

Captchas, consumers, compliance and competitions



Kerry Webb

kerry.webb@alianet.alia.org.au

A right Royal show

For a limited time, there's about 350 years' worth of scientific study and achievement available online free of charge. The Royal Society Journals Digital Archive was launched in September, combining all the back articles of both *Philosophical Transactions* and *Proceedings*, giving you the chance to stand on the shoulders of greats such as Isaac Newton, to journey with Joseph Banks to the far side of the world and to see Humphry Davy illuminate the world of mining. But don't delay: the free trial expires in December – after that you'll have to pay. See <http://www.pubs.royalsoc.ac.uk/index.cfm?page=1373>.

The return of the bear

Louis Rosenfeld is well-known in the world of information architecture (IA), having written – with Peter Morville – a book on the subject for O'Reilly (it's the one with the polar bear). In preparation for the new edition, they have been conducting a survey of the IA community, covering IA trends, suggestions for the third edition of the book, software for IA, and IA education from the perspectives of educators and practitioners. He says they got a few surprises, especially in the area of trends. You can find a discussion of the survey at http://louisrosenfeld.com/home/bloug_archive/000478.html.

On the right track

Ross Howard on the Boxes and Arrows site offers a few interesting observations on ambient signifiers, the subtle clues that indicate where you're going (and often where you've been) on a website. He relates the concept to the distinctive chimes on each Tokyo railway station where passengers engrossed in their sudoku or video game can keep track (almost unconsciously) of where they are. Back in the world of the Web, I really liked the idea of the BBC's 'digital patina' in the 2002 redesign; the colour of the site changes a little, depending on how many times you've been there before. (Interesting though the concept is, they seem to have dropped it more recently). The feedback section is also very interesting, with one person pointing out that if all websites did this – each in their own way – the Web could become a quite confusing place. The article is highly recommended; see it at http://www.boxesandarrows.com/view/ambient_signifi.

How much is enough?

It's funny how sometimes you read an article and (quite unexpectedly) there's a spooky resonance. I often wonder if I'm getting the right balance of stuff in this column, between resources about helping library operations improve, how to build better websites, the wars great and petty over Web standards and accessibility, quirky sites that I've found and Google, Google, Google. Well, Roger Johansson at the Vitamin site has been thinking along the same lines, but mostly on the subject of standards. He addresses the issues of whether we need yet another article on the importance of standards, when everyone is sufficiently clued-up on the subject, right? His advice, at <http://www.thinkvitamin.com/features/design/why-standards-still-matter/> is to look around you to see how much compliance there is with even the most basic standards and good practice guidelines. And after you've done that, if you have any comments on what I write in this column, please let me know.

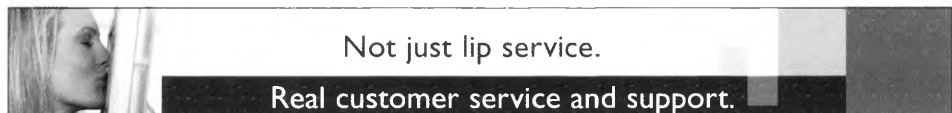
More than just a cute acronym

Have you heard of 'captcha'? You may not know the word, but you've probably seen one. They're the distorted images of text that you're supposed to recognise and copy into a site before you're allowed to proceed. The idea is that they can only be decoded by humans – not by the automated processes that spammers use to collect addresses and other useful information. Well, at <http://sam.zoy.org/pwntcha/> you can see how many of the captchas can be beaten using a number of automated techniques or even by battalions of low-paid workers. In a W3C presentation linked from this page, Matt May discusses why captchas are not a Good Idea (apart from their inaccessibility) and explores a number of approaches to keeping the bad guys out while not making it too hard for the good guys to go about their business.

Should you drink from the open source?

In an extensive essay at <http://chnm.gmu.edu/resources/essays/d/42/> Roy Rosenzweig looks at the Wikipedia phenomenon in quite a balanced way. He is more than a little critical of the waspish comment of a former *Encyclopaedia Britannica* editor Robert McHenry that "the user who visits Wikipedia... is rather in the position of a visitor to a public restroom. It may be obviously dirty, so that he knows to exercise great care, or it may seem fairly clean, so that

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he may be lulled into a false sense of security. What he certainly does not know is who has used the facilities before him." OK, it's a cute comparison, but Rosenzweig points out that the same could have easily been said about a public park. Anyone wanting to get a better idea of how they should treat Wikipedia (and I admit that my opinion has shifted over the past year) should read this well-written piece.

The tipping point?

As a consumer who's recently signed up for the broad(band) jump, I was interested in the projections released by the ABS and the ACCC in September that show that some time in that month, the number of Australian broadband subscribers would overtake the dial-up user population. Of course this can be expressed a different way: if you develop a website that requires a broadband connection, you'll be shutting out around half of your audience.

Write right

From the excellent *FreePint Newsletter* comes an article from Janet Corcoran on writing for a library website, full of valuable and clearly written(!) advice, and a series of very useful links (including a free link checker). See it at <http://www.freepint.com/issues/100806.htm#tips>.

... and be in the right job

Later in the same issue, there's an interview with Hazel Hall, a UK researcher who was one of a team researching the e-information job market. For more information about the results of their study, you should keep an eye on the ASIST conference in Texas in November and probably at the UK Online Conference next year. In the meantime, the interview is at <http://www.freepint.com/issues/270706.htm#feature>.

A worthy competition

Avid followers of trends will know by now that a mashup is a website or Web application that seamlessly combines content from more than one source into an integrated experience (thank you Wikipedia). There's more explanation of this at <http://www.talis.com/news/press/Competition2006.shtml> where the results of the Mashing Up the Library 2006 competition have been posted. Talis, the company sponsoring the competition, deserves our thanks for putting this together and encouraging libraries to extend our reach through the Web.

Old news, but good stuff

Historians will be (mostly) pleased at another new service from Google: a way of searching newspaper archives going way, way back. What they appear to have done is index various news archive sites so that you can limit your searches to newspapers from a particular time period, for example on Abraham Lincoln

before he became President. The problem with this is not necessarily with Google; it's more that that basic text will in many cases have come from a large-scale OCR activity and much of the scanned text will not have been cleaned up. Still, it's a start. See it at <http://news.google.com/archivesearch/>.

But how will they participate?

There's an interesting little comment in the *Guardian* about levels of involvement in Web activities. Despite the wonderful opportunities for involvement and contribution, it seems that observers outnumber creators by a very wide margin. Examples taken from YouTube show that although it's in its early days, the percentage of viewers versus suppliers of video is still less than 1 per cent, and this is borne out by the experience of Wikipedia, Yahoo Groups and websites in general. Which shouldn't surprise us, unless we expect to the Web to radically change human behaviour. It's at <http://technology.guardian.co.uk/weekly/story/0,,1823959,00.html>.

With all due respect, Minister ...

And speaking of YouTube, there are suggestions that the availability of video clips (real and bogus) could have an impact on elections all around the world. The example in the article at <http://www.politicswatch.com/video-aug28-2006.html> is of a relatively obscure interview being picked up, copied and posted to the video-sharing site. With appropriate publicity, it was given much greater exposure than anyone expected at the time. It's not only video clips; the ready availability of all sorts of information could mean that a politician's claim made in an interview could be rebutted before the show has finished. And then someone comes back with a counter-rebuttal...

Got any ideas?

What Should I Read Next? (<http://whatshouldireadnext.com>) is a site that gives you suggestions for reading based on recommendations of others. It works a bit like Amazon's Recommendations, but they are derived from your buying patterns rather than what you like or would like to read. You can dip into it just to get ideas for further reading, but the real benefit comes if you add your list of favourites and help the system grow.

Dressing up for fun!

It's too late for Halloween (and, for that matter, Talk Like a Pirate Day) but just to be prepared for next year, check out <http://www.costumzee.com/> for a very specialised search engine. You'll find all sorts of ideas for costumes, and if one really strikes your fancy there are links to suppliers (in the United States). *

Save yourself the trouble of typing URLs!

This column (with URL links) can be found on ALIANet at: <http://alia.org.au/publishing/incite/>.

Contributions and suggestions for this column are always welcome. Please contact Kerry Webb via e-mail kerry.webb@alianet.alia.org.au.

In September 2006, the number of Australian broadband subscribers overtook the dial-up user population

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