



# Internet applications, sites, trends and happenings

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

## More on mashing

I have drawn your attention before to mashing – overlaying content on maps – that is, data stored separately but then assembled, combined and displayed as new information. More of these sites appear every day. While they may not all be of use to South Africans, they at least show their scope and provide opportunities and ideas that could possibly be emulated.

Platial enables people to find, create and use meaningful maps of places that matter to them. The site originators hope it can connect people, neighbourhoods, cities and countries through a citizen-driven common context that goes beyond geopolitical boundaries. The project started with making a map of basic local amenities for guests to use when they came to stay. People started adding to it and before long, there was a whole directory. What started in Amsterdam now covers the world. Find out more at <http://www.platial.com/>.

Another good site, if you live in America that is, is GasBuddy, which can help you find the cheapest petrol (gasoline) in your city. The network of about 180 Web sites is operated by GasBuddy, which has the most comprehensive listings of petrol prices anywhere in America. Since petrol prices in America change frequently and may vary by as much as 20% within only a few blocks, it is important for the budget minded person to be able to locate the service station with the lowest price for fuel. GasBuddy Web sites allow motorists to share information about low-priced fuel with others as well as target service stations with the lowest prices to save money when filling up at the pumps. If you intend renting a car in America, be sure to have a look at <http://www.gasbuddy.com> and if you plan to travel by train instead, check out the Amtrack routes at <http://mapmash.googlepages.com/amtrak.html>.

If climate change and global warming worry you or if the earth and its environment are of interest to you, then take a look at the information that is available on a site called ExploreOurPlanet. The site features an advanced map interface with near real-time extensions, satellite photos and thousands of other maps that illustrate hurricanes, tropical storms and earthquakes when they happen. The maps include populations, bathymetry, shaded reliefs, volcanoes, mean temperature, vegetation and plate boundaries. Videos and audio enhance the displays. The site shows data available from the end of 2004 and the 'earth views category' collects all blog entries of events visible from space. The site uses external Web services and the latest Web 2.0 technologies, such as AJAX and JSON, to present information as easily and quickly as possible. Over 6,5 million place names are

provided on satellite maps and are linked to Wikipedia to provide useful background information. Parameters such as geo-position, altitude, place name visibility and active map, overlays or extensions are included. Why not explore your planet at <http://exploreourpla.net/>?

And talking of maps, GeoCommons is a place to explore, create and share intelligent maps and geographic data. While using GeoCommons, you can explore an open geodata repository with over two billion location attributes, 35000 variables and 1500 data sets. You can also create intelligent colour-coded heat maps to answer questions, gain insight and make decisions, as well as share maps and data with your fellow collaborators. GeoCommons includes a wide range of data in areas such as population, environment, recreation, schools, crime, employment, traffic, politics, shark attacks and whatever other information the community contributes. You can search for demographic data such as age, income, occupation and ethnicity to determine the location of your target market or future customer base. In addition, you can find neighbourhood information on crime rates, school spending, the number of school-age kids, toxic waste dumping and traffic congestion in order to choose the best place to buy or rent a home. Start mapping at <http://www.geocommons.com/>.

### **NASA maps the moon with Google**

You probably already use Google Earth, but now new high-resolution lunar imagery and maps that include NASA multimedia content are available on the Google Moon Web site. Updates include new content from the Apollo missions, including dozens of embedded panoramic images, links to audio clips and videos, and descriptions of the astronauts' activities during the missions. The new content is overlaid on updated, higher-resolution lunar maps. Also added are detailed charts of different regions of the moon suitable for use by anyone simulating a lunar mission.

NASA's objective is for Google Moon to become a more accurate and useful lunar mapping platform that will be a foundation for future Web-based moon applications, much like the many applications that have been built on top of Google Maps. This will make it easier for scientists everywhere to make lunar data more available and accessible.

Google Moon's visible imagery and topography are aligned with the recently updated lunar coordinate system and can be used for scientifically accurate mission planning and data analysis. The new site is designed to be user-friendly and to encourage the exchange of data and ideas among scientists and amateur astronomers.

The announcement about Google Moon closely follows the release of new NASA content in Google Earth, including photographs taken by NASA astronauts and imagery from NASA's Earth observing satellite sensors, such as the sea-viewing Wide Field of View Sensor, Landsat and the Moderate Resolution Imaging Spectrometer. For more information on Google Moon, visit: <http://www.google.com/moon/>.

### **View from the top**

Have you ever seen a distant scenic skyline and wondered what it was exactly? Well a new Web site might just provide you with the answer. HeyWhatsThat provides panoramic sketches and the names of visible peaks. You can either browse panoramas that someone else has requested or you can generate your own for use by others.

The main site computes the names of visible peaks and provides other related visualizations. Its computations are also available via e-mail and telephone. The Path Profiler allows you to

create a path and generate its elevation profile. There are also a few Google Maps mapplets that provide elevation contours, a path profiler and sea level rise. And to support the night sky feature of Google Earth, the site provides overlays of your horizon, an azimuth/altitude grid, and the positions of the Sun, Moon and planets on the [Planisphere](#) page. Add some South African scenic views at <http://www.heywhatsthat.com/>.

### **Local classified ads**

Need to find a flat? Or a job? Or a partner? Or a restaurant? Then instead of buying the local newspaper to scan the classified ads, simply go online to Craigslist that provides community moderated local classifieds and forums for 450 cities worldwide. There are three locations in South Africa: Cape Town, Durban and Johannesburg. You can view classified ads in categories such as community, housing, for sale, personals, jobs, services, gigs, discussion forums etc. So if you have a flat you want to rent out in Camps Bay or Clifton Beach to an MBA student from London coming to study in Cape Town for six months, then contact him quickly via <http://capetown.craigslist.org/>.

### **Instant Sketch**

Are you one of those lucky people who can draw faces and figures? No? Well you can be an instant artist with a nifty little Web site. Just upload a photo or select one stored on your personal computer and you get an exact copy in a pencil-like outline sketch from which you can then save or upload to Flickr and send to friends and colleagues to impress them with your new skill. You can also make your photo into a Rubik's Cube, lomograph, jigsaw puzzle etc. Be creative at <http://www.dumpr.net/sketch.php>

### **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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