



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.

Having your own say

In this column, I've collated a number of sites which allow the user to provide reviews or commentary or blog material which can be read and acted upon by others in a way of socially communicating which has not hitherto been so flexible or convenient.

Yelp is an on-line urban city guide that helps people find cool places to eat, shop, drink, relax and play. Starting from San Francisco, Yelp now covers quite a bit of the USA, but has not yet reached other countries. Why am I telling you this? Well, you could start your own local Yelp! The guide is based on the informed opinions of a vibrant and active community of locals in the know who write reviews of the places they like. Word of mouth and asking friends is usually the best way to find restaurants, dentists, hairstylists and anything else local. Yelp makes the process faster and easier by collecting and organizing personal recommendations in one convenient place. Search for a city and then browse the site by category (e.g. restaurants, health and medical, automotive, nightlife, hotels and travel, education and so on). Of course, one man's meat is another man's poison – so you have to take things with a pinch of salt. But if you are planning a trip to the US, then Yelp might help you to get the most out of a neighbourhood. Check it out at <http://www.yelp.com>.

Blogcritics.org is a new kind of on-line magazine, an interactive community in which more than 1500 writers plus readers from around the globe talk about stories, issues and products. Apparently more than 100000 daily visitors rely upon Blogcritics.org for the latest news, opinions and reviews on music, books, film, TV, popular culture, technology and politics. Every week, more than 300 stories are added to an archive of some 50000 pieces dating back to 2002. Published articles on Blogcritics.org begin the conversation, after which readers can jump in with comments to create an ongoing dialogue. Whatever is happening in the world – from global political issues to obscure rock bands, from the latest best selling novel to the TV shows that aired last night – Blogcritics.org has it covered.

Founded in 2002, Blogcritics.org is an official Google News and Yahoo News source, syndicates content to on-line editions of newspapers around the United States via the

Advance family of Web sites, and has won numerous awards. Sections including politics, film, television, culture and books were added to the original CD review site. Product reviews came to be supplemented by news, interviews and opinion articles and in 2005, on-line gaming, sports and science/technology sections were added. This fast growing grassroots phenomenon can be accessed at <http://blogcritics.org>.

del.icio.us is a social bookmarking Web site whose primary use is to store your favourite bookmarks online rather than just inside your browser – thus allowing you to access them (and add to them) from any computer anywhere. On del.icio.us, you use tags rather than folders to organize and remember your bookmarks, which increase flexibility. You can also use del.icio.us to see the interesting links that your friends and other people bookmark, and share links with them in return. You can even browse and search del.icio.us to discover the cool and useful bookmarks that everyone else has saved.

del.icio.us is an open-ended system, so you decide how you want to use it – to track your work and sources, to listen to podcasts, to let people add their links to stuff in your collection, to let others view your links for reference or entertainment and so on. If you want to keep all or some of them private, that's possible. If you see a link that has been saved as a favourite by many people, then maybe you might need to save it too. Have a look at <http://del.icio.us> to find out more.

Another user-driven social Web site that lets you share your wildest experiences or life's work is **Digg**. Digg is all about user-powered content. Everything is submitted and voted on by the Digg community. Share, discover, bookmark and promote stuff that's important to you! After you submit content, other people read your submission and Digg what they like best. If your story is thought to be absolutely fantastic by the reading community and receives enough Diggs, it is promoted to the front page for the millions of visitors to see. As a Digg user, you can 'digg' (help promote), bury (help remove spam) and comment on stories. You can also Digg for or bury comments you like or dislike. Digg also allows you to track your friends' activity throughout the site as well as share videos, podcasts or news stories with them. Several categories such as technology, science, world and business, sports, entertainment, gaming, etc. help manage the content. Digg it at <http://digg.com>.

The **Citizendium**, a citizens' compendium of everything, is an experimental new wiki project started by a founder of Wikipedia. Wikipedia, a fantastic concept, has suffered somewhat from idiots posting false and erroneous information, so Citizendium aims to improve on the Wikipedia model by adding 'gentle expert oversight' and requiring contributors to use their real names. In its relatively short period of existence, it has taken on a life of its own and will, perhaps, become the flagship of a new set of responsibly-managed free knowledge projects. The founders avoid calling the Citizendium an 'encyclopaedia' until the project's editors feel comfortable putting their reputations on the line. They further note that they believe this project is necessary, and justified, because the world needs a more reliable free encyclopaedia, which we hope to create by allowing people a place to work under the direction of experts, and by expecting personal accountability, including the use of real names. In short, we want to create a responsible community and a good global citizen. Are you knowledgeable about something? Then get involved at <http://citizendium.org/>.

Still want more of something new and different? Then take a look at **Infosthetics**. Inspired by Manovich's definition of information aesthetics, this Web log explores the symbiotic relationship between creative design and the field of information visualization, in an emergent multidisciplinary field that could be coined as 'creative information visualization'. The Web log is (and I can't resist quoting from the About bit on the site) 'based on the assertion that information visualization can be enriched with the principles of creative

design and art, to develop valuable data representations that address the emotional experience of users, instead of solely focusing on typical task effectiveness metrics. As information access enters the everyday life of users and becomes increasingly ubiquitous and pervasive, novel approaches are required that take into account considerations of user engagement and visual aesthetics. Instead of evaluating such information applications by measuring task performance and comprehension effectiveness, one should consider to determine user interest, attention, focus, enjoyment and curiosity'. See if this applies to you by opening up <http://infosthetics.com>.

On-line social networking

The majority of teens actively manage their on-line profiles to keep the information they believe is most sensitive away from the unwanted gaze of strangers, parents and other adults. While many teens post their first name and photos on their profiles, they rarely post information on public profiles that they believe would help strangers actually locate them, such as their full name, home phone number or cell phone number. At the same time, nearly two-thirds of teens with profiles believe that a motivated person could eventually identify them from the information they publicly provide on their profiles.

A new report entitled 'Teens, Privacy, and Online Social Networks', and based on a survey and a series of focus groups conducted by the Pew Internet & American Life Project, examines how teens, particularly those with on-line profiles, make decisions about disclosing or shielding personal information.

Some 55% of on-line (American) teens have profiles and most of them restrict access to their profile in some way. Of those with profiles, 66% say their profile is not visible to all Internet users. Of those whose profile can be accessed by anyone on-line, nearly half (46%) say they give at least some false information. Teens post fake information to protect themselves and also to be playful or silly.

The kinds of information teens post on their profiles, whether they are public or shielded, include the following:

- 82% of profile creators have included their first name in their profiles
- 79% have included photos of themselves
- 66% have included photos of their friends
- 61% have included the name of their city or town
- 49% have included the name of their school
- 40% have included their instant message screen name
- 39% have linked to their blog
- 29% have included their e-mail address
- 29% have included their last name
- 2% have included their cell phone numbers.

The new survey shows that many youth actively manage their personal information as they perform a balancing act between keeping some important pieces of information confined to their network of trusted friends and, at the same time, participating in a new, exciting process of creating content for their profiles and making new friends. Most teens believe some information seems acceptable – even desirable – to share, while other information needs to be protected.

While most teens take steps to limit what others can know about them from their profiles and postings, they also know that the powerful search tools that are available to Internet users could help motivated individuals track them down. Some 23% of teen profile creators

say it would be 'pretty easy' for someone to find out who they are from the information posted to their profile, and 40% of teens with profiles on-line think that it would be hard for someone to find out who they are from their profile, but that they could eventually be found on-line. Another 36% say they think it would be 'very difficult' for someone to identify them from their on-line profile.

The survey also suggests that today's teens face potential risks associated with on-line life. Some 32% of on-line teenagers (and 43% of social-networking teens) have been contacted on-line by complete strangers and 17% of on-line teens (31% of social networking teens) have 'friends' on their social network profile who they have never personally met. The report also addresses how teens make new friends and interact with strangers on-line. Read the full report at http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Teens_Privacy_SNS_Report_Final.pdf.

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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