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Spying by the Central Intelligence Agency yields informative website about the world

Are you looking for trouble? It's not hard to find. Throw a dart at a map of the world and there's a good chance it will land on a country that's experiencing some serious problems.

The news is full of reports of armed conflicts raging in Iraq, Israel, Ukraine and Syria. Conflicts continue to simmer in Libya, Egypt and several other African countries. Violence in Afghanistan, Pakistan and India flares regularly. The illicit drug trade fuels violence in the United States, Mexico and parts of Central and South America. Territorial disputes between China and its neighbors are raising tensions in Southeast Asia.

Benevolent spies

Trying to keep the names of the countries and the ideologies of the various battling factions straight would be a full-time job. For many people, all that is known of these countries is the stream of bad news

flowing from the media every day. If you want to learn more about any of these troubled lands you can start by visiting the website of the Central Intelligence Agency.

The CIA has a section on its site called The Worldfactbook (cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/). It contains encyclopedia-type entries on 267 countries and other entities around the world. There's information on each country's history, people, government, economy, geography and more. There are also maps, flags and photos from around the world.

Country profiles

The home page of The World Factbook provides several entry points to its content. An interactive, color-coded map of the world lets you select a region to study, such as the Middle East or South America. Clicking on a region brings up a list of all the nations there, as well as a localized interactive map. You can click on either the country's name or location on the map to bring up its information.

There's also an alphabetical drop-down menu of all of the countries and entities covered by the site. Selecting

a name from the menu takes you to its page.

Each country's page is set up the same. The name of the country is listed at the top with its flag, maps and a photo gallery below. A list of 10 categories follows:

- Introduction
- Geography
- People and Society
- Government
- Economy
- Energy
- Communications
- Transportation
- Military
- Transnational Issues

Each category can be expanded to reveal the information compiled on the country by the CIA. Some of the information is presented as lists and statistics, while some is written as a narrative. It's all presented in a rather dry yet informative fashion.

I have two issues with this part of the site, one functional and one aesthetic. First, the photo galleries don't work. Each one appears to have a collection of images that can be viewed or downloaded, but I couldn't get any of them to advance beyond the first image. It worries me that the people we count on to conduct

high-tech espionage can't get a website to work right.

Second, the lines of type in the entries are too long for the point size. It's difficult to read because your eye has trouble picking up the next line in the paragraph as you read down. They should put the type in two narrower columns instead of one wide one.

Spycraft

The site has other information in addition to the country profiles. There are numerous downloadable maps of different parts of the world. There also are downloadable flags of all the countries. One section allows you to view country comparisons of many categories, such as military spending, imports and exports, unemployment, education spending and much more.

The World Factbook also can be purchased as a printed edition. A gallery of past covers reveals the CIA actually has good taste when it comes to design. In fact, the site, while not visually exciting, is well-designed, useful and very informative.

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