continually aggregates reports on new and ongoing infectious disease outbreaks." These reports are organized and disseminated in a variety of ways, including creating disease maps and "situational awareness windows."

Ultimately, say Brownstein and colleagues, the use of news media and other nontraditional sources of surveillance data can "facilitate early outbreak detection, increase public awareness of disease outbreaks prior

to their formal recognition, and provide an integrated and contextualized view of global health information."

Source: Public Library of Science

Citation: Crawling the Internet to track infectious disease outbreaks (2008, July 8) retrieved 6 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2008-07-internet-track-infectious-disease-outbreaks.html>

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