

Innovative **ideas** available **here**

Webb's web



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Good ideas

The National Library held its Innovative Ideas Forum in mid-April, and – like the first one last year – it was well worth attending. A carefully selected mix of speakers from here and overseas entertained the audience and left us with many ideas to consider. I was particularly interested in what Abby Blachly had to say about LibraryThing – like users of most systems I'm only aware of some of its best features, and she revealed quite a few new things as well as telling us more about the tiny team that supports over 190 000 users and more than 13 million books. Some of the papers and presentations have been published on the Forum site at <http://www.nla.gov.au/initiatives/meetings/iif07prog.html>. This event was booked out weeks in advance so keep your eyes peeled for next year's announcement.

Tagging for fun and profit

The other eye-opener was Susan Chun's presentation on the Steve project (<http://www.steve.museum>) on social tagging in art museums. Her introduction to the presentation set the scene very well and made it obvious why social tagging may be needed. It also set me thinking about the purpose of art institutions, museums and libraries. If they are to be the high citadels of culture, with access to be mediated by the expert custodians, then it makes sense to let curators decide what information's to be put in the catalogue. If, on the other hand, you want ordinary people to find what they're looking for then you'll try to discover how they would describe the works in the collection. Go to the Steve site, join the project, do your own tagging and see how it works. It's fun, and not as easy as it might seem.

As simple as...

Another speaker at the Forum, Courtney Gibson from the ABC, gave a wide-ranging and entertaining talk about Aunty's digital future (hers is one of the papers published by the NLA). One of several points I noted from her talk was a series of Web principles from the BBC on

Tom Loosemore's blog – http://www.tomski.com/archive/new_archive/000063.html – I think that's a list worth noting.

As we say

Anyone interested in the development of our language (by which I mean the Oz variant) will find plenty to enjoy at the Australian National Dictionary Centre (<http://www.anu.edu.au/andc/pubs/ozwords/>). You can subscribe to their free e-mail newsletter and look at old issues. In last October's edition, there was a great little article by Visiting Fellow Sarah Ogilvie about a Brisbane man who's submitted over 10 000 quotations to the OED and to the ANDC.

Other language sites

As we appreciate every day, the English language is a real work-in-progress here and elsewhere, and our lives are (usually) richer for exposure to its various branches. Because of its massive influence, the American variant is hard to ignore, and if you want to keep track of it, have a look at American Dialect Society (<http://www.americandialect.org>). The newsletter tends to be quite serious, but the section Book Blurbs has some interesting mini-reviews on new books on language-related topics. If that's not enough, try Grant Barrett's 'Double-Tongued Word Wrestler Dictionary' (<http://www.doubletongued.org>), which 'records undocumented or under-documented words from the fringes of English'. One feature that I like is a custom search facility that lets you look for words not only on this, but also on other language sites.

A class act

I'm not a cataloguer – I describe my stuff on LibraryThing, but that's all. So I don't really care about whether my tags conform to accepted standards, and whether the publication data that I put in is in the absolute correct format. But some people do, among them the growing number who are using the system for their organisations' (usually small) holdings. A person recently asked for advice on what call numbers she could use in her health-related collection. One

useful suggestion was the NLM Classification at <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/class/>.

It's not only words

Yahoo! has announced that it will be providing access to over 400 000 song lyrics under an agreement with Gracenote. The lyrics, from five major music publishers, can be accessed by title, artist and words from the songs at <http://music.yahoo.com> and if you want, you can buy recordings of the songs as well.

The rock and the other place

As I write this, there's a huge brouhaha over at Digg (<http://www.digg.com>) about publishing a hack that can circumvent encryption on HD-DVDs. This particular issue will probably have blown over in a few weeks, but the underlying concerns will take longer to subside. After complying with a request from the owners of the encryption technology to take down stories and references to the hack, the site was overwhelmed with diggers posting comments containing the thirty-two hex digits of the hack. So the owners of Digg had a change of heart (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/6615047.stm>). They're still liable for legal action (as are the thousands of other sites that host any comments containing the code) and we'll be watching this carefully. It shows though that it's one thing to let your community create content and rank it, but an entirely different matter to live with the results of that choice.

Court proceedings

Yet another great project from the UK, courtesy of government and lottery funding, is the Online Proceedings of the Old Bailey, offering access to records of 100 000 trials from 1674–1834. You can look through the database using names (of criminals and victims), places, type of punishment, date and so on. A quick search shows quite a few Webbs transported for various misdemeanours – no relation of course. But it gives quite an insight into the justice system of the era. See it at <http://www.oldbaileyonline.org/>.

A good body of work

There are various sources for images on the Web, but if you're wanting to use them for high quality reproduction you'll often be disappointed – they'll be expensive or poor quality (or sometimes both). MorgueFile (<http://morguefile.com>) is different – its pictures have all been given to the site by their creators under specific but usable terms and conditions, and the images are all of high enough quality for print publications.

The Calhoun Report

A couple of years ago, the Library of Congress commissioned a study by Karen Calhoun (formerly at Cornell and now a Vice-President of OCLC) into the future of library catalogues. The result is the report at <http://www.loc.gov/catdir/calhoun-report-final.pdf>. It's been out for about a year now (and this will no doubt be old news to many readers) but it's a very good analysis of where catalogues are at (especially those in research libraries) and how they can meet the needs of their users – many of whom may believe that they can do it all themselves.

I'm wild about Oats

It's good to see more attention being given to providing services to people with disabilities. We notice this mostly in the creation of accessible websites, but what about the other side of the coin – the technology that makes it all possible? That's where Oatsoft (<http://www.oatsoft.org>) site comes in. You go there to find out about Open Source Assistive Technology – not just screen readers, but various types of tools to enable people to use their computers better.

Familiar territory

I came across an interesting story about website development and the value of branding. It concerned the Wells Fargo Bank in the USA and a website redesign that they did a few years ago. It passed through several phases of testing and approval, but when they took it to the customers it failed on the question of 'user confidence'.

Why? The design didn't feature the traditional image of a stagecoach that users associated with the organisation. Back to the drawing board.

Switched on sites

The simplest lessons are often so easy to forget. In his blog entry at <http://green-beast.com/blog/?p=169> Mike Cherim points out the importance of linking usability and design very closely. You shouldn't regard a site design as an opportunity to change the world, and you definitely shouldn't require your users to go through some sort of training course before they can make their way around it. He reminds us that a visit to a new site should be like setting up a new television or VCR. There will be a user manual of course, but the best-designed devices are those where you'll never (or very rarely) need to refer to the manual. Plug and play is what it should be about.

Look in the dictionary

Most of the time you'll never need to know, but in the information industry there'll be users who ask the curly questions. And then in your professional reading, you'll come across that term that just needs to be explained. If the subject is search engines, there's a lot of information in the Search Engine Dictionary (<http://www.searchenginedictionary.com>). So when your SEO comes to fix your page rank and suggests tweaking your robots.txt file to let the spiders in and improve your ROI, you'll have a better idea about what on earth they're talking about.

Comic cuts

If we don't watch out, we'll lose our reputation for being a serious profession. I've written previously about the shelved cartoons (<http://www.overduemedia.com/>) – checkout their Sunday Book Club strips. Now there's Turn the Page at <http://librarycartoons.blogspot.com/> which is often very good indeed.



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