Webb's web

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The problem with developing any site architecture is trying to guess how users will find content on your site.

A star turn

An interesting article that I read recently is by Keith Robinson on the Asterisk site. Aside from a discussion on folksonomies (of which, more below) he discusses a whole range of issues about home pages, findability, automatic redirections using search facilities, and so on. As with many of these online articles, much of the benefit comes from the people who respond to the original posting, including this comment 'The problem with developing any site architecture is trying to guess how users will find content on your site.' It is so obvious when you see it spelled out like that. The article is at http://www.7nights.com/asterisk/archive/2005/01/thinking-differently-about-site-mapping-and-navigation.

Uncontrolled vocabularies

And so to folksonomies. They appear to be one of the new buzzwords that have slipped in the back door over the past few months (and for an example of how it works, have a look at the http://del.icio.us site that I mentioned in the previous column). Before we abandon the term to the graveyard of all fadwords, just think a bit about the concept. Controlled vocabularies have their place, but I am having doubts that the web is that place. Louis Rosenfeld and his respondents at http://louisrosenfeld.com/home/bloug_archive/000330.html have a good discussion on the subject, including one statement that caused me to go back and read it again, for comprehension: 'It helps users generate standard metadata'. Truly we live in a remarkable world.

Facets of information

Another subject coming in for more attention is faceted navigation. Along with the concepts described above, it has great potential for improving access to information on the web, as long as it is made easy for the user. Fortunately, that is not too difficult, as long as you keep thinking about what you are trying to achieve. There is a short introduction to the subject — entitled 'A primer on faceted navigation and guided navigation' by Steve Papa at http://www.kmworld.com/publications/specialpublication/index.cfm?action=readarticle&Article_ID=1910&Publication_ID=122.

NARA on web document management

The US National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) has released a document providing guidance on the management of web records, a function essential to effective website operations. It covers not only the content contained on websites, but also the records of website operations. It may seem like a tedious requirement, but many managers overlook the fact that web-based operations have as much validity as more traditional ways of carrying out your business. Despite the many references in this document to US Government requirements, there is much in it to show us all how to do it better. Get the document at http://www.archives.gov/records_management/policy_and_guidance/managing_web_records_index.html.

More on semantics

At the beginning of December, I attended a Forum on the Semantic Web, arranged by DC-ANZ, and if anyone wants to know how it all works, I have a very attractive t-shirt that explains it fully. You can find links to the Forum and some notes on the discussions from Liddy Neville at http://www.dc-anz.org/index.html. The key speaker at the Forum was Libby Miller from the EU-funded SWAD-Europe project (which provided the t-shirt) and there is a description of SWAD at http://www.w3c.org/2001/sw/Europe/. Meanwhile, you can discover more about Semantic Web research at http://www.xml.com/pub/a/2005/01/26/simile.html where the SIMILE project is explained.

Website hosting

For many of us, it is not a problem — our organisation either has an in-house operation where we have to go to get our sites hosted or there is an arrangement that has been set up with an outside organisation. But for those who have to go looking for somewhere to get the job done, it is useful to have some idea of what you should be asking for. The UK government has produced a collection of website guidelines, among them the Procurement section which provides advice on the main issues that should be taken into account in securing services for the design and hosting of websites. See it at http://e-government.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/assetRoot/04/00/06/65/04000665.pdf.

Who's looking over your shoulder?

It seems that every time Google announces one of its new ventures, someone comes up with some concerns about unforseen implications. Which is a pretty good thing. The latest is Daniel Brandt's analysis of the Google Print initiative and the way that they use a single, unifying cookie that tracks a user's experience across all Google services and products. The biggest problem with this is the *US Patriot Act*, which gives US security forces access to the records kept by public libraries and private corporations (although the American Library Association is working hard to temper some of the Act's provisions). Do you want the US government (or any government) to know about what you are reading online? There is more on this at http://www.google-watch.org/.

Thinking ahead

One service that Daniel has not commented on yet is Google Suggest. Currently at the stage

of Beta testing, it looks at what you are typing into the search window, and tries to interpret what the completed search term may be, and offers suggestions in a drop down list. This can also advise on a range of terms that might be applicable to what you have already typed. For the moment, it is at http://labs.google.com/suggest/.

Names, names, names
There is a list of many links to all sorts of place names around the world at http://www.lowchensaustralia.com/names/placenames.htm.

Drawing from a very diverse range of sources, it points to sites all around the world that talk about place names and their meanings.

Librarians online
In the middle of December, the first phase of the new People's Network Service was launched in the United Kingdom, delivering a real-time information service to the public by providing 'live' access to library and information professionals across the internet. In the initial phase, twenty-nine library authorities in England are piloting the service, and the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council, which is behind the service, expects that by the end of 2005 all 149 library authorities in England will contribute to it. There is more at http://www.peoplesnetwork.gov.uk/.

Letting the users choose
Where those with an interest in usability get together, the discussion ranges freely about how to help the users find what they need, although there is a growing body of opinion that says that search engines — both global and within the site — are not only the preferred choice of users but also the most efficient way to present information. Some sites let users 'guess' URLs and the site then makes assumptions about what they want (see the Keith Robinson article above). An example is Microsoft, where you can type in http://www.microsoft.com/<productname>/ and you will be instantly redirected to the appropriate part of the site. I do not know if they use search technology to achieve this, but some others do, and the results are pretty good. Of course, letting users know that this is an option is another matter.

Simple as ABC
For traditionalists though, site maps and indexes provide a good alternative. In a defence of A-Z indexes, Heather Hedden at Site Point argues that although they cost more (especially if you do it right and employ a professional) they are far more accurate than search engines. I would not go that far, but they can be useful, especially if we recognise that the user population is quite varied — some like searching, some like lists, others prefer graphical layouts. See what Heather says

about it at http://www.sitepoint.com/article/a-z-indexes.

More on navigation
And then there is the argument about where to put the navigation tools. In an article in *Web Pro News*, Meghan Whitmore describes some of the research that has been carried out into the best place to put navigation bars. It is quite interesting in that one study found that there was little difference in the users' reaction to navigation being on the left or right side of the screen. Nevertheless, I expect that the left side will continue to be the main location, because that is where we are used to seeing it. She also talks about the use of breadcrumbs. Although some studies have shown that their presence improves site navigation, it seems that the overall use of breadcrumbs is low, probably because of the difficulty of expressing the concepts in just a few words for each element in the path. The article is at http://www.webpronews.com/webdevelopment/basicdevelopment/wpn-37-20041210WebsiteUsabilityBreadcrumbsandLeftSideNavigation.html.

How the web works
The good folks at the World Wide Web Consortium have laboured hard to produce a definitive document on the 'Architecture of the World Wide Web' and they have generously given it the subtitle 'Volume One'. Opinion is divided on how useful it is, with some suggesting that is the sort of document that everyone mentions, few read and almost no-one understands. But you could say that of so many things, and I think the critics miss the point. It is the sort of document that you need to be able to go to when you want to check on some particular aspect of how the Web works. It is readable, without being great literature; it's a reference work. Decide for yourself at http://www.w3.org/TR/2004/REC-webarch-20041215/.

Survey of UK users
A new UK survey published recently has taken a look at the issues of reliability of information found on the internet, and the extent to which users feel they can trust the information they find there. It found that information provided through the websites of more established organisations such as museums, libraries and archives are most likely to gain much more trust from the people who visit them, especially in comparison to more commercial websites such as utility companies, travel agencies and internet-only retail companies. One finding was that more than half of all current users (fifty-four per cent) of the web use it as their preferred information source. Forty per cent have done so in connection with their own education, and twenty-five per cent in connection with their own children's learning. The full results of the survey are at http://www.common-info.org.uk/audienceresearch.shtml. ■

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