Kerry Webb

kerry.webb@alianet.alia.org.au

On topic

L ocal Government New Zealand is look-
ing seriously at the use of topic maps to
help manage access to planning docu-
ments. They considered the technology a cou-
ple of years ago, but found little local expertise
to help them proceed. Now, it looks like there
are enough people around to make it a viable
alternative, although it's only one of several
options being considered. There's more at
http://computerworld.co.nz/news.nsf/NL/
7EE88219C28145E5CC25700F0000965D.

At the summit

It's getting on for two years since the first
meeting of the World Summit on the Infor-
mation Society (WSIS); the next phase will
occur in Tunis this November. A paper by Ajit
K Pyati in First Monday looks at the work that
the WSIS is doing in working towards an In-
formation Society, and particularly the global
Digital Divide. It's a thoughtful examination
of the thinking behind the WSIS agenda, and
he sounds some warnings about the appar-
ent technological determinism behind the
assumptions in the WSIS documents. See it
at http://firstmonday.org/issues/issue10_5/
masum/index.html.

The searchers

A survey of 2100 adults in the United States has
indicated not only the importance of search-
ing (more than 50 per cent reported that they
searched every time they went online), but also
some interesting aspects of their search behav-
iour. Not surprisingly, most people search for
specific topics, and it was also not a surprise
(at least, not to me) to find that almost twice
as many women as men searched for health
and medical information. People also searched
to get directions (again possibly more women
than men), to get news and to shop. And while
Google was the most popular search engine,
the respondents showed a willingness to use
whatever it takes: only 13 per cent said that
they used Google all the time. There's more
information at http://searchenginewatch.com/
searchday/article.php/3519361.

Open source design

One of the most difficult things when you're
starting out in web design is finding good
examples. There's a lot of stuff that you can
copy, but to get the right stuff — that's the
problem. Enter Open Source Web Design at
http://www.oswd.org/. The crew there have
been operating for about five years, providing
designs and advice to all comers. They have a
list of over 1100 design templates, each with
a thumbnail image and information about its
category (business or fun), its popularity and
whether it uses CSS. They also feature inter-
views with the top designers. You can really
learn a lot at this site.

Certificates online

In good news for all types of researchers, the
UK Office for National Statistics (http://www.
statistics.gov.uk/) has awarded a contract for
the scanning, digitisation and indexing of
more than 250 million birth, marriage and
death certificates from 1837 to the present
day. The scanning will be based on the
80 000 microfilms in the current archive, and
is planned for completion in 2008.

For the long haul

We're all aware of the problems of perma-
nence of records — indeed the library and
archives community has spent a great deal
of time and effort in bringing the problem
to the attention of the wider world. Now,
it looks as though it's paying off. An article
in CIO magazine at http://www.cio.com.au/
index.php?id=1074284081&eid=-601 de-
scribes some of the approaches being con-
sidered by the computer industry, especially
in the application of standards in hardware,
data formats and metadata.

Fed up?

And, talking of metadata, it looks like one of
the pioneer projects may be quietly buried.
The Government Information Locator Standard
(GILS) is not being considered as a component
of the search engine for the US Government's
FirstGov site. It hasn't helped that Uncle Sam
did not embrace GILS in the same way that
Australian governments mandated the use of
locator standards, but it seems that the effi-
ciency of today's search engines has removed
the need for metadata. It's interesting that this
also seems to be the attitude of some sen-
ior people in AGIMO, despite the extensive
use of metadata by many Australian search
facilities. The GILS story is at http://www.
fcw.com/article89673-07-25-05-Print/.

Meanwhile, those search engines
just keep rolling

Tyler Huston, in Internet Search Engine Data-
base, reports on a couple of new developments
in the search engine arena. The first is Nutch
(http://lucene.apache.org/nutch/), an open
source project that has developed a full-feature
text search engine library, including an applica-
tion that you can download, that has a crawler,
their own search algorithm and link analysis
software. Then there is an application of Nutch
at ExactSeek (http://www.exactseek.com/)
showing the benefits of the plug-in concept
used in the Firefox browser. The report is at
http://www.isedb.com/news/article/1226/.

Help!

In my July column, I discussed the approach
to Help facilities in operating systems —
Apple vs Windows. There's a further exami-

nation of this at http://www.winwriters.com/articles/navigation/. Robert Krull and Angela Eaton look at a number of issues in using help systems, and the first one — Framing the Search Question — is probably the most important. They point out that, in their studies, users went to Help as a last resort. Now, this is not too surprising, but doesn't it tell you something about how much attention should be paid to Help systems? For instance, you're not just idly searching; you've been stymied in the pursuit of a task and you'd really prefer not to be navigating through an unfamiliar system. Added to which, there's the embarrassment factor that maybe you're not very bright — otherwise you wouldn't be having to pick your way through Contents, Index and Search. Read the paper; it's a good one.

Simply put

James Robertson at Step Two Designs has written a short paper on content management systems (CMS), where he suggests that the more users you have, the simpler the CMS should be. He's already been challenged on this in a couple of forums, and his argument deserves closer examination. I think that the main problem is that he's confusing simplicity with usability, and that his argument is really that the system that you choose should meet your needs most closely, and that usability should be a significant selection criterion. Decide for yourself at http://www.steptwo.com.au/papers/cmb_moreequalssimpler/index.html.

Colour me accessible

As the experts keep saying, accessibility isn't just about putting alternate text elements in your HTML so that blind people with screen readers can make sense of your site. One often-overlooked aspect is the use of colour, especially in the contrast of text on a background. Giacomo Mazzocato has published a site with a tool that checks the contrast and brightness between colours and simulates some of the vision problems that users may encounter. It takes a bit of getting used to, but it is a valuable aid. See it at http://gmazzocato.altervista.org/colorwheel/wheel.php.

You're just trying to help…

In a rather complicated case in the United States, the Internet Archive is being sued because of the content it contains. It arises because of a trademark dispute, in which one of the parties said that access to the Archive by the other was unauthorised and illegal, because of the use of a robots.txt file that requested that the site not be crawled by the Archive. Informed opinion seems to be that the case has no merit, because the protocols around robots.txt are voluntary.

We hope that cases such as this don't damage the long-term utility of this sort of archive, but we can't be too confident. The full story is at http://www.nytimes.com/2005/07/13/technology/13suit.html?ex=1278907200&en=377b4f3f0d459300&ei=5090&partner=rssuserland&emc=rss.

Too many details

It appears that this is a common problem, one way or another. The Stumpers-L list went missing one weekend recently. After a couple of days, the moderator came back online to say that the computer centre where the list was hosted had a complaint from someone that his contact details were visible in the list archives and that he wanted all such information removed, and he wanted it done now! They couldn't contact the moderator, so they pulled the plug on the whole server. Now you might question the wisdom of putting lots of contact details in an e-mail that's going to be archived on a site. I can see another caveat to be added to the 'Welcome to the List' message.

For your health's sake

One site that you should bookmark if you have any interest in medicine, or if you know someone else who may, is http://www.medicalstudent.com. They've collected a whole batch of links to authoritative medical sites that are free to use. They say that their audience is students of medicine, but there's something there for all of us.

May they stay unwritten

There's a short article by Bryan Eisenbergat http://www.clickz.com/experts/crm/traffic/article.php/3514816 that sets out a few pointers about what not to do in developing your websites. It covers things like 'more info', 'click here' and 'we make our own rules'. I'm sure that if we thought about it, we could each make quite a few of these unwritten rules of our own. And the world would be a better place.

For those who can remember

Maybe you think that the web hasn't been around long enough to have things to the regret. Well, think again. Just remember (or try to forget) the Dancing Baby, picked up with much glee by the makers of Ally McBeal. And then there was Hamsterdance and 'All Your Base Are Belong to Us'. Maybe you'd like to make up your own little list of internet phenomena, if you've nothing better to do. Anyway, see CNET's list at http://www.cnet.com/4520-11136_1-6268155-1.html?tag=cnetfd.ld.   ∎

…I'm sure that if we thought about it, we could each make quite a few of these unwritten rules of our own. And the world would be a better place.