

## Internet News

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### Internet Governance

Stephen Bell (no relation!), writing in Computerworld New Zealand, discusses a recent UN ICT forum on governance of the internet. In particular he quotes Vin Cerf, one of the 'fathers of the internet', who addressed the forum describing how the internet had developed openly and freely due to the openness of the technical rules and their voluntary adoption by designers. Unavoidably, as the internet developed it began to incorporate functions that had been subject to considerable regulation offline. Cerf's view is that governance should, "be thought of as the steps taken collectively to facilitate the spread, development and collective use of the internet". As an example, he says that e-commerce could be promoted by the adoption of procedures for the use of signatures, mechanisms to settle disputes in international electronic transactions and the treatment of international transaction taxes, together with protection of intellectual property.

Certainly, if there is no voluntary governance of the internet, there will be compulsory external government control.

### Internet Really Flies

After 3 years of testing, [!] SAS, the Swedish airline, seems to be going ahead with in-flight internet connection <http://www.internetnews.com/bus-news/article.php/568691>. Up until two weeks ago I would have thought that very unnecessary. Then my home computer crashed fatally and I have been without access until very recently. I can't believe how much I missed not being able to logon whenever I wanted. As an active member of an online motorcycle club, <http://www.bikersoracle.com/vfr>, I felt really cut-off. Maybe I won't be so hasty to judge others in future!

### Directgov

The Office of the e-Envoy announced a new electronic access point to government at the beginning of March this year. Directgov, <http://ukonline.direct.gov.uk/Homepage/fs/en>, is expected to develop into the first point of contact with government for the public, bringing all of the various government departments into one website. Initial impressions of the site are very good. The homepage is clean and ordered, and the 'citrus' colour scheme is very refreshing! It only took me seconds to navigate to information on driving licences for motorcyclists. Previously it took much longer trying to get through via the DVLA site.

If the site can retain its simple, uncluttered, interface it should be a valuable resource for many people. However, it will need to be promoted much more vigorously to potential users so that they automatically think of it when they need governmental information.

### Lifesaver

The internet is to be used to co-ordinate research and knowledge in order to assist governments and relief agencies cope with drought in Asia. The International Water Management Institute (IWMI), a non-profit making organisation, has launched a website, <http://www.iwmi.cgiar.org/droughtassessment/index.asp> created as a "meeting place" for scientists, managers and policy makers dealing with drought.

It is hoped that the website will bring together the people, data and knowledge that will help to alleviate the devastating effects of drought throughout Asia. There is an acknowledged pool of knowledge and experience in the area but it requires a co-ordinated effort to make the best use of these resources. The internet is seen as the ideal way of bringing this about.

## Intranets and Content Management

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I know that you should not judge a book by its cover, but the minute I look at the home page of an intranet I start to get a very strong impression of what may lie beneath. One intranet I came across recently had white type on a black background, and at quite a small font size at that. It was unreadable at almost any distance. All the other pages on the intranet used the same reversed-out appearance and all were equally unreadable. On asking why this had been adopted the answer given was that this was the format that had been used for the annual report a year or so back, and the Chairman liked it so much that he decided that it should be the basis for the intranet 'so that there was a strong brand identity'. Need I report that intranet usage was in terminal decline?

For a web site creating a strong brand identity is an important objective of the home page, because you are trying to get some instant 'stickiness' that will persuade a first-time visitor that this is a site worth visiting and remembering. Intranets are different, and yet the same. There should be a strong link with corporate objectives, but more in terms of organisational culture. When I see an intranet home page where the organisation is by department, and presupposes that users know which department is responsible for certain information it tells me a lot

about the silo management approach of the company.

### Navigation versus information

The usual format that I come across is a home page which has some navigation in the LH column and perhaps more on the RH side, but the centre is taken up with a picture of the office and news about the organisation. A few years ago I was working for an international organisation that had a graphics team whose sole task was to create a new image for the central section of the intranet every day. Where there is a news component it is often a mixture of news about the organisation from an external perspective and news about the activities of individuals and departments that in the past would have appeared in the staff newsletter, and been ignored. People are very selective about news, and are only interested in it when it has some impact on them. If it does not then it can be a total turnoff, and so a waste of valuable space.

One of the pieces of web design folklore is Peter Cochrane's 'three clicks' rule. With the current scale of web sites and intranets trying to get every piece of content just three clicks away from the home page is insanity. My version of the three clicks 'rule' is that within three clicks of the home page a user should be confident that they are heading in the right direction. This argues for navigation-rich home pages.

A very good home page design I saw a couple of years was on the intranet of Software Spectrum, a US-owned software company. This had three columns headed Our Clients, Our People and Communications. Each subheading had enough third-level headings to illustrate what content was likely to be found there. This was complemented by selected departmental links and very clear global navigation. Another feature of the home page was that the current times in the international offices were presented, which served both to emphasise the global basis of the company and also assist in working out when staff would be in the office. I recall there was also an indication alongside the time to show if the office was closed for a public holiday. All very simple things to do, but the overall effect was to reinforce the corporate culture of having a focus on meeting the needs of customers.

### Home pages and organisation culture

Not only do the home pages have to provide a high usability information architecture but they also set the culture of the organisation. I remember not so long ago being in a company where there was quite a large voluntary redundancy programme being put into operation. On the home page details of the programme could indeed be found on the employee information pages, but were listed after links to the cafeteria, sports clubs and theatre trips. The reason was of

course that this list was organised alphabetically, but staff concerned felt that they were being seen as second-class citizens.

The case is sometimes made that employees do not use the home page to find content on the intranet, but the reality is that they do, or at the very least open the intranet up at the home page before tunnelling into specific content.

### Top down and bottom up

Home page development needs to be managed with more care than is evident in many organisations. A top-down view that reflects corporate objectives and business processes is a good start, but then as the intranet develops in complexity and size there will be a need to look back at the home page and see if it still works. All too often changes in lower levels are force-fitted into the home page, and the first level below the home page. In my view the home page and first level down should be kept under continuous review. It can be quite instructive to ask users to describe the top level structure of your intranet without the aid of the PC! This is where usability testing becomes so important, not only to identify enhancements but also to make the business case for making the changes.

Unfortunately usability testing is usually regarded as an expensive luxury in many organisations, on the basis that 'employees will soon find ways of locating the information that they want, and in any case there is a search engine'. Search engines are important in an intranet, but only in conjunction with other elements that support the findability of content.

Going back to my initial metaphor, would you buy the third edition of a book if the publishers had used the book jacket from the 1st edition, and taped it in place because the current edition was now twice the size of the original, and that in addition neither the contents page or the index had been updated?

## Reference Management

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Following promotion of reference software (see my column in the last issue of eLucidate) and familiarity of the basics of the software (do come to my course on June 23rd) the next steps tend to be making appropriate use of the references.

### Posting references more widely

Posting references onto the web seems to be a fairly difficult area to locate adequate software. There are