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## Citizens can mine valuable ore

**M**any professionals must take continuing-education classes to keep their licenses valid. In fact, most workers know that they have to update their job skills to survive.

Keeping current also is a task — a difficult one — of informed citizenship. Good newspapers, magazines and specialty newsletters help a great deal. So do National Public Radio and PBS. But even these often don't suffice.

Readers increasingly drill into the Internet to extract statistical ore that can be refined into high-quality conclusions. But that vast territory is filled with hazards: unverifiable data; unqualified sources (kooks and cranks); propaganda posing as fact; and weak analysis presented with great energy.

So here is a sampling of Web sites that reporters tell me they respect. The reasons: Their information usually is up-to-

date and reliable; their commentary, if any, adjusts to changes of fact and isn't locked into preconceptions; they deal responsibly with opposing views; and their presentations are readable, intelligent and aid conscientious decision-making.

◆ The Center for Budget and Policy Priorities ([www.cbpp.org](http://www.cbpp.org)) is a remarkably quick, useful and accurate data source on federal economic policies (housing, Social Security, welfare, unemployment insurance, taxes, deficits) and their effects on state policies. The emphasis is on policies affecting low- and moderate-income people, but you don't have to agree with the policy recommendations to appreciate the richness of data and analysis.

◆ RAND ([www.rand.org](http://www.rand.org)), a think tank, applies cross-disciplinary research to scientific, educational and charitable issues in search of pragmatic recommendations involving public welfare and national security. The site contains studies, op-ed columns and testimony to Congress.

◆ Most governments have Web sites, many with poor access to the array of state functions. But Washington state ([www.access.wa.gov](http://www.access.wa.gov)) has done it right. You can get from there to any state activity, from lottery to new legislation, from what nurse or doctor has been punished for infractions, to the latest news. Oregon should take lessons from the Webmaster.

◆ For information useful for earthquake monitoring, real-time river and stream flow, pollution control, and many public and private planning functions, enter the U.S. Geologic Survey earthquake site (<http://earthquake.usgs.gov/recenteqs/>) or the National Atlas site (<http://nationalatlas.gov/natlas/NatlasStart.asp>).

◆ For self-protection, be aware of the

National Council Against Health Fraud ([www.ncahf.org](http://www.ncahf.org)). It debunks a lot of popular health and diet misinformation and cites research.

◆ Also in the health field, the Kaiser Family Foundation ([www.kff.org](http://www.kff.org)) offers excellent research on many policy issues and a link to State Health Facts ([www.statehealthfacts.kff.org/](http://www.statehealthfacts.kff.org/)) that provides state-by-state health profiles and 50 state comparisons. E-mail updates also are available.

◆ For trends in state spending overall and in activities such as prescription drug programs and children's health insurance, check the National Association of State Budget Officers ([www.nasbo.org](http://www.nasbo.org)).

◆ The Project On Government Oversight ([www.pogo.org](http://www.pogo.org)) investigates, exposes and seeks to remedy mismanagement, systemic abuses of power and subservience by the federal government to special interests. Whistle-blowers often protect themselves by going to POGO rather than risk their own agencies' vengeance. POGO case studies on problems in public purchasing, open government and environmental oversight routinely force the government to be more accountable to the citizenry.

◆ Bridging language gaps that stop us from knowing what is said in the Middle East press and mosques are translations by the Middle East Media Research Institute ([www.memri.org](http://www.memri.org)).

◆ And last, the Economic Development Administration's superb site ([www.econdata.net](http://www.econdata.net)) is a diamond mine of 1,000 links to socioeconomic data sources, arranged by subject and provider.

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