



Kerry Webb

kerry.webb@alianet.alia.org.au

Lighting the way

Searchlight, produced by Thuringowa Library Services in North Queensland, is a weekly column published in the *Townsville Bulletin*. It helps make internet searching more effective, efficient and fun, by reviewing search tools, providing hints and tips, and helping with tricky search topics. You can find the archive of articles from the last couple of years at <http://townsvillebulletin.news.com.au/sectionindex3/0,6674,searchlight^^TEX,00.html>. Check it out — it is impressive.

Patently fair

The United States Patent and Trademark Office has begun to publish patent examiners' decisions on the web, for the benefit of all prospective inventors, through its new system PAIR (Public Patent Application Information Retrieval). Concurrently with this project, they have almost finished converting the paper-based application process to digital methodology. The result is that the correspondence about published applications is available online eighteen months after they have been filed, and is accessible to the public for free. More information is at http://www.uspto.gov/ebc/pair/pair_faq.html.

Still on the topic of intellectual property

The Australia-US Free Trade Agreement will have a significant impact on many aspects of our work (have a look, if you dare, at Chapter 15 on how it will affect government procurement) but the most obvious is in the area of copyright. The Commonwealth Parliamentary Library has produced an impressive guide to copyright and patent law changes resulting from the Agreement, and while there is cause for concern there are some possibilities for change for the better. See it at <http://www.apf.gov.au/library/pubs/CIB/2004-05/05cib03.pdf>.

Lifting the bonnet

One of my colleagues started discussing cookies the other day, and we soon realised that we did not know enough about them. A quick search took me to a great site at <http://www.howstuffworks.com/index.htm>. It is the sort of place where you can spend hours, following all sorts of links and learning, learning, learning. And if you want, you can find out about cookies, in language suited to the meanest intelligence.

Users who know what they want

One of Jakob Nielsen's latest columns at <http://www.useit.com/alertbox/20040816.html> gives a thoughtful analysis of the users' experience and comes to the conclusion that they treat sites as 'an undifferentiated pool of answers'. What he is saying is that they are usually looking for a solution to their problem, rather than enjoying the ride — as many web design-

ers hope they will be doing. If we keep this in mind, we will be offering a better service, even if it is not the service that we really planned.

Cop this lot

The Australian Government Information Management Office (the entity formally known as NOIE) has embraced the concept of Communities of Practice. These are groups that meet — usually in person, but with some online activity — to discuss various issues relating to e-government. One such group is about content management systems, and their page is at <http://www.agimo.gov.au/resources/cop/cm>. There you will find information about their meetings, their discussion list (open to government employees) and various useful resources.

Words to order

One of these days someone is going to ask you which is the 868th most common word in the English language. Well, maybe they will. If you have bookmarked <http://www.wordcount.org/> you will have no trouble providing an answer (it is 'looks'). The site is based on a 100 million-word collection of samples of written and spoken language from a wide range of sources, and is designed to represent an accurate cross-section of current English usage. One interesting aspect is the way that certain words are grouped together, reflecting the way in which they are used.

And on the subject of word usage...

If you get annoyed with people who delight in using tautologies (or even those who have not got a clue what they are talking about) have a look at the absolutely essential site at <http://www.wordexplorations.com/pleonasm.html>.

Just the FAQs

With working on the web (as with many endeavours, I suppose), one of the hardest things to find out is how to get started. This is where FAQs should help, but too many of them are either badly organised or require a good understanding of the issues involved. One that I found recently comes from the DC Web Women site, and the FAQ is at <http://www.dcwebwomen.org/cgi-bin/wgfaq?index>. The section on graphics and fonts is particularly useful.

EU web study

There is a report of a study on conformance to web accessibility and technical standards in four European Union countries (Ireland, the United Kingdom, France and Germany) at http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue9_71/marincu/index.html. The authors tried to get a representative sample of sites from each country across a range of categories. Despite the different numbers in the samples (272 to 5702) the results were similar, with generally poor

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accessibility and a low level of conformance to HTML technical standards. I wonder how we would fare in a similar test.

How to find it?

One issue that generates a fair bit of discussion among webheads is site maps. There would be few users who would make a site map their first choice for navigating a new site: rather it should be a last resort if the navigation and search fails you. And that is why, if you have a map, it should be a good one. The article at <http://www.statelocalgov.net/notes/2004/08/state-sitemaps.htm> found that forty per cent of United States state home pages did not have a site map, and some that appeared were not all that good (North Carolina's is a shocker). The percentage of Australian state portals without one is about the same. The article also points out that a link to a site map is a useful addition to the message that a user gets when the page that they have asked for cannot be found.

Metadata research

The Records Continuum Research Group at Monash University has begun a project titled 'Create once, use many times — the clever use of metadata in e-government and e-business processes in networked environments'. It is developing a prototype to demonstrate how standards-compliant metadata can be created once in particular application environments, then used many times to meet a range of business purposes. The prototype will be implemented in a test-bed site to provide a model for best practice. It is a collaboration between staff from Monash, UCLA, the National Archives of Australia and others. There is a description of details of the projects at <http://www.sims.monash.edu.au/research/rcrg/research/crm/index.html>.

Not quite out of print

The Copyright Agency Limited has launched a project to help you find some classic Australian works that are unavailable in print. The pilot project will publish twenty-five works of fiction that are out of print but mostly still in copyright. Through this system, users will be able to order individual copies of otherwise unavailable books, while paying the copyright owner for the use of their work. Books will be produced using print-on-demand (POD) technology and sent through the mail. Some of the authors whose works will be offered initially are Martin Boyd, Eleanor Dark, Ian Moffitt and Kylie Tennant. More details at <http://www.copyright.com.au/caw.htm>.

Be a master of style

The mysteries of cascading style sheets (CSS) are explained in the *Westciv complete CSS guide*, a free online reference to the whole subject of cascading style sheets. You can access it all free on that site or for a small fee, buy your own copy with some extra features. There is no doubt that CSS have some significant benefits, but if you do not do it right you

will be in big trouble. For example, an ACT government website built with CSS looked fine using Microsoft's Internet Explorer, but under the more rigorous application of standards in the Firefox browser, it was a mess. Learn more about CSS at http://www.westciv.com/style_master/academy/css_tutorial/index.html.

A breath of fresh air

Inspire England is an initiative led by SCONUL, the British Library and the Society of Chief Librarians, aiming to provide a seamless cross-sectoral pathway for learning by adults across public, academic and national libraries. Some of the early demonstration projects involve adult learners who may be outside the world of formal education, encouraging them to access higher education and public libraries to find out information and to develop skills. The libraries involved in these projects have developed co-operative access agreements, which have resulted in increased use of library resources by selected learners. Be inspired at <http://www.inspire.gov.uk>.

Separated by a common language

If you have trouble understanding some Americanisms (or even some word usage among the English) <http://www.effingpot.com/> will help you. This is not quite a two-way guide to the language, but it will help you to carry out useful tasks like decoding recipes posted by Americans. And it is written with a fair sense of humour.

Hot stuff?

Icerocket at <http://www.icerocket.com/> is a metasearch engine that, at first glance, looks like it might have a couple of useful features. One aspect is that in the list of search results, it displays a small image of the home page of the site where each was found, which seems sensible but it does not really tell you much. And clicking on that image takes you not to the home page, but to the 'result' page, which is counter-intuitive. But they do keep a list of the searches that you have done, and with the search results you are given some suggestions for related searches. So, you might find that it meets your needs.


All over the world

Looking for something specific in a country's web environment? There's a bumper list of search engines at <http://www.philb.com/countryse.htm> which covers many countries, including Timor Leste's own *Web directory*. The choices made by the author are a little strange — he has SA Central but no others — but it is a pretty good collection.

...and if you need more reasons to travel

Douglas Hasty's site at <http://www.fiu.edu/~hastyd/lcp.html> lists a large number of library conferences throughout the world, with helpful links to airlines, accommodation, car rental and general travel information. ■

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