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An introduction to indexing

On one of my lists, someone asked for guidance on indexing for websites, and was referred to a White Paper from Bright Path Solutions, called 'Creating usable indexes: a systematic approach to editing indexes for quality and usability'. Well, it has been a long time since the good folks at UCan taught me all I know about indexing, so I had a look and I was impressed. It is aimed at 'back of the book' indexing, but it could easily be used to build a suitable index for a website or just about any document that needs an extra navigation tool. You can request it by e-mail from http://www.travelthepath.com/whitepapers.shtml.

Great ScOT

Curriculum Corporation, The Le@rning Federation and education.au limited have developed the *Schools Online Thesaurus (ScOT)*, describing the subjects of online curricula content in the Australasian K–12 education sector, with version 4.3 being released in September. It will be made available to the private and educational sectors through licence agreements with Curriculum Corporation. Organisations interested in trialing ScOT can apply for an Evaluation Licence at http://www.curriculum.edu.au/scis/partnerships/scot.htm.

Heritage lists

Australia has a new national heritage system, and anyone can nominate a place to one of two new heritage lists — the National Heritage List and the Commonwealth Heritage List. The idea is that these will become lists of places with outstanding cultural, natural and Indigenous heritage value to the nation. The National Heritage List is highly selective, with only four sites so far, but there are many more on the Commonwealth Heritage List. Any group of persons wishing to elect a place to either of these lists may must provide the Commonwealth Department of the Environment and Heritage with information about the place, and prove that it meets at least one of the criteria for listing. More information about the lists is at http://www.deh.gov.au/heritage/.

Domains explained

We use them all the time, but most people have no idea how they work — and do they need to, after all? I am talking about domain names, the bits towards the start of the URL that help your browser find the address of the website that you are looking for. If you are curious, or you need to describe it to your friends, go to http://www.webreference.com/content/domains/names/ where it is clearly explained. There are a couple of minor points that an expert might quibble with, but that's

what experts are for — right? Overall it is quite useful.

Checking accessibility

I talk a lot about accessibility here, because it is an important but mostly overlooked aspect of website development. And there is a legal requirement to produce accessible websites, but as I have said before, that is not the most important reason to do it. It is not easy to find simple guides to getting accessibility right, but I will keep looking. Just as important though, is the need to test your sites after you have done your best. Steve Faulkner of the Vision Australia Foundation presented a paper at the AusWeb conference last year on automated testing tools. You can do this testing online at no charge (as long as you don't abuse the service) or pay for software that you download. Such services will give you an indication of how you are going, but no more than that. Steve's paper is at http://www.it-test.com.au/index.asp?inc=&line=&parentnav=resources&subsection=resource1. For a more comprehensive (and useful) check, you are better off paying a company with the appropriate credentials to perform a combination of automated and visual checks, and maybe produce for you a guide tailored to your needs.

And what about those little logos?

When you have had your accessibility checked and you have found your site has passed the test, you may be tempted to put a little logo on your site that says something like 'Bobby Approved'. Well you can, but why would you want to do it? It doesn't really tell your disabled users much about the site; it is really more about parading your (apparent) credentials to the world. And is that what you are trying to do?

The right text

One aspect of writing for the Web that affects both accessibility and searching is having the right link text, that is, the name of the link that is displayed on the page. This is important for people using screen readers, because they can skip through the page from link to link, with the reader announcing what each link is about. You can see that such a user would make more sense of 'Contact us' than they would 'Click here'. As for searching, Google and other search engines use the link text to determine the popularity (and relevance) of a page. A Google search on 'click here' returns the Adobe Reader Download page; not because that page features the words 'click here' prominently, but because that is the link text so many people use in linking to that page. There is more on this at http://www.e-consultancy.com/forum/101703-writing-effective-link-text.html.

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Filling or just flaky?

The debate about breadcrumbs continues. They can be useful, as an additional navigation feature, but there is lots of evidence that users ignore them. They do not really tell you where you have been but they give an indication of the structure of the site and the context of the current page. And they might be used more if the users would only learn more about them. Frustrating, isn't it? Some recent thoughts are in Kath Straub's article at http://www.humanfactors.com/downloads/oct04.asp#kath.

For the record

The International Association of Sound and Audiovisual Archives (IASA) has released 'Guidelines on the production and preservation of digital audio objects'. They discuss key principles and standards, metadata, signal extraction from originals and target formats in the production and preservation of digital audio objects. There's also information on the reproduction of optical disk media such as CD and DVD and digital magnetic carriers. The publication is currently only available in hardcopy, and can be ordered from http://www.iasa-web.org/iasa0022.htm.

A different view on information

Greg Notess' article 'The changing information cycle' at http://www.infotoday.com/online/sep04/OnTheNet.shtml explores the dynamic nature of publishing on the web, compared to the print medium. He looks at how the web can be used to present information and also (in the case of comments in the Wikipedia) allow for annotations to the material that is published. Which is interesting to those of us involved in information, but does the presence of a 'comments' area outweigh the misinformation presented in so many Wikipedia entries? We know that many users of the web do not have the critical faculties to evaluate what they find — and many are probably in too much of a hurry to get 'the answer' from a site and then get out of there. So, what is to be done about incorrect entries and sites? Education, and more education, I suppose.

Keenly anticipated

The OCKHAM Initiative received a grant from the US National Science Foundation to develop a network of services that will improve the deployability of the National Science Digital Library (http://nsdl.org/) in traditional libraries. The initial work will produce the OCKHAM Network, a suite of interoperable digital library services for use by traditional libraries. It will be based on simple, open approaches and standards for digital library tools, services, and content. Follow its progress at http://www.ockham.org.

LC and friends

In a distributed approach to archiving, the Library of Congress has awarded about US$15 million to various teams in thirty-five participating institutions to create an archive for materials that start life digitally, such as web pages, satellite maps, aerial photos, television shows, opinion polls and voting records. They will also develop strategies for determining which material is worth saving and how it should be saved. Details on the National Digital Information Infrastructure and Preservation Program can be found at http://www.digitalpreservation.gov/.

I know I have read it somewhere...

Google has a new service — Google Print — in which they will scan and index books supplied by publishers willing to participate. In doing this, they will match the service that Amazon already offers. They say at http://print.google.com/ that you will not be able to read a whole book online, but it will be a good way to find that elusive quotation that you think that you have read somewhere.

The future of searching, again

There is an interview with search expert Ramesh Jain at http://www.acm.org/ubiquity/interviews/v5i29_jain.html, in which he discusses new strategies in information retrieval research. The interview was no doubt a result of his white paper on 'Next Generation Search', published in August at http://www.acm.org/ubiquity/interviews/v5i29_jain.html (the paper is headed 'Early draft. Please don't circulate' but I think we can ignore that direction). He suggests that, apart from the terms supplied by the user, many other factors need to be taken into account — context, personal preferences, the time when the search is conducted and the user's location. He sees a number of advanced technologies being exploited more in the future: clustering the search results for better categoriation, better use of metadata, visualisation and multimedia searching.

Rights management report

The UK Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) commissioned a study on Digital Rights Management and the final report has been published at http://www.intrallect.com/drm-study/. Not surprisingly, the report recommends that there should more work carried out in areas such as good practice guides, common licences and practical examples of DRM technology. Nevertheless, this document provides a pretty good overview of the subject. ∎

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