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EMAIL FROM AMERICA

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IN SEATTLE - NEW TECH CITY

Is the climate change website you're visiting funded by an oil company? And can you trust the Wikipedia page for a politician you're interested in? Search engines that prioritise popularity over accuracy hardly help, giving you millions of websites to choose from and no idea of which you can trust.

A new type of search engine, launching this week, could change all that. WolframAlpha (www.wolframalpha.com) is the web's first "computational knowledge engine" and is the brainchild of Stephen Wolfram, a British computer scientist now based in Illinois. Unlike Google or Yahoo!, WolframAlpha holds only factual data – more than 10 trillion pieces of information – sourced from thousands of official websites, libraries and academic journals, and checked by experts.

In America it has created speculation that it could redefine how we use the web. This isn't just because it uses only trustworthy sources, but because it knows how each piece of information in its databases is related to every other piece. This allows users to ask it questions in plain English and get the results as graphs, tables and 3-D diagrams. Type in "30 miles per gallon", for instance, and WolframAlpha will convert it into kilometres per litre and contrast it with the fuel consumption of an average car. You can compare the GDP, currency or mortality rates of different countries, or find out how much healthier a banana is than a hamburger.

It's particularly strong on science, plotting solar eclipses on globes, unravelling DNA sequences or simply solving mathematical equations. Of course, WolframAlpha does not know everything. Where searches on Google can return millions of results, a search on WolframAlpha during a demo run often gave none at all, when its databases lacked the information or the site didn't understand the question.

Americans have grown used to surfing the web, picking and choosing from thousands of links to unreliable sites. Whether they're now ready to dive deeper in search of substantial information remains to be seen.

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1p **2** Which two qualities make WolframAlpha such a special search engine according to the text?
- **A** WolframAlpha only uses relevant sources for the information requested and forwards your search to other reliable search engines.
- **B** WolframAlpha only uses reliable sources and all information is linked to other relevant information.
- **C** WolframAlpha only uses sources when they come up on multiple search engines and information given is compared to that on other relevant websites.