

Webb's web

Managing our knowledge base

I'm continually impressed with the amount of information that the ABC manages to put on its website. A good example is the Alfred Deakin Innovation Lecture from December at <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/scienceshow/stories/2007/2122486.htm> The main theme is copyright, intellectual property and patents, with three highly qualified speakers, one of whom is the man behind the database of Australian patents that I mentioned a few months ago.

Not to be ignored

You can go off trekking through the outback or spend the next year in an isolation tank, but that's about the only way you're going to avoid contact with the speculation, coverage and aftermath of the US Presidential elections. On the other hand, you could embrace an interesting exercise in democracy. A good place to start is the State Department's

Guidetothe2008Election at <http://uspolitics.america.gov/uspolitics/elections/index.html> It has all the things you'd expect - FAQs,

a calendar of the important dates, blogs, up-to-date news, videos and podcasts.

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There must be a word for it

Entering the crowded sphere of word sites on the Web is Wordsmyth <http://www.wordsmyth.net> which is different from the others in that it doesn't base its offering on an existing print dictionary. Instead, the Wordsmyth Dictionary-Thesaurus is a powerful system that comes out of many years development and provides impressive synonym processing. One particular feature is a separate Children's Dictionary but this starts to show the limitations of a home-grown system. It copes with snake and koala, but not with wallaby or echidna. Its future is a little unsure too. The current systems talks about a preview of a premium service for a limited time. Whether it provides a sufficiently better product to justify charging a fee will have to be seen.

Enter if you dare

In developing a website, you'll often need to let people login to the site. To get a better idea of what not to do, have a look at Jared Spool's '8 Design Mistakes to Avoid with Account Sign-in' at http://www.uie.com/articles/account_design_mistakes/ Mistake 1 is the most common; having a sign-in in the first place. If you really don't need it, why put your users (and potential clients) to more trouble than is necessary. He finishes this article with a link to eight more mistakes that you should avoid.

Forming an opinion

In the same vein, Jessica Enders has turned her mind to "What makes a good form". Whether your form is Web-based or paper, her analysis and suggestions are spot on. I attended a presentation that she made to Canberra's IA community, and we had no trouble suggesting lots of examples of forms that annoyed us quite a lot. See <http://formulate.com.au/articles/what-makes-a-good-form/>

And Y not?

The people at the Pew Internet & American Life Project keep coming out with reports that make you sit up and think and some of the results really challenge your assumptions. The most recent, on how people use the Internet, libraries, and government agencies when they need help http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/Pew_UI_LibrariesReport.pdf looks like it's good news for the library world. In a time when we expect just about everybody to turn to Google for the answers to all their problems, the Pew people found that a fair proportion did turn to the library, but (more importantly) the representatives of Generation Y were most likely to do so. Good news indeed.

Where we've come from

It's no secret that I'm a bit of a history nut. To me, an appreciation of the origins of things goes a long way towards understanding them now. That's why I was taken with the Library Time Line at <http://www.acadia.org/competition-98/sites/integrus.com/html/library/time.html> Starting around 1250 BC at Thebes, it travels through the centuries until 1998 illustrating what's been happening in the world of libraries. Granted that the twentieth century entries are skewed towards the US, you'll find enough entertainment in the earlier part of the history, including the charming news from the 1600s that there was general abandonment of chaining books.

The new world of search

I wrote in July last year about the Wikia Search project and how it seemed to be trying to bring a new 'open' attitude to Web search. It was launched early in January, and it's fair to say that the jury is still out. Quite a few commentators had difficulty seeing the point of it all, and several were quite scathing in their assessments. I think that the Wikia mob could have taken a bit more time to get it looking a little better, and to spend a lot more clearly stating what problem they're trying to solve. To try it out, see <http://alpha.search.wikia.com/> and for some sort of manifesto, look at http://search.wikia.com/wiki/Search_Wikia

Don't forget - for further discussions visit my blog <http://www.alia.org.au/webbsblog>

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