Is a linking policy better than no linking policy?

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Here is a dead giveaway for determining the overall understanding that a given organisation has about the use of the internet, and in particular of the world wide web — check out their website linking policy (if it has one at all — those that do not are probably already way ahead of the game in this context). It takes little effort to comprehend the thinking behind organisations that post comments of this nature:

> Any links (HTML references) to pages within this website must be made ONLY to the main page (index.html)...

And here is another, to demonstrate how legal teams can make matters worse:

> Use of Hyperlinks. You may display on your website the hyperlink to this website ("Hyperlink") for purposes of enabling users of your site to link to the Company's website ("Website"). The Hyperlink shall at all times be displayed in its entirety and not in association with any text, graphics, trademarks, trade names or other information which is misleading or otherwise misrepresents the nature of the Website with which the Hyperlink will connect or which is in any way derogatory, of negative connotation, or otherwise negatively impacts on the good will of the Company in the Hyperlink or the Website. Use of the Hyperlink shall require the user to link directly to the Website via either the same browser window in which your website operates, or via a separate browser window. Under no circumstances shall the Website be framed, modified in any manner or for any purpose, or otherwise interfered with in its normal operation and appearance. The Hyperlink shall only be displayed as set forth in this paragraph, and shall not be modified in any way, including but not limited to, enabling the Hyperlink to grant access to other than the home page of the Website. The only rights granted to the Hyperlink are as set forth in this paragraph.

Both of these statements demonstrate a complete misunderstanding of how people actually use the web, and how the web works. An extreme example can be found at http://www.fodors.com/about/linking/ ['We make it easy to link to our site' (!)], but by mentioning it here — and because this article will appear on our website, ALIAnet — I have not complied with their terms and conditions. I await prosecution...

Not permitting linking to specific references within a given website is not only unenforceable, but unworkable — unless there is only one page

to look at, of course. I have no argument with organisations that wish to protect their copyright and content, although it is rather difficult to protect both of these things within the context of the internet. One site that I stumbled across that helps to determine how much your content has been copied is Digital Integrity Search [http://www.findsame.com/]. And most of the more-common search engines allow you to determine how many external links point to your site, in case you wish to track down those without licence agreements. Indeed, a recent check through Yahoo/Google to determine the number of external links to ALIAnet indicates over 1300 links at the click of a mouse. How we might manage a licence-based linking policy for ALIAnet is anyone's guess, given the resources at our disposal. But in any event, why should we licence links to ALIAnet? What purpose would it serve, and who benefits?

There are websites that not only understand how the web works, but embrace the issue of copyright and linking in the same manner. An excellent local example of an organisation that demonstrates this is the Department of Fair Trading's NSW Consumer Protection Agency website. The website itself is not the easiest to navigate, but its linking policy is as sensible and as user-friendly as it needs to be. The URL is 128 characters in length, but can be found by following links to their publications page and beyond. The online version of this article has the full URL for those that want a quick link.

So what can we do to encourage others to follow their example? Education and positive reinforcement of best-practice linking policies is a good starting point. Encourage site owners to understand that incoming links can only be a good thing, and encourage website designers to take advantage of the fact that people will not always enter by the 'front door' (the home page). Keep URLs relevant and updated with current information, or at least offer links from older archived information to more contemporary information. If the site designer still insists on using frames, make sure that the pages within the frameset can exist in their own right, and has links that work even without the full frameset. Watch the error log file to see if an externally-referenced but non-existent page might need a redirect to one that does exist. If your site must have an outlined policy on linking, then write a policy that is in plain English and is clear and simple. Encourage visitors to respect copyright and the author's intellectual property, but to link to any material on your site as they see fit, and without condition.

Above all, a commitment to praising those that have a sensible policy will encourage others to follow by example. ∎

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