

You can see it: but can everyone else?

Webb's web



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Some good coming out of the conflict

There's been a nice little firefight going on about gender balance and diversity among conference speakers. It started when Jason Kottke (at <http://www.kottke.org/>) did some analysis of the percentage of women speakers at various major web conferences, to which Eric Meyer (at <http://meyerweb.com>) replied with some inflammatory thoughts which of course were picked up and volleyed back by a not-so-diverse group. Well, the debate (if you can call it that) has had a positive result. Kevin Lawver has put together a page of helpful hints if you want to take the first step in getting onto the conference speaking circuit – whatever your gender, race or other distinguishing characteristic. See it at http://lawver.net/archive/2007/02/26/h20_how_to_get_to_speak_at_web_conferences.php.

Claim with baggage

As various news items cross my (virtual) desk, I have to decide what to do with them. Some are dropped, but some warrant a second look. Jyte (<http://www.jyte.com/>) allows you to make claims (such as whether your football team is going to do well this year) and then other people vote on them. That's not particularly useful, but

Not a good idea, to shut out large numbers of users

one thing caught my eye: you register on the system by setting up a personal ID on a service called OpenID, which wants to offer this facility to all sorts of sites. My first impressions are not favourable though: the OpenID site spawns a host of pop-up ads that

you may not wish to see, and more when you leave the site.

Something similar

The same sort of thing (but just a little different) is eduStyle at <http://www.edustyle.net/> which doesn't say much about what it is, but appears to be a collection of links to university and college sites, with the opportunity for users to rate the sites and add their comments. Registering and logging in is easy (compared to Jyte) and it is quite convenient to browse all the sites listed there.

Finding out about science

The US government's science search portal at <http://www.science.gov> has just gone through an upgrade to provide much better search facilities. They get their information from 30 federal scientific databases and more than 1800 web sites, and the search now features a relevancy ranking architecture based on the full text of documents, rather than just metadata and general bibliographic information. One nice feature of the service is the ability to search the portal's complete catalogue of data sources or only those within a defined subject group.

More learned searching

If you don't already know about it, hop over to Intute at <http://www.intute.ac.uk>. It's been set up by a consortium of seven UK universities who work with many partners (mostly in the public sector) to evaluate web resources and provide a structured approach to help people find and use them.

Their database contains over 100000 records. As with Science.gov you can do general searches or limit them to specific areas.

Web writing

Christian Heilmann has given us a funny article with plenty of insight on Writing for the Web. As a writer and content editor, he's well-qualified to provide this sort of advice. Apart from the humorous examples, the most interesting part is when he points out the ways in which the web is so different from other media (try telling that to your Communication Unit when they bring the Annual Report to you for publishing). The presentation is at http://icant.co.uk/articles/writing_for_web.pdf.

A real page turner

To coincide with the launch of Microsoft's Vista operating system, the British Library demonstrated its Turning the Pages 2.0 system that enables the user to read digitised versions of some of the world's greatest books and manuscripts – providing a user has Vista, but that was the point of the launch, I suppose. It's an intriguing concept, but I wonder if it's a good idea to shut out so many users who won't be able to access it. There's more information at <http://www.bl.uk/ttp2/ttp2.html> and if you want to find out about Vista, there are many places you can go.

Accessibility and diversity

And while I'm on access, I have to observe that you win some, and you lose some. Just when I was celebrating my financial institution upgrading its website so that I could bank online with my chosen laptop and browser, I find my local library system has introduced an online audiobook service that can't be used by around 10 per cent of the population of computer users (those of us with Macs). I know it's

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tough providing these services to as many people as possible, but I'd like to think that they'd just try a little harder.

Needs more work

It can be a good thing to put some provocative statements in a column (not that I'd ever do that, oh no!), you should have some substance in your claims. Jakob Nielsen was trying to demonstrate that government or non-profit organisations can get significant return on investment with good usable sites, but he went a little too far in claiming a 22000 per cent ROI for a Californian government site. His basic points are good, but such an over-the-top claim does little for his credibility. Decide for yourself: read it at <http://www.useit.com/alertbox/government-nonprofit.html>.

A carefully architected summarisation

I found a kindred soul in Erin Kissane, posting on A List Apart (a poor acronym there, but at least it's not A List Incredibly Apart) in her attack on Zombie words. You know them when you see them: the language of mission statements, crammed with phrases like 'leveraging world-class infrastructure strengths', and you see them on too many websites. She gives you sensible alternatives to ensure that you're not inducing nausea – or even boredom – in your readers. It's at <http://alistapart.com/articles/zombiecopy>.

Under the hood

One of the many things I like about Google is the way that their experts are prepared to post views, opinions and information so that we can use their systems better (good strategy there). On the Google Blog at <http://googleblog.blogspot.com> in January, Dan Crow started a series of postings revealing some of the

ins and outs of the search engines' interactions with websites. The first was on blocking sites and pages from the search spiders, followed by another on the use of metatags.

Book lovers speak out

Just to balance the ledger, there are many people ready to go on the record saying just how much they owe to their libraries. The Love Libraries campaign in the UK has put up a site, with notable quotes from library lovers at <http://www.lovelibraries.co.uk/quotes.php>.

Understanding your website

As we all know, there are many types of disability, even if the one most people are concerned about is blindness. The problem is that it's probably the easiest one to think about. You can do a lot with some well-placed ALT text and a bit of consideration of colour contrast, but I haven't seen too much information around on other forms of cognitive disability. One welcome addition is the series of articles on designing for dyslexics, with the first at <http://accessites.org/site/2006/10/designing-for-dyslexics-part-1-of-3/#n25> and links to the subsequent parts on that page.

As you see it

Colour blindness is an issue for a significant group in the community, and you need to be aware of it in designing websites. At <http://colorvisiontesting.com/> you'll find a lot of background information explaining the various aspects of the condition, and most usefully, a number

of images that show just how people with different types of colour blindness will perceive an image.

Another good introduction to CSS

The use of cascading style sheets can be a little insidious. I was recently developing a web page on my home computer – one that would never be externally accessed, but just a guide to documents within the system, so there was no consideration of efficient loading of the page or any of the other reasons that you might want to use CSS. I was about to do it the 'old way' but then thought that it was worth the extra effort to use style sheets. If you're similarly inclined, but aren't sure where to start, look at http://www.adobe.com/devnet/dreamweaver/articles/first_css.html.

The value of standards compliance

Ethan Marcotte has written an article about the use of web standards that rambles a little, but contains a gem: an analysis of the benefit of writing valid code. In his first year in business, he found that around 15 per cent of his time was spent fixing invalid HTML. A good selling point for adherence to standards, isn't it? See the article at <http://alistapart.com/articles/whereourstandardswentwrong>.

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