Webb's web

Pretty damn fine advice

One of my pet hates about how people publish for the web is the way they put up PDFs with no consideration about what their readers will be doing with them. And my biggest gripe is with those who'll take all the big pretty pictures onto the web version, bloating the size of the document out to glory. But now, help (or at least good advice) is at hand. A couple of chapters from a book by Ginny Reddish (**http://www.uie.com/articles/breaking_down_documents/**) illustrate how to do it properly.

The Australian Government 2.0 Taskforce – almost there

The Australian Government 2.0 Taskforce was announced on 22 June, with a planned life of six months. Well into the second half of its term, this is my personal assessment of what's happened so far.

The most public sign of activity has been its blog at **http://www.gov2.net.au**, complete with the Taskforce's logo which was chosen after a brief competition between volunteers (this competition produced an acrimonious exchange with members of the community who demanded that designers should be paid for their work).

The blog has been the avenue for announcements of roadshow presentations and competitions, opinion pieces by Taskforce members and calls to arms. There has generally been a good response to the posts, and some Taskforce members have been prepared to often enter into debate with posters when they felt themselves competent to do so.

There have not so far been detailed reports on the roadshows (they were limited to capital cities and a couple of regional centres) so I can only refer to two that I attended in Canberra – one the formal affair and another less formal that was run by Senator Kate Lundy. On both occasions there were a number of Taskforce members present (although rather more for the Lundy event) and they answered the questions put to them quite well. The quality of the questions though showed the level of confusion about the concept in general and the role of the Taskforce in particular. Some people "get it" quickly; others need to have "it" explained carefully.

This divide seems to be something that the Taskforce is having trouble with: for the most part, the people responding to blog posts are a small, well-informed (and it must be said, opinionated) group who know quite a lot about the 2.0 world. This should not be seen as a criticism, but it is definitely a barrier to the take-up of whatever proposals the Taskforce hands to the government in the early hours of New Years Day 2010. Unless they see a strong indication that there is a demand from the general community for Government 2.0, it's unlikely that the government will take the issue seriously and will be content to point to the number of MPs who Twitter as a measure of its commitment to the concept.

Apart from the roadshows, the most significant development has been the announcement of a series of competitions to produce reports and develop demonstrator projects, especially mashups involving data provided to the Taskforce by Commonwealth, state and territory government agencies. This data was provided at short notice and it shows. There is virtually no metadata that would assist in interpretation of the datasets on offer. Nevertheless, it appears that the developer community has been attracted by the opportunity to show what they can do.

There has been some criticism of the need to have Microsoft involved in the projects, but the reason is simple: the Government not being prepared to put money into the project, they had the bright idea to use a special fund provided by Microsoft. This has not met with universal acclaim.

Some results of the Taskforce projects are already on display at **http://mashupaustralia.org/**

Earlier in the project, there was a lot of discussion about transformational change and how this had the potential to change our brand of democracy. That topic seems to have subsided and the focus is more on the concrete effects that we can expect from the reports and competitions. Nevertheless, don't expect it to go away entirely; everyone brings their own agenda to the table and there will continue to be some agitation to take the issue of community involvement beyond merely putting your tuppence into online consultation sites.

It's too early to tell just how successful the Taskforce has been – and certainly we won't know about its impact for several months – but I believe that they've done a good job in getting started and bringing the concept to the attention of some people in the community. I guess in the end it's a matter of getting the right people to care about it.

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Pandora to the rescue

I've been doing a bit of work this year for the Australian Memory of the World Committee, transferring its website to a Drupal environment (http://www.amw.org.au). Most of it has progressed quite well, but then I encountered a snag. The Committee ran a successful conference last year and Alan Howell, the former webmaster, had built an attractive mini-site for the conference with speakers' photos, biographies and papers. Converting that well-crafted HTML into something for Drupal was going to take a lot of work. Then the flashbulb went off. A quick check showed that it had all been archived in Pandora (http://www.pandora.nla.gov.au/) and all I had to do was link to that. Phew!

Not lost in translation at all

I saw from Seb Chan's blog at http://tinyurl.com/yg9r4fx about his work at the Powerhouse Museum that they've had a good experience with the Google Translation Tool (http://translate.google.com/translate_tools) so I tried it, first taking a paragraph from English to French and then back again. The results were good enough to recommend that our webmasters here consider using it as a standard feature on our pages.

Don't forget to visit my blog
http://www.alia.org.au/webbsblog