Internet trends

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.

Stuck for a word – just look it up

I've mentioned a few dictionaries in my column before, but I do not think I've drawn your attention to this one. A–Z Dictionaries is the dictionary of dictionaries – listing many popular and specialty dictionaries, word games, little known words, articles on dictionary topics and so on. There are hundreds of free online dictionaries for you to access from many different companies, and information on many more, so whatever you are looking for, this Web site (http://www.a-z-dictionaries.com) should help you find it. Free translations to and from English in 40 languages and across 28 languages, a complete reference library on the one search engine and many more features and links make A–Z Dictionaries a useful reference source. Not all the dictionaries provided are free, however, and in some cases you are referred to where you can buy them. But the more you use it the more interesting things you come across – such as a collection of word oddities and trivia (e.g. http://www.a-z-dictionaries.com/blog/?page_id=81).

Where are you going on holiday?

I cannot exactly remember how I ended up here – I think I was looking up something about statistics and came across this page http://www.neoncarrot.co.uk/h_aboutindia/himachal_pradesh_stats.html – but look at what it contains! A wealth of detail on Himachal Pradesh in India, if that is where your interest lies. But look further and you will find the whole Web site is devoted to many diverse aspects of India. Neon Carrot was originally apparently intended to give a day-to-day account of travel and life in India to the Webmaster's family and friends. The originators have now moved back to the UK, and while their travelogue is no longer possible, they are trying to keep the site going by adding all kinds of news, information and photographs about various regions of India.

Another site that might be of use to you if you are thinking of coming to Europe is Durant Imboden's Europe for Visitors (http://europeforvisitors.com/). This site gives European travel articles, travel links, maps, major city guides, hotels, information on pretty much all of Western Europe (former East European countries are not included), etc. The author and his wife write about countries, transportation services and tourist attractions in Europe, with an emphasis on 'evergreen' rather than time-sensitive features. Recently they have been placing greater emphasis on 'saturation coverage' or 'megafeatures' about destinations, cruises and other European travel experiences. The site is very comprehensive and also contains good image galleries.

Whistle-blowers stop here

The mission of CorpWatch is to investigate and expose corporate violations of human rights, environmental crimes, fraud and corruption around the world. CorpWatch provides in-depth

information on a wide range of issues involving corporate power, corporate globalization and grassroots resistance to it. For the past nine years the company, based in San Francisco, has been educating and mobilizing people through its Web site and various campaigns. CorpWatch professes to counter corporate-led globalization through education, network building and activism. The company works to foster democratic control over corporations by building at the grassroots a diverse movement for human rights, dignity, labour rights and environmental justice.

In fact, if you are interested in global affairs and big business (and sleaze) then there is a lot of interesting and readable material on the site. Issues on which you can find information include chemicals and energy, corporate corruption, corporate influence in the classroom, financial malpractice, mining abuses and so on. In addition to providing in-depth information related to corporate globalization, CorpWatch also gets involved in campaigns. Current ones include the War Profiteers Campaign, which is taking a stance against corporate opportunism in places such as Afghanistan, Iraq and the American South; and Hurricane Katerina, where a round-up of coverage related to federal and state contracts granted for reconstruction of the US Gulf Coast is provided.

By means of an interactive guide, users are taken through the steps of researching a corporation on the Internet – how to find information about a corporation's business strategy and operations, financial status and environmental and social record. Read more about CorpWatch and check out the blog at http://www.corpwatch.org/.

WebWatcher is watching for you

Consumer Reports WebWatch (http://www.consumerreports.org) is a grant-funded project of Consumers Union, the non-profit publisher of the *Consumer Reports* magazine and ConsumerReports.org. Through research, the promotion of guidelines for best practices and other means, the project seeks to improve the credibility of content on the World-Wide Web. The project rates Web sites on categories that include disclosure of transaction fees and business partnerships relevant to consumers, how clearly sites tell consumers what their privacy policies are and whether they disclose how data collected from the consumer will be used, how clearly and consistently Web sites label advertising and whether they clearly separate editorial content from advertising, 'advertorials', advertising supplements and the like.

WebWatch has a number of ongoing investigations into such matters as whether travel Web sites deliver, Web credibility, e-commerce, online advertising, fraud and online drugs sites. Typically an abstract is given with the full report being downloadable. An online newsletter will allow you to be notified of new Consumer Reports WebWatch research projects, investigations, news stories and special events.

The related Consumer Reports (http://www.consumerreports.org) provides ratings and expert opinions on thousands of products including cars, appliances, computers, food, fitness, finance and so on. Information provided includes material on such things as auto insurance scams, how to find a good repair shop, hidden airline fees and much, much more. You can keep up-to-date with what is new in general and in the car, health and safety fields with specialist newsletters.

Greet users with a cheery message

How about a nice friendly voice talking to you from the screen? SitePal allows you to design speaking animated characters that can be added to your Web site to enrich the user's experience and to increase sales. Research has shown that virtual salespeople, such as those provided by SitePal characters, can actually increase business and the site quotes a recent study with the McAfee store that showed that adding talking characters to their Web site increased online product sales by 10%. Such talking characters also apparently keep you at the site for longer and increase traffic. You can learn how to set up a character in a very short time – simply design it, add audio and publish! Of course, the software is not free – you can buy one of three packages ranging from $10 to $50 per month. Find out more at http://www.oddcast.com/sitepal/.

Looking for open source software?

Open source software permits the rapid creation of solutions within an open, collaborative environment. Collaboration within the open source community (developers and end users) promotes a higher standard of quality and helps to ensure the long-term viability of both data and applications.

SourceForge.net is the world's largest open source software development Web site, giving free hosting to more than 100000 software development projects and providing over 1000000 registered users with a centralized resource for managing projects, issues, communications and code. SourceForge.net has the largest repository of open source code and applications available on the Internet and provides a wide variety of services to hosted projects as well as to the open source community.

The projects hosted on the site are listed by category such as clustering, database, hardware, multimedia and financial; the number of projects contained within the category is given together with the most downloaded software and the most active. Clicking on the category shows the software packages within that topic together with such information as times downloaded, rank, latest file and download button. Clicking on a software name gives full details about the software and its developers. Learn more at http://sourceforge.net.

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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