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 up to date with news and views on Internet trends, developments and statistics. It offers essentially a personal selection rather than comprehensive coverage. Although some sites may not cover products or services available in South Africa, they are included because they may inspire you to either contribute missing data or become an entrepreneur and create a similar local site.

Animal, vegetable or mineral?
There used to be a programme on the BBC years ago when I was young called Twenty Questions. A panel had to guess in a maximum of 20 simple questions what object a given person was thinking of and the team usually started off by asking whether the object was animal, vegetable or mineral to narrow down the possible choices. (Out of curiosity and nostalgia I looked up the term and found that, in fact, the game seems to have first been aired in the USA rather than the UK – see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twenty_Questions). In any event, this programme has now manifested itself in a Web-based game called 20Q, where it first gained popularity as an online game where users logged onto the Website and played against an artificial intelligence foe. Players think of an animal, vegetable, mineral, or other object and 20Q guesses what the player is thinking in 20 questions or less. And, the more people play, the more the game 'learns'. The system is not always correct, but is right 80% of the time (which rises to 98% if you let it ask 25 questions).

The player can elect to play in one of over 20 languages (with differences between American, British and Canadian English) and then, after giving a few optional details such as age, sex and where you live (South Africa is listed!), the user can select one of some 15 games to answer questions on. Games include The Simpsons, StarTrek, Coronation St, Doctor Who, Sport, Movies, etc (actually the choice of games is only given for the English language choice). Each 20Q game has a unique theme and its own neural network. Some of the games are very young and still have a lot to learn. For instance, 20Q Movies and 20Q TV don't know as much as the 20-year-old Classic 20Q. The newer games, played fewer times, have not yet had as much experience and thus may make mistakes. However, the more times you play, the smarter they will get.

20Q is adaptable to other formats apart from the Web – it can, in fact, run on any platform as it is adaptable, scalable, modular and embeddable. The technology is uniquely suited to low bandwidth applications, mobile entertainment and small screen devices – as a look at the online shop on the Website will attest. One popular product seems to be the Pocket 20Q. So try and beat the system at http://www.20q.net/.

What happened when, where?
Being a keen genealogist and researching my family tree (regrettably not so famous even though I am distantly related to Bonnie Raitt!), I was interested in making a kind of timeline to show what was going on elsewhere in the world at the time some of my 18th and 19th century ancestors were alive and kicking. There are, of course, several specialist packages you can purchase for this purpose and you can always do it yourself easily enough anyway. But my casual search led me to two ways of doing it using standard Microsoft tools that we all have on

our computers. The first is a helpful tutorial that shows you how to create a timeline by using the drawing tools in Microsoft Word (the tutorial is designed so that, if you are a teacher, you can set up timeline formats before or during your lesson, depending on your curriculum objectives and the age of your students). The second uses a Microsoft Office Excel spreadsheet to create a timeline that can save hours on student and teacher projects and also lets you easily and clearly organize a lot of information. You can find the tutorials at http://www.microsoft.com/education/TimelinesWord.mspx and http://www.microsoft.com/Education/CreateTimeline.mspx respectively.

But there's more to it than that – many people are now using tools to create timelines for all kinds of events and projects – especially to keep up with friends and topics they are interested in. For instance, Dipity allows you to create interactive timelines that can be embedded into, for example, a blog, campaign Website or social networking profile. Chronological information is presented graphically using any combination of text, pictures or videos. Users can choose between a traditional timeline view, a list view, a flipbook view or a map view which presents any geo-tagged data or entry on a Google map.

The recently released Dipity 2.0 lets you follow updates from the people and topics you care about, and have fun doing it. The new Dipity organizes updates from sites such as YouTube, WordPress, Twitter and 7500 news sites into 'channels' on an interactive timeline. You can create your personal channel to broadcast updates to your friends, and can start a channel about anything from Aardvarks to Zulus in just seconds with options such as Web search, RSS feeds and updating. Dip into Dipity yourself at http://www.dipity.com.

Examples of using Dipity and showing its features and versatility include the company's 'Election Center' at http://www.dipity.com/election. The site lets users follow their candidates, and show off their allegiances. Users can get official updates from the campaign via YouTube, blog posts, twitter messages, Flickr photos, etc. through Barack Obama's and John McCain's Dipity channels. Votes are counted and compared to see how interest in the candidates stack up.

Updates with comments show a special icon on the timeline view and users can carry on a conversation about any update from the candidates, or on any channel.

Another example of showing the application and power of Dipity timelines can be viewed at DigiActive's site at http://www.digiactive.org/2008/08/11/tool-dipity-makes-creating-interactive-timelines-easy/. And Brian Kelly of UKOLN at the University of Bath has created a timeline of his own to show what can be done for the library and information science world. See http://www.dipity.com/user/briankelly/timeline/Web_Accessibility_Timeline_For_Brian_Kelly.

Another system is Timeline − a DHTML-based AJAXy widget for visualizing time-based events. It's like Google Maps for time-based information. The Timeline Website at http://simile.mit.edu/timeline/ provides a live example relating to the killing of JFK that you can play around with. Other timelines for dinosaurs, the life of Monet and religion are also available. The system is an outgrowth of the MIT Simile Project and more widgets from the project can be found at http://code.google.com/p/simile-widgets/.

Become a programmer in 20 minutes
Creating timelines or mashups with available tools is a form of simple programming – but programming proper is a specialist domain and a tedious task. However, a company called Iceberg wants to empower people in this day and age of Web publishing to become programmers themselves virtually overnight. With Iceberg, any user can create a Web application for free using its simple DIY tools (see http://www.readwriteweb.com/archives/with_iceberg_everyone_can_program.php).

Iceberg allows you to build data-driven Web-based applications with enterprise-level complexity and flexibility, without having to write a line of code. You can then use these

applications to further your business, or sell or share these applications with other businesses. Iceberg is an ASP.NET Web application, and needs a Microsoft Windows server with SQL Server to run the core application. Iceberg supports Windows 2000, Windows XP, and Windows Vista and is also compatible with Internet Explorer and Firefox.

Learning Iceberg is relatively easy and quick. The Website provides a vast and well-documented training section including free sample applications (such as a Human Resources vacation planner), step-by-step guides, screenshots, diagrams, videos and more. Version 2.1 was recently launched, which includes an intuitive Getting Started Wizard that makes applications even easier to build. The Iceberg interface itself has also been improved allowing for the more flexible integration of dashboards right into your application. In addition mashups have a new embed feature and can integrate any widget/Website into your application. These kind of opportunities seem to be the way computing and the Web is going in future. Chill out at http://www.geticeberg.com/.

Create your own Wiki
Wikis make it simple to post text or documents so that a group can share files and information with others and make comments or changes. Some wikis like Wikipedia are free and public, while others are more enterprise-focused, with more robust security features. PBwiki gives you the opportunity to create business, academic, and personal wikis by providing WSIWYG editing tools, collaborative page editing, storage space and automatic backup, SSL encryption, automatic notifications via e-mail or RSS, and controls on access, including blacklisting, customizable templates and multimedia plug-ins. The company's Web site at http://pbwiki.com/ has a video demonstrating how to set up your own wiki as well as providing the possibility to create your own. PBwiki will be useful for businesses, universities and teams looking for an easy, secure way to collaborate at work without the necessity to get heavily involved with IT as the tools and processes are already provided. The service is free for up to three users and with modest charges (and discounts) for more people using it.

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.