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Webb's web

All the news

This month's main theme is the news media and how they're making the transition from traditional to online versions. I started thinking about this seriously when I heard Stephen Mayne (founder of crikey.com.au) speaking about his life and times on a couple of occasions recently. In the course of his presentations, he talked mostly about his Crikey years, and also about the state of the online press in this country.

Let's look at Crikey first. It's quite a phenomenon, boasting around 10,000 subscribers to their daily email bulletins and a large number of them located in the various parliaments and newsrooms around the country. They have their share of critics (when push comes to shove) and Mayne likes to relate the story of how he lost the family home after a defamation case, but the publication is now almost respectable and has clearly reached the status of required reading in many workplaces. If you're not inclined to pay the annual subscription, there's a limited selection of their current and archived stories on the website.

One thing that he covered in his talk was the difference between the content of newspapers and their issues online. He says that for any story the online version may have twice as much copy as will appear in print. The reasons for this are pretty obvious: the print edition has to accommodate advertising space, while online it can go for screen after screen at no extra cost. Which probably means that what you'll see on their website is a more indepth version of the story.

Where you won't necessarily see extended coverage is the new ABC website at <http://www.abc.net.au>. They revamped it a couple of months ago and some people are happy with the change, but not this little viewer. They've tried to be clever by picking tags out of stories and using them to reach back into their archives to produce a list of related items. I suppose it seemed like a good idea at the time, but when the related items come from several years ago and often have only the slightest relevance, it does look clunky.

Similarly, the use of location-based tags and postcodes isn't really adding much to the user experience. I think we should expect more from our eight cents per day.

It must have been the season for site redevelopment; *The Australian* — <http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au> — released theirs at around the same time. It's not bad, and shows that they've been working hard on the design and the operation of the site. I have a minor quibble about the IT Section (accessed through a specific URL) in that you can't get to all opinion pieces, even a couple of days after the paper has been published, but it does provide a pretty good service.

One of the never-ending myths about search engines ... is the use of the META Keywords tag.

For general all-round news coverage, it's hard to go past Google News, at <http://news.google.com.au>, where there's summary of news items in various categories, continuously updated during the day. What's a little more interesting is the search facility, where you can look through recent and archived news items. Being a curious person, I used it to check on a recent event involving the medical records of some AFL players. You'll recall that the records were found outside a clinic and given to Channel 7 which published many of the details. Other news media followed up on this, until the AFL and the club in question were granted a court injunction to suppress this reporting. Try as you might, you won't find any online versions of these stories, even though they were published widely on that day. You may not even be informed of the club in question — except if you did a Google News search on, say, AFL and drugs, which would return a number of hits referring to the news items in question. Click on the links and you'd get an error message saying that the item couldn't be found on the newspaper or TV station website, but strangely enough the search results showed a brief description of each item, in which the club's name could be seen. It's not clear how much Google is

subject to Australian court injunctions, but you can expect this to be clarified before long.

And we can't forget that all of this has to be paid for somehow — almost always by ads. Google News is ad-free as far as I can see (as is the ABC), but the online newspapers aren't. And some of their practices are not pretty. The use of in-your-face pop-ups and Flash material is increasing, to the extent that there is some serious consumer resistance. Many of the major newspapers tried to operate on a subscription-only basis for a while — offering only teasers to the general public — but have abandoned this for a free model. The *New York Times* is the best example of this. Others, such as the *Australian Financial Review* (AFR), cling to a hybrid approach that seems to be pleasing no-one. The free material at the *AFR* is copied from what can be found elsewhere and the subscriber-only component is usually delivered in a slow and cumbersome way.

It's a difficult question, and one that no-one has a comprehensive answer for, but it sure is convenient to track breaking stories, get a wide range of views and search broadly through all sorts of archives.

Alpha indexing

Easing back into general matters, but still with an eye on the media, see what Helen Lippell wrote about the redesign the BBC's A–Z index at <http://www.boxesandarrows.com/view/the_abcs_of_the_bbc_a_case_study_and_checklist>. She starts by describing how A–Z indexes are seen by many as the less desirable than other navigational elements such as sitemaps and search, but points out their value as secondary navigation tools, especially for large sites. Most importantly, she includes a useful checklist for anyone starting such a project.

German picture archive

As part of the German Government's E-Government 2.0 program, an archive of government pictures ranging from the nineteenth century wars of unification up to reunification in 1990 have been published on the web. The high-resolution images can be downloaded from

<http://www.bild.bundesarchiv.de> with full online payment facilities. Initially, there will be around 60,000 photos, aerial views and posters accessible, with the eventual aim of 250,000 digitised documents online.

Antisocial networking?

I think the flurry about social networking will subside after a while, but I'm willing to bet that it won't go away entirely. There was another bump on the yellow brick road in September when the name Quechup gained the wrong sort of fame. This startup company was doing the same sort of thing as many others — offering to check your address book to see how many of your friends are already on their system — but they took the extra step to send invitations to their site, without really telling you that's what they were about to do. The community expressed their unhappiness all over the place. I haven't heard how they're going since then, but it wasn't a good start. Meanwhile, there are indications that some of the people getting into the business have interesting backgrounds, involving companies whose business is selling customer data to marketers. It's all the more reason to be just a little careful about what you give them.

To tag to not to tag

One of the never-ending myths about search engines and marketing is the use of the META Keywords tag. It's understandable if beginners are a little confused, but I often find that experts are not well informed either. One who knows what he's talking about is Danny Sullivan at Search Engine Land, and he's written a primer at <http://searchengineland.

com/070905-194221.php> that should be the last word (for the time being) on the subject. He sets out the history of the concept and how the good guys and the others used and exploited it over the years, and how the search engines responded. Most useful is his reporting of recent interviews with representatives from the various companies to try to get the lowdown on the subject. It's a very good article, but if you skip to the chase his advice is don't worry about Keywords tags — they won't hurt, but they're not worth the effort.

Getting around

Also from Search Engine Land is a piece from Shari Thurow on Site Maps. I've never been a big fan of them, although they can be useful under some circumstances. The problem is that, as Shari says, they're too often used as a way of providing a quick fix for a site's poor information architecture and interface. For an idea of how to use them more effectively, see <http://searchengineland.com/070809-091501.php>.

Hues who

This is a site I really like, and it's useful too — especially if you're trying to communicate. Chirag Mehta's 'Name That Color' page at <http://chir.ag/phernalia/name-that-color/> gives you the power to choose a colour by navigating around an image and have the generally accepted name of the colour displayed, along with its RGB and hex values. Even better, you can browse a drop-down list to scroll through an alphabetical list of colours, which means that many of us will never again be in doubt about teal, ecru or flax.

Vale Harold Weir — former Commonwealth Parliamentary Librarian

Harold Weir, Parliamentary Librarian from 1978 to 1982 and distinguished staff member period to his appointment, passed away in late August. He made a very considerable contribution to the establishment of the library's research services, particularly the establishment of high-quality service, and was instrumental in much of the early automation, including the implementation of word processing, connection to external databases and development of staff skills. His contribution lives on through the successful Bills Digest service, the research service itself and the use of new information technologies.

Roxanne Missingham