

Data about books

Geoff Nunberg started an interesting discussion on the metadata in Google Books in the Language Log blog (<http://languageblog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=1701>). The thing I appreciated most was that the people at Google took the time to respond – in a polite and very helpful manner. From what they said they are very well aware of the problems with the metadata and are willing to do something about them. It's also revealed that Google have sourced their metadata from some very strange places – Central Europe and South America for instance. Meanwhile, another of the respondents recommended the newly updated Harvard online catalogue (<http://hollisweb.harvard.edu>) which has links to Harvard's material that's been scanned into Google Books. The interface to the catalogue is not perfect, but it does have some very nice features indeed.

Taking the good with the bad

Tom Davenport has ruffled a few feathers with a provocative post titled *Are Social Media Contributing to the Decline of Civilization?* at <http://tinyurl.com/qxfcjf>. The obvious answer is "yes", but of course there are so many other contributors – and it's been happening since way before even Web 1.0 made its way into our lives. And while I don't completely agree with him, I won't be cancelling my subscription to his RSS feed either. He's right that there is a whole lot of trivial usage of Twitter et al (note the comment from one respondent about social media people adding to the cognitive deficit), but by carefully choosing who to follow you'll come across many gems that would have lain otherwise hidden. It's a set of tools, after all. I won't be signing up to OMGICU though. There are much better things to do – even gardening.

Living with the Gorilla

In a research paper in *First Monday* (<http://tinyurl.com/kj9qxd>), Vivienne Waller from Swinburne University has examined the relationship between Google and public libraries. She looks at search results (and the confusion between paid and organic results), censorship, and the mixed feelings we all have towards the company. At the heart of the relationship though is the sad fact that each side wants something different – we want to provide information (and we wouldn't mind if the clients kept on coming back for me) while for Google the act of returning is paramount and the provision of information is a secondary consideration. The paper is very well researched and written, and will provide anyone with plenty to think about. The challenge now is to get the right people to read it – especially the folks in the higher reaches of management who continue to question our existence with the "everything's there on the Web" mantra.

Thoughts on design

It's fashionable for some of the eager young things of the web 2.0 world to be somewhat dismissive of Jakob Nielsen, whether because of his dogmatic stance or the design of his newsletters or just because they think they know better (and I'll admit that you do have to struggle through the extremely minimalist design of his site). I do like him, though. The sort of advice that he provides is timeless, and unlike many of his critics his observations are evidence-based. In some of his recent thoughts on redesign at <http://www.useit.com/alertbox/familiar-design.html> he makes a couple of points that we need to hear over and over: users don't care about design for its own sake (they just want to get the job done) and we must never forget that users spend most of their time on other sites.

Professionally speaking

There's a little rant by Noah Stokes at <http://tinyurl.com/nyjr9x> that caught my eye. He's offering some thoughts to web designers, generally telling them not to be so precious about IE6, to just accept that clients often don't know what they're talking about and to concentrate on educating the clients; in short, stop whining. He's a little over the top, but much of it makes sense. Web design is something that anyone can do, but it takes someone with skills and experience to do it well. And web designers have a long way to go before we can lay any claim to the heights of the real "professionals", but it's a good idea to start taking a few steps in the right direction.

Many hands light up history

Rose Holley from the National Library's great Newspaper Digitisation Program has written a paper (see <http://tinyurl.com/yk34add>) describing the project in some detail. The paper is a very good example, not of 'how we done it right' but of the proper way to go into a project, taking your time to do some planning and risk management, but also being prepared to try something, and if it doesn't quite succeed then change your tack and have another go. And the results are there to see – especially the remarkable contributions of a number of dedicated volunteers (how do they find the time?) And as for the intemperate comment made by someone that of course it had all been done before by Project Gutenberg, I say "faugh!"

Lower your sights, but not your standards

To many people who go to websites, the footer is just that stuff at the bottom of the page, a section that the eye glides over in search of what really matters on the screen. Well that's as may be, but there's a definite trend to put more useful stuff down there – I've written before about it as a place for your site map. If you want to see just how attractive a footer can be, look at <http://tinyurl.com/mdm5r6>

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<http://www.alia.org.au/webbsblog>

