Internet applications, sites, trends and happenings

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This column aims to draw your attention to various interesting Web sites, which I have come across and which might appeal to you, and to keep you uptodate with news and views on Internet trends, developments and statistics. It offers essentially a personal selection rather than comprehensive coverage.

WordReference
WordReference is a Web site and service dedicated to providing quick and easy dictionary translations to people reading foreign languages. With these tools and the use of professional dictionaries based on the Collins dictionaries from HarperCollins, it is hoped to make it easier for users to read and comprehend foreign language Web pages. The idea behind it is that, while the Internet has done an incredible job of bringing the world together in the last few years, one of the greatest barriers has been language. Much of the Web's content is in English and a huge number of people are reading the English-language Web pages as a second language.

WordReference can be used in two ways: as free on-line dictionaries, and as a Web browser add-on tool. There are four multi-lingual translation dictionaries and one extremely big English dictionary – just type in a word in the search boxes to the left of the screen for a brief definition that also gives the part of speech (e.g. noun). If you look up a word in the English then you can also get the equivalent contextual translation in French, German, Italian and Spanish. The other dictionaries are English-Spanish or Spanish-English, English-French or French-English, English-German or German-English and English-Italian or Italian-English.

WordReference can also be used as an add-on to IE and Netscape browsers. You simply download the files and install them to be able to translate any word (in English, French, German, Italian or Spanish) on any Web page with a few quick clicks using the Collins dictionaries. Find out more at http://www.wordreference.com.

Impact of political Web sites on presidential campaigns
Recent research conducted by comScore Survey Solutions reveals that political Web sites have a significant effect on visitors' interest in, engagement with, and opinions of political issues and candidates.

comScore Survey Solutions's unique technology permits the selection of survey participants at random or based upon specific behavioural or demographic characteristics. Using this approach, comScore polled US citizens who were known to have been both visitors and non-visitors to political Web sites, and segmented their responses accordingly. comScore's study of these responses yielded insights into how visitors to political Web sites differ from

the general population and how such sites have a significant impact on Americans' pre-election attitudes and behaviours.

The comScore survey found that visitors to political sites are far more likely to report that they are highly interested in political issues and candidates. Specifically, 73% of visitors to political Web sites report that they are either 'extremely interested' or 'very interested' in political issues, compared to only 38% of non-visitors.

To further measure political engagement, the survey asked both visitors and non-visitors whether they participated in any of ten political activities ranging from registration to vote, to campaign donations, to attending political demonstrations. comScore found significant differences between visitors and non-visitors for each of these engagement measures. For example, 87% of visitors reported that they are registered to vote compared to 77% of non-visitors. At more involved levels of engagement, the gap between visitors and non-visitors is far greater. Approximately 25% of political site visitors reported that they had donated money to a campaign or special interest group in the past three years against just 4% of non-visitors. More than 60% of visitors said they had contacted a politician in the past three years – more than three times as great as the proportion (17%) of non-visitors that did the same.

Among the most important outcomes of comScore's research was validation of the considerable impact political Web sites have on people's opinions of, and participation in, the political process. For example, more than 40% of visitors reported that political sites have increased their interest in learning more about issues or candidates. Nearly 30% of visitors told comScore that they are more actively involved in politics as a result of visiting these sites. Nearly 20% of visitors reported that political Web sites have actually changed their opinions on issues ranging from tax cuts to which candidate they plan to vote for in the 2004 presidential election. Visitors to political Web sites are also substantially more likely to report that they will vote in the 2004 presidential election. Fully 85% of visitors answered that they 'definitely will' vote in the November election compared to 56% of non-visitors.

For further information on the survey and a full analysis plus statistics on numbers of visitors to leading US presidential candidates Web sites, read
http://www.comscore.com/press/release.asp?press=414.

Decline in music file swapping
The percentage of on-line Americans downloading music files on the Internet has dropped by half, and the numbers who are downloading files on any given day have plunged since the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) began filing suits in September 2003 against those suspected of copyright infringement. Furthermore, 20% of those who say they continue to download or share files on-line say they are doing so less often because of the suits.

A new nationwide phone survey of 1358 Internet users during November and December 2003 by the Pew Internet & American Life Project showed that the percentage of music file downloaders had fallen to 14% (about 18 million users) from 29% (about 35 million) when the project last reported on downloading from a survey conducted from March to May 2003. On an average day during the spring survey, 4% of Internet users said they downloaded files. In the November and December survey just 1% said they were downloading files on any given day during the survey period.

Furthermore, data from comScore Media Metrix, based on the company's continuously measured consumer panel, shows significant declines in the number of people with peer-to-peer file sharing applications running on their computers. In fact, comScore found that

usage of each of the four applications sampled – KaZaa, WinMX, BearShare and Grokster – dropped in November when compared to one year ago. The declines in the user base of each of these applications from November 2002 to November 2003 were 15% for KaZaa, 25% for WinMX, 9% for BearShare and 59% for Grokster.

Conversely, comScore has observed that in recent months a growing number of consumers have turned to a new generation of paid on-line music services. In November 2003, 3,2 million Americans visited Napster.com, which re-launched as a paid on-line music service in late October. Apple's iTunes, which expanded to serve Windows-based PC users in mid-October, drew 2,7 million such visitors in November. Furthermore, in the Pew Internet Project survey, the percentage of Internet users who said that they shared files, such as music, video, picture files or computer games, with others on-line dropped from 28% in a June 2003 survey to 20% in the November and December survey.

Read more, including the background to the RIAA involvement, at http://www.comscore.com/press/release.asp?press=395.

Dutch travel Web sites sticky
The latest research from Nielsen//NetRatings, the leading provider of Internet audience measurement and analysis, shows that Thomas Cook Neckermann is the 'stickiest' travel Web site in the Netherlands, both in terms of the number of pages viewed each month and the amount of time spent per person. The number of pages viewed per person at 54 per month is much higher than any other travel Web site in the Netherlands. D-reizen is the next closest in terms of the number of pages viewed, but with much less pages viewed, namely 22 per person. In terms of time per person spent on the Web sites, visitors to Thomas Cook Neckermann spent 6'13 minutes, compared to 9,52 minutes on 9292ov.nl and only 6,66 on D-reizen.

The most popular travel Web site is ANWB (the Dutch motoring organization), with more than half a million visitors. Twenty-five per cent of people visiting a Dutch travel site in December 2003 visited the ANWB site – a general travel site, offering tickets and holidays, plus advice on car travel and traffic updates. Locatienet, a route planning service, closely follows ANWB. Map24 had a strong increase in its unique audience, growing 79% in the period from July to December 2003. The prominence of map and travel information sites in the Dutch Top Ten is mirrored across Europe. On-line map Web sites in Europe, such as Multimap in the UK, Mappy in France, map24 in Germany and Karthotellet.com in Sweden, attract a large proportion of the total travel sector audience in their markets. In some cases they outperform on-line travel agencies in terms of audience. For instance, in the Netherlands, Locatienet accounted for 23% of the total travel sector audience who visited travel Web sites, in Germany Map 24 took 16%, in France Mappy had 42% and in the UK Multimap.com accounted for 30%. This research shows also that the major European on-line travel players such as Lastminute.com, Expedia and Opodo are surprisingly absent from the Dutch on-line travel market.

For more facts and figures on Dutch travel Web sites see http://www.nielsen-netratings.com/pr/pr_040129_netherlands.pdf.

How the Internet has changed our lives
It has been ten years since the Internet took its first steps towards becoming a mass medium in the UK and five years since Nielsen//NetRatings started measuring on-line activity. It is almost impossible to overstate the extent to which the Internet has changed our lives in that time. In an attempt to show how it has, the Nielsen//NetRatings' European analytics team has selected the following ten Web sites and Internet applications as the ones they feel have had the greatest impact on the Internet and on society as a whole so far (http://www.nielsen-

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Google. This Web site is so successful it became a verb – search engine Google is not only one of the most-visited sites on-line, it is also the market leader in a fiercely competitive sector. Google's enormous coverage and speed of results has meant that the concept of search has expanded from looking for Web sites and reference material to hunting for personal details – 'googling' old friends or new ones. What's next? The Google brand is expanding, buying Web-publishing tool Blogger and launching a news service. But it is likely to face renewed competition in 2004.

EBay. What Google did with information, eBay did with things – pretty much anything you would want can be found there, and the nature of on-line auctions means that the more people sign up to it, the more chance anyone has of finding what they are looking for. The result? eBay is now the largest e-commerce site in Europe. What's next? We expect to see continued European growth – two-thirds of German surfers now use the site and the UK audience shot up during 2003. Other European markets are likely to follow.

Microsoft Outlook. No aspect of the Internet has changed the way we work more than e-mail. It has enabled 24-hour, global business to become a reality and it has revolutionized communication within companies too. Of all the things on this list, it is probably the one hardest to imagine doing without. Unfortunately e-mail has its dark side – MS Outlook is the preferred carrier for unwelcome spam e-mail and viruses as well as useful communications. What's next? The war on spam will continue with international legal solutions being sought and increased popularity for software add-ons.

AOL Instant Messenger. Instant messaging is being seen as the Web's latest 'killer application' – a mix of on-line chat and mobile phone that is also speeding up and improving communications in the workplace. AOL was the pioneer in this sector, introducing most of the functions IM users now enjoy, though in Europe MSN Messenger is far more popular. IMs popularity is part of a shift away from the Internet as a public space and towards the Web as a private communications tool. What's next? All the major portals are looking to make money out of instant messaging. Also the current situation, with AOL users unable to communicate with MSN users, is reminiscent of mobile phones in the days before inter-network calls – some consolidation is likely.

Napster. Only time will tell whether Napster's newest incarnation as a paid download service is a success, but it has status as the original file-sharing network guarantees it a place in on-line history. Napster blazed a trail that Audiogalaxy and today's market leader KazaA followed. Legal issues so far have dogged all the biggest file-sharing networks but their impact on users is just as important as their impact on the record industry. Napster helped popularise the MP3 format and led indirectly to the current success of portable MP3 jukeboxes like the iPod. What's next? The record industry will be waiting to see if any European sites can emulate the American success of Apple's iTunes in offering paid downloads. Napster will hope it is the one to do it.

Amazon. Despite some wild predictions, books are much the same now as they were five years ago, but Amazon earns a place on this list for the way it sells them – Amazon, and other successful e-commerce ventures like Lastminute.com, have pioneered personalized selling, and sell hundreds of thousands of items through customized newsletters and recommendations schemes. What's next? This kind of 'social software' is likely to become more sophisticated, so interactivity will be an even bigger selling point and sales driver than it is now.

Friends Reunited. If there is one site that has changed the perception of the Internet in the

UK, it is Friends Reunited. The Internet was suddenly no longer a geek's playground – 'normal people' used it too, and not just any 'normal people': the people who went to school with you. The hugely successful formula has been used in most other countries too, and may be said to have paved the way for the wider acceptance of on-line dating and matchmaking services. What's next? The idea of meeting people through the Internet is mainstream now and likely to stay that way.

Easyjet. Back in the days of the dot.com boom, e-commerce was talked up as an agent of revolutionary change in every business. But only in the travel sector did things really change. Easyjet's Web-only business model and radical pricing structure led to a host of imitators and genuinely shook up the airline and holiday industry. Easyjet is still the number one on-line budget airline and the budget sector has prospered during a generally tough time for airlines. What's next? More of the same – airlines have caught on to the potential of the Internet for filling unsold seats quickly and cheaply.

Kelkoo. Shopping comparison portal Kelkoo is one of the big European e-commerce success stories, helping millions of Europeans research and compare prices on a vast range of products and services. Kelkoo is a great example of a service site that makes the rest of the Internet easier to use for the layman. What's next? As artificial intelligence grows more sophisticated, customized on-line 'companions' may play a bigger role in the layman's Web experience, such as when hunting out the best deal or most useful information.

Blogger. Blogger is a tool that lets you publish your own 'blog' or Web diary. The Blogger company was bought by Google this year, a sure sign that 'blogging' is gaining. Even if nobody you know has a blog now, in another year someone you know will have one. The significance of blogging is in the way it allows communication on every level – politicians reach out to their public through their blogs, and the public 'blog' to share stories and pictures from their lives with friends. What's next? Blogger is the least mainstream of the sites on this list but it is likely to move further into the limelight in 2004.

FTC launches international anti-spam campaign
The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has just launched a new international anti-spam campaign by sending 'tens of thousands' of letters to businesses and organizations urging them to close open relays and proxies on their servers. Known as 'Operation Secure Your Server', the effort involves more than 35 agencies in 26 countries.

Open relays and open proxies are servers that allow any computer in the world to bounce or route e-mail through them, disguising the real origin of the e-mail. Spammers often abuse these servers to flood the Internet with unwanted e-mail. The abusers not only overload servers, but can also damage an unwitting business's reputation if it appears that the business with the open relay or open proxy sent the spam. So far, more than a million IP addresses with open relays or proxies have been identified and international cooperation will play an important role in combating spam.

The FTC has created a Web page that contains information for businesses on what precautions to take so as not to unwittingly become distributors of spam. In addition to the FTCs letter, which is available in 21 languages, the site contains business education and links to other resources.

Along with the FTC, agencies in Albania, Argentina, Australia, Canada, Brazil, Bulgaria, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Denmark, Ecuador, Finland, Hungary, Jamaica, Japan, Lithuania, Norway, Panama, Peru, Romania, Serbia, Singapore, South Korea, Switzerland, Taiwan, and the United Kingdom are participating in the initiative.

Read more at http://www.internetnews.com/bus-news/article.php/3306581 or visit the FTC at http://www.ftc.gov.

News bites
Just in case you did not check out the Search Engine Watch site (http://www.searchenginewatch.com/), here are some of the latest articles, which have appeared on its pages:

Hidden Google Tools. Even if you consider yourself a Google expert, these 'hidden' tools and resources let you push the search engine's capabilities to the maximum.

A multi-faceted on-line news and blog search tool, Rocketinfo Desktop is a powerful news search engine with a lot of additional goodies designed for both news junkies and on-line researchers alike.

Learning about search engines from Google engineers. Want to learn how Google works? A new archive of publications by Google employees offers deep insights into many aspects of the search engine's operation.

Google Alert automatically tracks your favourite topics. Google Alert lets you automate the process of running regular queries and sends you an e-mail whenever any new content is added to the Google database.

You will see that many items in this column relate to Google. There is also an article entitled 'Search and Destroy' in Time Magazine (Europe edition. 2 February 2004:36–39), which gives some interesting facts and figures. For instance, although Google indexes the most Web pages (around 4 billion) it is still only about 1% of the total estimated pages available on the Internet. Some 32% of all searches (and Internet surfers do about 550 million searches a day) go through Google – though these increase to about 70% if you take into account other sites like AOL that licence Google technology.

There is now a Web log for photographers. Rather than wait until you get home or are near a computer to write about your day, why not write about it as it happens? At phlog.net (http://www.phlog.net) a community of phone-bloggers is being created. Once you have registered with the site you can send your phlog entries from your phone to the phlog community, using e-mail or MMS – and have them viewable to the world in seconds. If your phone has a camera, you can take pictures of what you are up to and have them displayed instantly too!

If you are interested in seeing what bloggers are writing about, or if you want to publish your own instant thoughts on the Web, then have a look at http://www.bloggers.com or http://www.blogger.com.

Finally, more news on spam. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has just organized a special seminar on the topic (prompted by the Mydoom worm) which has called for government action before spam – which some estimates say now accounts for half of all e-mails – gets completely out of hand. A European Union study estimates the cost to Internet subscribers of spam is €10 billion per year. Another study suggests that 65% of Internet users spend more than 10 minutes per day killing spam, and a US Federal Trade Commission report last year found that 65% of spam messages were fraudulent. The OECD seminar found that there was no single easy solution to spam, but governments must work together to improve law enforcement for the problem. Find out more about OECD's work on spam at www.oecd.org/sti/spam.

About the author
Dr David Raitt is senior technology transfer officer with the European Space Agency in the Netherlands. His work involves finding applications for space technologies in non-space sectors, particularly those useful for improving everyday life. An information scientist by education and training, David is also editor of *The Electronic Library* and chairman of the Internet Librarian International conferences.

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