

On reviews

By the time you read this, Jacqueline Howett's life may have returned to normal – I hope so. As at the end of March, this latest internet sensation was probably starting to regret a few of her recent actions, or maybe not. It all started with a polite but unfavourable review at tinyurl.com/4jzko8v. She took umbrage. Of course, everybody knows that an author is mad to hit back at reviews that they find objectionable (do they really expect the reviewer to say that they were wrong?) But that didn't stop Ms Howett reacting in terms that fully justified the reviewer's initial assessment. Thankfully, he closed comments on the blog after over 300 people had their say – but by then the damage had well and truly been done. The story had been picked up on Twitter and Facebook and in various online news outlets and gone viral.

I'll admit that I started off enjoying the to-and-fro of the blog's commentariat, but it soon became a little boring and I began to notice other sub-threads. One of them was disparaging of self-publishing and crowing about how a good proofreader would have picked up the obvious errors and an editor might have been able to advise the writer that their style was clunky at best. Well, maybe. I've seen quite a few books in recent times from proper publishing firms that could have done with a couple more checks and better advice.

Then, wonder of wonders, the self-publishers started to turn on each other with a harangue about the misuse of the term 'indie'. Well, here's a bulletin for them: we .. don't .. care. You may feel strongly about that sort of terminology – and if we're polite we'll note that – but the rest of us are mostly unimpressed.

The great thing about the web these days is that anyone can air their views or their artistic endeavour. The worst thing about the web is the same. Long live the web.

The other Tim

Tim O'Reilly has built a reputation on spotting trends and incorporating them into his publishing empire; many internet professionals have at least one of his books on their shelf - or their e-reader. In a perceptive interview with Forbes magazine at tinyurl.com/6x6zklk he speaks about e-books and makes a lot of sense. He also says that he arranges to donate the books returned by retailers to less-developed parts of the world. Bravo!

Protecting your data – or yourself?

I had a great experience in March at BarCamp Canberra 2011, which was a free-wheeling but quite organised unconference. (And their description of it as unorganised is quite ironic - it ran much better than many of the organised events that I've attended over the years.) Despite my expectation that it would be all about the 2.0 world, the topics ranged quite widely - from how to give a great presentation and how to develop standards better to a fair bit of 2.0 stuff. One topic that I was interested in was the creation of more useful bus timetables and route finders, something that government people are trying to do in the traditional ways, while enthusiastic developers in the community try to produce the same products in a more agile manner. One of them was really very impressive, the developer had put a lot of time into the project and was able to demonstrate a good prototype. But then I looked at the disclaimer he'd put on his site:

"The content of this website is of a general and informative nature. Please check with printed timetables or those available on <http://action.act.gov.au> before your trip. Whilst every effort has been made to ensure the high quality and accuracy of the Site, the Author makes no warranty, express or implied concerning the topicality, correctness, completeness or quality of the information, which is provided "as is". The Author expressly

disclaims all warranties, including but not limited to warranties of fitness for a particular purpose and warranties of merchantability. All offers are not binding and without obligation."

I was inclined to scoff at this, until I checked around and found very similar comments in all of the state and municipal transport sites - but if you look at their online timetable data you don't get the same weasel words. I can't see any good reason for the difference. There's a certain amount of fear that if they provide the data for other people to do what they want with it and someone misses a bus by relying on out-of-date or incorrect data, there will be some come-back. So? Once you release that data, it's out there. Better to just make it available, and see what happens.

Snapshot required

A note on the *Link* list (mailman.anu.edu.au/mailman/listinfo/link) has raised a point that I've not considered so far. When you click on the 'I accept' button for a user agreement on a site, do you keep a copy of the terms and conditions that you've just agreed to? You really should, because they change from time to time and one day you just may need to show what you agreed to.

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