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Internet applications, sites, trends and happenings

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In this column I am going to tell you about several interesting Web sites which I have come across, as well as keep you up-to-date with news and views which might appeal to you.

Web sites

Where's George?

Have you ever wondered where money goes? Well, in the United States, a Web site has been created to assist those interested in knowing exactly where their money goes and where it has been. The record starts when somebody enters the serial number of a banknote at http://www.wheresgeorge.com and marks the note with the Web site address (the site is named after George Washington - found on $1 bills). The idea is that, whenever people get a bill, they too log its serial number at the site. Currently some 3.5% of bills registered at the site are logged again as they change hands. The site offers a unique way to track money around a city or across the country and see where and how bills are spent. It takes some bills two months to travel three miles. Some 70 000 people have entered over 1 million bills totalling over $6 million so far.

Bird's eye of Britain

A millennium map will provide an aerial photographic inventory of every town, street, house, field and barn in Britain at the turn of the century - thus providing a unique historical survey and insight into life at one point in time. More than 75 000 high definition, colour photos are needed and are being taken from 5 500 ft to show objects as small as 25 cm. The map will be available on the Internet (http://www.millennium-map.com) and people can zoom in on an area, browse across the British landscape and order prints of locations. The plan is to update the photographic survey every five years. The photographic survey of England is expected to be completed by the middle of 2000 and maps of Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales should be completed the following year.

Help the hungry

Every 3.6 seconds someone dies of hunger somewhere in the world and 75 per cent of the deaths are of children under five. A wonderful site (http://www.thehungersite.com) has been created to help ease their plight and merely by visiting it and clicking on the Donate Free Food button, you can help hungry people. The site sponsors (who vary over time) pay for your food donation, which you can make once a day.

Life's little ups and downs

Want to keep track of the ups and downs in your life and compare them with others? Then you need to have a look at the Daily Rating site (http://dailyrating.com), which enables you to see the trends and patterns in your life. When you register with Daily Ratings, you receive a daily e-mail asking how was your day. Your reply indicates the kind of day you've had (1= really bad, 10 = really great). You can check to see what kind of days others have had over time by US state, gender, age, salary and job.

Library of infinite knowledge

Here is a Web site which bills itself as the library of infinite knowledge. By structuring your searches and scouring the Web deeper than other search engines, Karnak (http://www.karnak.com) helps you find and accumulate a personal library of knowledge from multiple sources, while at the same time providing you with a summarized, condensed and highlighted report. Karnak uses hundreds of Web sites to cross-reference topics, verify Internet sites, pages and requested information, and sort out non-pertinent links. The basic service is free, although fee-paying levels offer the user more options such as automatic SDIs.

Web news

By coincidence, much of the news reported in this issue follows up topics I discussed in my paper presented at the Internet Applications conference in September and published in the previous issue of *SAJIM*.

For instance, I discussed the Echelon network which spies on e-mail and looks for keywords relating to terrorist and criminal activities. Well, in an act of electronic civil disobedience it seems that angry and concerned Internet users were prompted to overwhelm the system by flooding it with ficticious messages on a Jam Echelon Day. Supporters of the jamming campaign were, however, pessimistic that their efforts to bombard the National Security Agency in the US with millions of e-mails would actually do much harm.

Also in my paper I alluded to the problems of languages on the Web - mostly English at present, but moving to others in a few years. I also mentioned that some organizations made their Web pages available in several languages - well, Lufthansa and British Airways make content available in 30 languages. In a follow-up to my discussion, translation services are considered key to a global Internet and a Honolulu-based company, WorldPoint (http://www.worldpoint.com), now offers a Web-based 'localization' service that translates and edits documents into 18 languages - not just text, but also currencies, dates and even colour and image conventions. WorldPoint Passport is the Internet's first comprehensive software solution for creating, managing, and delivering complex multilingual Web sites. The system uniquely includes seamless integration with a the world's largest network of professional language translators - WorldPoint relies on 1 000 human translators, with another 9 000 as back-up. WorldPoint Passport users can serve Web pages dynamically from a proprietary cached database architecture with unparalleled speed. The company, which offers 24-hour support, charges around 20 to 30 cents per word, depending on the obscurity of the language, and can turn around simple jobs in two hours.

Again, following up on home shopping, I see that Britain's first nationwide interactive television service, claiming to be the most advanced home shopping and home banking service in the world, was launched recently to more than one million homes with digital satellite television. Known as Open, the service has been set up by Sky, British Telecom, HSBC and Matsushita. Major retailers such as Next, Iceland, Somerfield and Thorntons are expected to sign up alongside Woolworths, W H Smith, Domino's Pizza and Dixons in the

coming months. The free service will allow users to pay bills, buy groceries, play video games, send e-mails, order take-aways and check their bank accounts by using a portable keyboard and their TV screens. Research has shown that people are more likely to use a television rather than a computer for home shopping since they associate it more with leisure activities. Digital set top boxes connected to a telephone outlet are required, but the time, and cost, spent online is much less with interactive television than with computers. Although cable companies such as NTL are launching similar interactive services in their catchment areas, Open is available nationwide to anyone with a satellite dish and who subscribes to SkyDigital.

I also mentioned security issues. Well, Intershop Communications (http://www.intershop.com) e-commerce software will soon have additional security; instead of users having to log on to protected sites with a password, the new system will verify identities by fingerprints. The new technology is called Goldfinger (http://www.goldfinger-secure.com/gold.htm) and the basis for authentication is biometric information generated from fingerprints. Characteristics of the fingerprint are extracted and encoded so that the original fingerprint cannot be reconstructed. When a user logs on, a biometric scanner attached to the computer scans the user's fingerprint and compares it to an original scanned-in image template, which are stored and encoded in the server engine. The user gains access to the online shop only if there is a match. Goldfinger is expected to be available in Europe by the end of the year and elsewhere later.

Something else I covered was the way in which users' paths across the Internet are tracked. Most Web users know that the sites they visit can track their movements, watch what they do on that site and use that data to more effectively market products and services. But many people do not realize that they are also being tracked by companies they have never heard of as they travel from site to site. The data gathered is used to create dossiers with the ultimate aim of matching names and addresses to online actions. Such online profiling is done by a growing breed of trackers - online advertising companies such as DoubleClick, Engage and MatchLogic who drop tiny ID tags on users' hard drives when they visit pages with the ubiquitous banner ads - even though they may not actually click on the banner. The companies compile detailed profiles of where people visit and what they look at. They can tell what kinds of books or CDs you buy, where you are thinking of going for a holiday, what your proclivities are. Although some people don't mind too much if the ads they are shown are tailored to their specific interests, since surfers are unaware that such data is being gathered or who has access to it. Many consider it an invasion of privacy - so much so that the Federal Trade Commission is looking into such online profiling and is grilling the companies involved (source: http://www.usatoday.com/news/acovmon.htm).

And remember how I talked about those four naked people who had to sustain themselves from the Net? Well, now an American, who calls himself DotComGuy, is going to stay in his house in Dallas, Texas for one year and try to buy everything he needs to survive from the Internet using a laptop and credit card. He is allowed to walk around the garden, but not leave the premises, and he is allowed to have visitors. His experiences will be webcast live 24 hours-a-day and he will be available to chat and answer questions about e-commerce and provide information and demonstrations on Web resources and sites. Visit him and view him at http://www.dotcomguy.com.

Already in some large hotel lifts you can watch real-time television, for example CNN news, as you are whisked to and from your room in the sky. Well, early in the next year, Otis Elevator Company will be displaying Internet content in lifts in New York, Sydney and Paris. The Net-wired elevators will feature a flat-panel screen with full-motion, full-colour, ever-changing content including news, sports, weather and traffic updates, as well as safety information relating to the building. Ads will be an integral part of the displays! The content

is being generated by Next Generation Network and will be transmitted over the Internet to monitors in Otis lifts via phone lines. With over one million elevators in over 220 countries, the Otis service, known as e*Display, will eventually become a global service for a huge captive audience (source: http://cnn.com/1999/TECH/computing/12/10/net.elevator.idg/index.html).

OECD has compared fixed and usage charges of telephone companies as well as the charges of ISPs at both peak and off-peak rates for the largest telecommunications operator in each of its member states. Six countries (Denmark, Italy, Poland, Spain, Switzerland and the UK) now offer full Internet service at no charge (users still have to pay public switched telephone network charges though). The average price of OECD's off-peak basket of 20 hours of service per month was just under $46 - with a price range of $22 to $95. Prices were also computed for 30 and 40 hours per month. The OECD methodology and Internet price comparisons can be found at http://www.oecd.org/dsti/sti/it/cm/stats/isp-price99.htm.

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