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Webb's Web

👤 Posted by Kerry Webb   💬 25 comments

Finders keepers

The comings and goings at the end of Carol Bartz's time at Yahoo! inspired me to refresh my memory about the development of searching facilities for the web. Although the timeline is not particularly clear, there's a lot of information at **www. searchenginehistory.com/**. It's easy to think that the history of internet searching has been all so straightforward; not so. All of the players have had their successes and setbacks (and been involved with other partners from time to time) and it really highlights that in this sort of industry you have to innovate, innovate, innovate. For a while Yahoo! really was a thought and market leader, only to see other more nimble developers spot a niche and muscle in. And some of them prospered, but not all. Talk about continuous improvement!

There when you need them

The first-ever Australian GovCamp was held in Canberra at the beginning of September. GovCamps are like BarCamps - unconferences with an emphasis on participation rather than being lectured to - but these come with a specific direction towards Government activities. This was a typically enthusiastic affair, with a good range of participants from various places around the country and levels within organisations, and plenty of interaction - thanks largely to the efforts of the indefatigable Pia Waugh. One of the highlights was a presentation from Anthony Baxter of the Google Crisis Response team, which has the aim of making critical information more accessible around natural disasters and humanitarian crises - of which there have been way too many recently. And because of the unpredictable nature of such events Anthony and his team are accustomed to getting in touch with government organisations at very short notice - although by now there's a lot of planning going on to make sure that data in appropriate formats will be available. Apart from his stories about how and when he was approaching the custodians of important information, I was interested to see that his organisation Google. org was almost unknown among the GovCamp attendees. They definitely do a good job, without seeking too much credit.

Oh for some evidence-based decision-making!

We have a new online directory at work, and of course it's going to take some of us a little time to get used to the new look. What was more disturbing was that Someone In Authority likes fly-out menus - and overrode the advice of the professional designers that it wasn't a good idea at all. The result? Well, as your cursor approaches the vicinity of the menu it flies out, and if the link you were trying to click lies under the menu - that's just your bad luck. We can all dream of a time when management comes to value the advice given by the professionals, but I suppose that'll be some time coming.

Well and truly in the public domain now

I suppose we need to be aware that people we deal with - especially in such a huge community as the internet - are going to pass on, but every time it happens it still comes as a shock. Much as it does in face-to-face relations (I almost said "real life" - ha!), I suppose. On the Stumpers list a week ago it was announced that Michael S Hart had died (**tinyurl.com/3ohfuzw**) and I'm sure that I wasn't the only one who thought "but he only posted here last week". I didn't know him well but we had crossed swords a little when discussing how far *Project Gutenberg* should be going in presuming to know what was in the public domain.

This was illustrated very well recently when a friend of mine told the story about her father's books. He was a first-rank science fiction author from the 1950s until his death in 2001, and gained plenty of fame but not a lot of wealth during his career. Now, his widow has to spend a lot of time pursuing those who happily take his work and assume that they can put it online. I think it would be better if they took the default position that you should respect the wishes of the author and their estate wherever it's even remotely applicable. Many of the Clan Gutenberg don't agree.

Whatever your opinion though, you must acknowledge that Michael Hart was one of our pioneers, and more than most of us has left a considerable legacy. Happy trails, Michael.

Where we've come from

An interesting interactive chart has been released showing the development of the various browsers (**evolutionofweb.appspot.com/**) that have defined how we use the web. The surprise for me was that the Opera product has been around so long - beginning a few months before Internet Explorer in 1995. The chart also shows at what stage the various versions of HTML, CSS and so on came into being. It's not a bad effort at all, although I do think that the multitude of swirly lines just detract a little from the message they're trying to send.