

Consider some of the things that are possible because of the internet

Webb's web



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Mix'n'match

I really like the idea of mashups—web applications that integrate data from a couple of sources to produce something new. It's said that Google Maps achieved its dominant position partly because they realised that the geographic data that was the basis of the system could be linked to all sorts of other information, and they produced the appropriate interfaces quickly. At the end of May, Google Australia had a special day to showcase the capabilities of their software and the inventiveness of the developer community. The report (with links to the award-winning sites) is at <http://www.webpronews.com/topnews/2007/06/01/speedgeeking-spins-off-google-maps-mashups> and if anyone thinks I'm impressed because there's a map project based on Patrick O'Brian's books, you're right.

Thinking big

The National Library of Scotland is forging ahead with its plans for a massive digitisation project that will result in 100 terabytes of information. It's now at the stage of the design and implementation of a new storage infrastructure. I'm impressed at the methodical way that they've gone about this so far (and quite impressed that they've been granted funding for the project) but then I thought about it a bit. When desktop computers routinely come with 100 gigabyte drives, maybe they'll run out of capacity sooner than you might expect. But by that time, the storage costs will have dropped further, so that's all right then. There's more on the project at <http://www.publictechnology.net/modules.php?op=modload&name=News&file=article&sid=9286>

European developments

And over the Channel, they've been busy too. The Bibliothèque nationale de France announced in April another step towards the European Digital Library. They've taken around 12 000 books from the BnF and the national libraries of Hungary and Portugal and put them online in a fully digitised format. You can search the database, read excerpts from books and documents on-screen and print or download them. The portal is at <http://www.europeana.eu> and seems to be available only in French. Dommage!

Should the government be listening?

I hope these columns strike the appropriate balance between providing information about web developments and warning of obvious boosterism and marketing hype. Two articles this last month have been crying up the need for governments at all levels to become Government 2.0 to match the phenomena of 'social networks of people linked by cell phones, capable of high-level collaborative thought and action.' Well, there's nothing much wrong with that, except that Web 2.0 (and Library 2.0 for that matter) is really only affecting the lives of a small part of the population. It's a bit like building your websites only for the broadband-enabled elite. Sure, there are interesting ideas like allowing people to send camera pictures along with their emergency calls or to submit digital photos of potholes, but I'd caution against going overboard on hip new applications while there are still major areas of non-digital need.

... maybe they should

As a counterpoint to that attitude though, there's an article in the online *Guardian* (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/Columnists/Column/0,,2090994,00.html>) where Jonathan Freedland looks at the political process rather than the bureaucracy, and considers some of the things that are possible because of the net: politician's slips being caught on camera phones, past indiscretions promulgated widely (and wildly) and, on the positive side, the easy mobilisation of crowds of volunteers.

Conventional behaviour

I don't go to many conferences these days, and I do miss the experience. For anyone about to join the library conference world (and not just the one in North America) I'd recommend a recent posting by Walt Crawford at <http://citesandinsights.info/civ7i7.pdf>. Quite a few of us would have met Walt or at least heard him speak (I recall he was at VALA in the 90s) and would recognise his dry and informative tone in this wide-ranging look at how to organise, participate in and survive conferences. One fascinating section deals with people participating in 'back channel' discussions during presentations. You will have seen them typing industriously on their laptops in the darkness of the lecture theatre, but may not have realised that some of

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them are chatting online, critiquing the performance of the speaker. Walt thinks (and I agree) that this is rather rude, but the justifications of the people who make a habit of this are quite illuminating.

Bring your own slingshot

They say that there's nothing so successful that it can't be improved upon. Or maybe what they're saying is that Google is a very big target. Either way, there's a new open source project at the Wikia Search Labs that's trying to fix internet search, which they claim is broken. They have some information on what they're planning, at <http://search.wikia.com>, but the really interesting bits are on their mailing list, which is linked from that page. At this stage, the list is mainly talking about how they're going to develop this search facility, with little in the way of technicalities, so most of us can follow the conversation quite easily. Where's it going? Well, it's hard to tell. Many people wouldn't agree that search is broken, but if there were any way to produce better (which is to say fewer but more relevant) search results, we'd all be happier.

The humans strike back!

While we're waiting for the Wikia project to start delivering, another has hit the streets. Mahalo (<http://www.mahalo.com>) relies on an initial band of 40 people creating result pages for the top 10 000 search terms (although there's no obvious indication of how they choose these). If it doesn't yet have the canned results for the terms that you're looking for, they'll add a set of Google results. It's obviously a long-term project, and they don't plan to have it fully operational for 18 months. At this stage, it seems to be an updated version of the directories that have come and gone in the past, and it will be difficult and costly to maintain. But it's worth watching.

They've all been busy

But if you're interested to see what else is happening in the Big World of Search, a really good place to start is the list at http://www.readwriteweb.com/archives/top_17_search_innovations.php. It gives examples for natural language processing, personalisation, semantic search, the use of tag clouds, and so on. (But not

my favourite—proximity.) And in the comments attached to the article, there are several other leads, mostly of the 'what about our product?' variety.

Another good accessibility resource

Many readers will already be familiar with the Web Accessibility Network for Australian Universities (<http://www.wanau.org/site.html>). I came across it because of an enthusiastic critic of Australian websites who wasn't too impressed with WANAU. Fortunately the forum where he was posting has some pretty strict moderation policies and the heat soon went out of the discussion. But WANAU is good value. They run their own events and promote others, they have their own mailing list and a collection of links to valuable resources; most of all they form a network that supports Web workers in the university sector.

Remembering to forget

The combination of the internet and cheap computer storage has turned many of our concepts on their heads. How much personal information have we been used to keeping? How many shoeboxes of papers and photographs are tucked away on the back of the cupboard? Now we have all those e-mails and digital photos stored on our disk drives, and we probably don't take the time to cull (or manage) them as we should. Viktor Mayer-Schönberger of Harvard has examined this in the wider society in his paper 'Useful Void: The Art of Forgetting in the Age of Ubiquitous Computing' at <http://ksgnotes1.harvard.edu/Research/wpaper.nsf/rwp/RWP07-022>. In an era where Google has admitted that they've kept every search query ever submitted (although they have agreed to remove data that identifies the user after a period), this is a welcome addition to the discussion.

They come and go

I've commented before that I'm not a fan of the Gartner Hype Cycle, but at <http://wisdump.com/web/the-ebb-and-flow-of-social-networking/> they've used it in an interesting way to illustrate how social networking communities have developed, and how the less successful have been left in the wake of the next new thing.

Old and bold

Barring some sort of miracle, we're all going to become greyer. And the website designers need to be continually aware of this reality. In a brief article at <http://www.humanfactors.com/downloads/mar07.asp#kath> Mark Hall and Eric Shaffer describe the issues and the steps to be taken if you want to reach this significant part of the population. They cover the choice of buttons and text, cognitive design, navigation and search issues. And the 100% Easy-2-Read Standard at <http://www.informationarchitects.jp/100e2r> amplifies this advice, in a very clear and readable example of what they're preaching.

Online reading

I've written recently about new studies in how people read online. The latest one that I've seen looked at users' preferences in the layout of different types of content. It's been recognised that print format is still the preferred option for journal articles, but for others (including news items) an online is more favoured. More interesting though in this study is the analysis of line lengths on reading speed, comprehension, and satisfaction. Reading rates were found to be highest for longer lines, but satisfaction and comprehension were much more dependent on the reader's personal experience. See it at <http://www.uigarden.net/english/the-effects-of-line-length-on-reading-online-news>

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