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Kerry Webb

kerry.webb@alianet.alia.org.au

Where are we going?

The Smart Internet Cooperative Research Centre has put on its collective thinking cap and come up with a few ideas on what the internet may look like in 2010. The investigation has been built around four schools of thought: 'Adaptive user environment', 'Not the smart internet', 'Rich media' and 'Chaos rules'. From there, the report looks at what might happen; it's not prescriptive but rather offers possibilities on which strategic thinking might be based. The full report is at <http://www.smartinternet.com.au/SITWEB/pdf/Smart%20Internet%202010.pdf>.

Not so smart, though?

The report has generated little comment so far, but the format in which it's published has been criticised. In its PDF form, it's 1.24mb, has no explicit navigation structure and is full of extraneous images. As one person noted, it's based more on the printing paradigms of 1910 rather than a century later.

Not in print yet

I've written about the Google Print Library Project and the objections raised by various publishers. Well, it seems the fighting has only just begun. In the latest round the publisher bodies have strongly denounced Google's copying of books without first seeking permission from the copyright holder. Google insists that they'll only be making a small portion of each work available in search results (and therefore will comply with 'fair use' provisions) but the publishers are having none of this. The result is that Google has suspended its scanning activities until November. There's more at <http://www.techweb.com/wire/ebiz/170101412>.

In the wake of Katrina

It seems that the world keeps on throwing up examples of how the internet can bring people together when there's a craving for information. The dreadful damage on the US Gulf Coast has been kept in our minds so effectively by the activities of bloggers, as well as the more traditional news networks. Just one example is the Civil War Damage Assessment at <http://thepresentpast.blogspot.com/> where enthusiasts can keep abreast of what's happening in their particular area of interest. Sad to say, there are many similar websites.

And speaking of blogging

comScore Media Metrix has conducted a study titled 'Behaviors of the blogosphere: Understanding the scale, composition and activities of weblog audiences', giving particular attention to the demographics of users of blogging sites. Their findings include that 50 million US internet users visited blog sites in the first quarter of 2005 (around

16 per cent of the total US population), political blogs were the most popular, and blog readers visit nearly twice as many web pages as an average internet user. The report is at <http://www.comscore.com/blogreport/comScoreBlogReport.pdf>.

So many options

Various reports say that Australia lags behind much of the developed world in the takeup of broadband connectivity (but then we're also told that we're only just better than Hungary in terms of affordability of telephone services). I'm about the take the plunge but the big question is 'Which broadband provider will best meet my needs?' Ivan Trundle directed me to <http://www.whirlpool.net.au/> where there is a wealth of information about the various providers and up-to-date explanations of their plans, as well as plenty of general news about the Australian broadband scene. To help in choosing a provider, select 'Broadband choice' on the home page.

Site statistics

One aspect of having website that's often overlooked is analysing information about your visitors. Of course, you can pay for a professional service or even buy some software to do it for you, but there's a lot that you can get from the most basic logs supplied by your hosting provider. In an article at Web-Source, Michael Rock provides an introduction to the sort of data provided in these logs, and an explanation for some of the jargon. The article is at <http://www.web-source.net/feature1000.htm>.

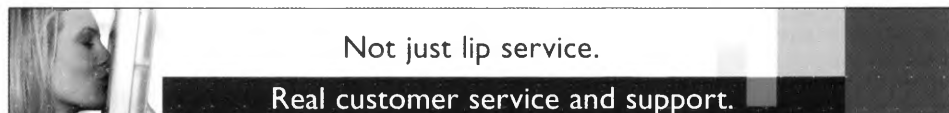
Search strategies

And another benefit of looking at site statistics is scanning search logs, which can give you information on what your users are looking for, but more particularly how they frame their searches. Our local intranet mostly features information about IT policies in the ACT government, but people hopefully look for all manner of things on it. Last month, there was a sequence of searches, starting with 'vehicules' which gave no results. The next was 'vehilces', with the same outcome. Finally, the user entered 'cars' — with rather more success.

Who said that?

From the fine folks at Stumpers-L comes another gem: Fagan Finder at <http://www.faganfinder.com/quotes/>, a site where you can search for quotes and proverbs, and lots more. You can specify which source to use (Bartleby or Wikiquote, for example) or you can select a link to another site for specialist information, such as lyrics or dictionaries and thesauri.

*...a few ideas on what
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Multicultural site

The MyLanguage site addresses the needs of people whose main language is not English. A partnership between State Libraries and Territory Libraries, it is a resource tool for library services and staff specialising in the provision of library services to culturally and linguistically diverse communities. The site provides access to guidelines, standards, reports, articles, research and conference papers on various aspects of multicultural library services. The site is only sparsely populated at present, but will grow into something worthwhile. See it at http://www.mylanguage.gov.au/cgi-bin/for_libraries/index.cgi/.

WSIS and ICANN

There's an interview with Paul Twomey at <http://www.wpherald.com/storyview.php?StoryID=20050801-092013-4925r>, in which the president and chief executive officer of ICANN discusses the report on internet governance coming out of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). Twomey is understandably cagey about the report (and politely declines to endorse any of its four proposed models), but acknowledges its contribution to the debate. It's nevertheless clear that he sees a lot of good in the status quo and ICANN's current close working arrangement with the US government. All of which indicates that there'll be a lot of discussion at the next WSIS meeting in November.

A proposal for a licensing consortium

With the support of the National Library, a reference group comprising many of our peak library bodies has been looking at the feasibility of creating a national, cross-sectoral libraries consortium. Its main goal would be to negotiate and purchase national licences for a number of key online information resources that are of central importance to meeting the information needs of Australians. The proposal can be found at <http://www.nla.gov.au/initiatives/meetings/sitelicense/nlproposal.html>.

Some views on PDF accessibility

The WEBAIM (WEB Accessibility In Mind) site is a collection of useful accessibility resources, as well as being the home for a discussion list on the topic. One of its recent features is a lengthy tutorial on the best way to use PDF files on your website. It's comprehensive, but it can be summed up in two recommendations: have an HTML equivalent to any PDF files, and make the PDF file natively accessible by having all of the appropriate mark-up. Of course, there's a lot more to it than that, and you should look at the complete document (which addresses ways to do these two things) at <http://www.webaim.org/techniques/acrobat/>.

A slightly different view is given by Joe Clark on A List Apart, although he supports the general points made in the WEBAIM document. He gives a lot more background (treading the well-worn path of the SOCOG case, among others) and explains the various reasons why you might need to use a PDF file. And he makes the very valid point that accessibility is not just for blind people: those with motor skills disability may be affected by excessive scrolling. See it at http://www.alistapart.com/articles/pdf_accessibility/.

Cultural institutions and accessibility

Last year, the UK Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) commissioned a Web accessibility audit from City University London. It was based on two samples of websites: 300 from museums, libraries and archives in England and an international comparison sample of 25 websites from national museums from around the world. They initially used a number of automated tools to select candidate sites and then established a panel of 15 disabled people — blind, partially sighted and dyslexic — to conduct more in-depth assessments. Some of the main problems encountered were: poor page design, ambiguously named links, difficult colour schemes and contrast, no 'skip navigation' links and confusing external links. Apart for the obvious lessons learned, the audit will provide a useful baseline for future comparisons. The full report is at <http://www.ariadne.ac.uk/issue44/petrie-weisen/>.

The ABC of indexes

In addition to search facilities and site maps, an A-Z index can be a very useful part of a site navigation strategy. Indexes can be easy to set up, but the ongoing maintenance as the site develops and grows is often enough to turn a developer off the idea of having one at all. This paper does get a bit technical (not surprising in a developers' site) and you'll understand it better if you're familiar with Javascript, but it's an interesting exposition. See it at <http://www.devarticles.com/c/a/Web-Design-Usability/Easy-as-A-B-C-dynamic-A-to-Z-indexes/>.

For nosy users?

Not that we need a new piece of jargon, but the article at http://www.steptwo.com.au/papers/kmc_informationscent/ has some interesting ideas about understanding the way that users make their way around a site, using the concept of 'information scent'. It's a way of explaining how people get an indication of where they should be looking. A good example of a poor scent is a badly thought-out classification system with separate entries for 'audio/TV' and 'computing'. In such a case, where would you look for 'iPod'? ■

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