

Approachable, useable, accessible – for ever, to everyone

(well, we can hope)

Little differences

Net censorship is always a hot issue, particularly what search engines are prepared to show to users in certain countries. If you're curious as to what's being hidden, have a look at the Censearchip site at <http://homer.informatics.indiana.edu/censearchip/>. It shows what Google or Yahoo! will reveal to users from the USA, China, France or Germany. The limiting of search results to Chinese users is well-documented, but there's also a lot that Germans won't be shown, like Nazi material. It's an interesting experience and the results are in the 'clouds' representation that I noted in last month's column.

And perhaps not-so-little ones

Meanwhile, Amazon has announced that it has modified the way its search engine handles queries for the term 'abortion' after receiving a complaint that the results appeared biased. Until this change, if you typed in the word 'abortion', you'd receive the prompt "Did you mean adoption?" followed by search results for 'abortion'. Amazon insists that this was based on technology and not human intervention, explaining that 'adoption' and 'abortion' differ only by two keystrokes, and it's an accident that the terms are somewhat related. Nevertheless, they decided to remove the question.

Best practice in accessibility

The UK Disability Rights Commission (DRC), finding that many sites were seriously lacking in accessibility, asked the British Standards Institute to produce Publicly Available Specification (PAS) 78, a publication that outlines good practice in commissioning websites that are accessible to and usable by disabled people. There's been a fair bit of discussion about the document (and its price) but overall it's been welcomed as a great initiative. A good place to start to appreciate it is Bruce Lawson's site at <http://www.brucelawson.co.uk/>.

Off the shelf

We're often urged to make our profession more approachable and more in the public eye. One suggestion was to get sympathetic librarians written into soap operas, and that's always worth trying – Rupert in the *Buffy* series probably had some impact. In the meantime, there's a comic strip called *Unshelved* that's getting some good publicity. See it at <http://www.overduemedia.com>.

The other shoe drops

It seems that the next step in Google's plans is to let users buy the full text of books on-

line from publishers who are willing to participate in its Book Search program. They are being invited to submit books to the program and set prices for their texts. Customers will only be able to view the books through their browser, and will be prevented from copying pages or saving the purchased books on their computer. More information is at <http://tinyurl.com/eax93/>.

Opening up the documents

In an effort to ensure that all sorts of documents in electronic form will continue to be available and usable, a consortium of associations, academic institutions and industry groups today has set up the OpenDocument Format Alliance (ODF Alliance). They'll be promoting a truly open-standard file format for use by governments and their constituents in using, accessing and storing critical documents, records and information, independent of the applications or enterprise platforms used for their creation. The Alliance's site at <http://www.odfalliance.org> sets out their goals and who their members are.

Finding your way around

As I've written before, opinions vary on the usefulness of site maps (and even on the way that the term is spelt) but some organisations require them, and that's why you might be interested in Stephen Turbek's article at <http://tinyurl.com/qvzlw/>. His original tip is about using Microsoft Excel and Visio as the tools, but some of the comments on the page point to various other products that can be used to achieve similar results.

An answer to the tourism question

In an article in *Search Engine Watch*, Chris Sherman describes some of the online gazetteers that you can use to get more geographic information. They include MapPlanet (<http://www.mapplanet.com>), which lets you search for a place, and also add your own information about that locality. Another is the Getty Thesaurus of Geographic Names at http://www.getty.edu/research/conducting_research/vocabularies/tgn/ which has data on over a million place names, with variant names (and the preferred one) and also an indication of where the place is located (country, province, etc).

Topsy-turvy

I don't need a crystal ball to tell me that where internet users congregate, far into the future, there will still be a debate on top vs bottom-posting. Some say that your preference origi-



Kerry Webb

kerry.webb@alianet.alia.org.au

*Make our profession
more approachable
and more in the public
eye – get sympathetic
librarians written into
soap operas*

Not just lip service.
Real customer service and support.

nates in whether you come from the Usenet era; others bemoan the 'standards' imposed by Microsoft products that make it difficult to do things other than their way. Neither is right (well, one is – of course – but I'm not inviting a storm of discussion in this forum) but if you wonder what the hoo-ha is, have a look at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Top-posting/> – especially the Discussion page.

For those who can't wait?

From O'Reilly & Associates comes another great idea – Roughcuts (<http://www.oreilly.com/roughcuts/faq.csp>), which lets you have access (for a fee) to technical books as they are being written. Because O'Reilly's books are often about cutting-edge concepts, you can read about issues as they are being formulated and developed, and you can even contribute to the final product. There's a similar service offered by The Pragmatic Programmer under their Beta Book program at http://pragmaticprogrammer.com/starter_kit/faqs/beta_faq.html. I discovered both of these through the Trends: Media Lifestyle page at <http://tinyurl.com/z25ml>.

A whole new paradigm

Another site providing new ideas (it's a little more technical than Trends) is Digg at <http://www.digg.com>. It operates in an unusual way – stories are suggested by users for review, but rather than an editor deciding what's to move from 'review' to 'publish', that's what the users do. They can look at the stories in the queue and 'digg' the ones that they want published. Once a story gets enough diggs, it goes online for the world to see.

For when you need a tradesman

This column isn't here to provide free advertising, but we do report on bold initiatives. One such is Austrades, a national directory of tradesmen and services at <http://www.austrades.com.au>. It's a worthwhile product, even if Victoria is the only region covered at the moment, but you'd have to wonder why they're venturing into an area that's already covered – most notably by the Sensis Yellow Pages. Of course, one reason might be that the performance of the Yellow Pages hasn't been too good over the years, and you'll recall that David did slay Goliath. Good luck with the quest – they'll need it.

Simple website creation

I mentioned last month that Google was offering a Page Creator service, but that it had been closed to new users after a very short time. The good news is that they've now opened it up to people who expressed their interest, although it won't be open to all comers for a little while yet. At first glance, it's good. There are around forty basic layouts to choose from, and you can use 6 fonts and 4 text sizes, and add images to the page that you're creating. It

won't replace a proper content management system, but it will let many people set up their own pages and it could also come in handy if you're touring and want to write your own travel diary. If you'd like to go on the waiting list, go to <http://pages.google.com>.

For digital kids

Have you heard about the International Children's Digital Library at <http://www.icdlbooks.org/>? It's a project funded primarily by the National Science Foundation, the Institute for Museum and Library Services and Microsoft Research, aimed at creating a digital library of outstanding children's books from all over the world. It can be accessed in ten different languages and includes physical books (but not those born digital) that may be currently available in print and within copyright, out of print but within the copyright protection of the country in which they were published, or freely available in the public domain. There are currently just under a thousand titles, with a few Australian favourites.

Fire away!

In developing web content, you'll often find that various browsers don't quite display the HTML exactly how you want it. A good example is in bulleted lists, where you may need to use a different symbol for the bullet and you'll probably want to have some control over the positioning of both the bullet and the list item. There's a short tutorial at <http://css.maxdesign.com.au/listtutorial/master.htm> that shows you just how to do it. Poking around the site, I found that there are quite a few good tips on how to use CSS effectively.

Performance analysis

Many web developers don't pay enough attention to how their sites perform in the wild, which is a pity because that's where they're used. It's easy enough to look at your pages on your own computer or on an intranet, but it's only when it's at the mercy of those strange internet connections that you can really see how it's performing. One useful tool is the Web Page Analyzer at <http://www.websiteoptimization.com/services/analyze/>. It'll run the ruler over your site and give an indication of how long it will take to load over various types of connections. More importantly, it will analyse a page to identify potential problem areas and recommend how they may be addressed.

In closing

Finally, let me congratulate the National Library on the Libraries Australia service. One of the things I missed most when I left there was the access to the NBD. Well done! ■

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.

Correction:

In the March Webb's web, under the item '...perhaps not', the link should be <http://www.buzzle.com/editorials/10-12-2005-78712.asp>.

Our apologies, the online link is now correct. ■

Softlink web based library management software.

www.softlinkint.com or call 1800 777 037



How does your site perform in the wild? That's where it's used.