



Internet applications, sites, trends and happenings

David Raitt

david.raitt@esa.int

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.

100 million surfers per month in Europe

Research from Nielsen/NetRatings shows that in the past 12 months the number of people actively surfing the Web from home each month in Europe has grown by 12% to 100 million. France enjoyed the highest growth in the last 12 months (16%), followed closely by Italy (15%), the UK (13%) and Germany (12%). Sweden was the lowest with only 1%, with Spain at 3% and Switzerland at 5%. According to the research, the use of high-speed Internet connections has also increased dramatically. In the 12 months to October 2004, the number of people in Europe surfing the Internet at high speed from home increased from just over 34 million to nearly 55 million people – an increase of 60%. The largest increases occurred in Italy (120%) and in the UK (93%).

Do you know your online rights?

The Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) is a nonprofit group comprising lawyers, technologists, volunteers and visionaries working to protect people's digital rights. The EFF was created to defend the right to think, speak and share ideas, thoughts and needs using new technologies, such as the Internet and the World-Wide Web. EFF is the first to identify threats to basic rights online and to advocate on behalf of free expression in the digital age.

Based in San Francisco, EFF is a donor-supported membership organization working to protect fundamental rights regardless of technology; to educate the press, policymakers and the general public about civil liberties issues related to technology; and to act as a defender of those liberties. Among its various activities, EFF opposes misguided legislation, initiates and defends court cases preserving individuals' rights, launches global public campaigns, introduces leading-edge proposals and papers, hosts frequent educational events, engages the press regularly and publishes a comprehensive archive of digital civil liberties information. Learn more about what the EFF is and does at <http://www.eff.org>.

Cool way to search

IceRocket is a global leader in commercial search services on the Internet, providing new and more powerful ways for customers to find exactly what they are looking for and putting the interests and wants of consumers before advertisers. IceRocket uses innovative

metasearch technology to search the Internet's top search engines (including WiseNut, Yahoo, MSN, Teoma, Altavista, Alltheweb and Lycos) and offers a full suite of Internet search products and search-related services.

IceRocket aims to be addictive, and some of the features that the meta search engine includes are thumbnail pictures of each site in the results list, a 'quickview' window to see a site without leaving the results page, Alexa rankings and links to archived Web pages. IceRocket can search the Web or blogs, news, phone pictures and multimedia. An e-mail search is currently being tested for PDA and cell phone users. The site also has a picture search with links to different sites than most image search engines use. IceRocket also offers a 'find a friend' feature, which searches several of the 'check out my picture' sites like Face the Jury, Am I Hot and Game to Fame. Users can search by demographic info, and eventually by name and meta data. In addition, IceRocket users can also play IceSpy and see what other IceRocket users are searching for. Another interesting feature is the search history, where you can keep track of what you have searched for. IceRocket is also currently evaluating pay-per-click and other advertising options. Find out more at <http://www.icerocket.com/>.

Clustering search results

Clusty is the search site owned and operated by Vivísimo that aims to change the way people search online. It uses the award-winning Clustering Engine to organize search results into folders, grouping similar items together. Thus a search for 'pearl' organizes the top 250-500 results into subject folders such as Jewelry, Pearl Harbor, Pearl Jam, Steinbeck Novel and Daniel Pearl. Clusty thus allows users to focus on the area of interest without all the chaff.

The specially developed Vivísimo clustering algorithm puts search results together based on textual and linguistic similarity. This raw similarity is augmented with heuristics based on what users wish to see when they examine clustered documents. The clusters are shown to users in the style of folders and sub-folders.

Clusty allows the user to delve deeper and farther to get a quick overview of the main themes that relate to the query; to see similar results grouped together for faster access; to find results that are buried in the ranked list and would otherwise be missed; and to discover unexpected results and relationships between items.

The Clustering Engine was originally developed for enterprise search and only offered on the Vivísimo Web site as a demonstration of its capabilities, but international media coverage and awards generated a huge demand for a feature-rich, dedicated consumer search site. Try it yourself for shopping, Wikipedia, news, jobs, gossip, images and more at <http://clusty.com/>.

A9 – the best route to take?

Amazon reckons the Web is easy to use, but using it well is not easy. So they are inventing new ways to take searching one step further and make it more effective by providing a unique set of powerful features to find information, organize it and remember it – all in one place. They are doing this through A9.com – a powerful search engine, using Web search and image search results enhanced by Google, Search Inside the Book® results from Amazon.com, reference results from GuruNet, movies results from IMDb and more. In addition to these sources, your personal history, diary and bookmarks will also be searched automatically.

A9.com remembers your information so you don't have to. You can keep your own notes about any Web page and search them; it is a new way to store and organize your bookmarks. It even recommends new sites and favourite old sites specifically for you to visit. With the A9 toolbar installed, your Web browsing history will be saved so you can search through your whole history (and clear items you don't want to keep). A9.com uses your history to recommend new sites, to alert you to new search results and to let you know the last time you visited a page. It also provides sources of information with a customized multi-column interface. Try it out at <http://a9.com>.

Searching the past on Google

A new feature recently launched by Google allows users to see all of their past searches. The service, called My Search History, is similar to, but more comprehensive than a similar feature that has been offered for some time by other services such as Amazon, Ask Jeeves and America Online. It is intended to help people who use Google locate the information they sought during earlier searches so they can avoid repeating past queries. Simply go to <https://www.google.com/searchhistory> and set up an account which will enable you to access your past searches.

My Search History lets you easily view and manage your search history from any computer. This feature of Google enables you to find information you thought you lost. And over time, you'll see an increasing number of relevance indicators in your search results that help you find the information you want. My Search History lets you search your web search history, including full text search of all the pages you found with Google. It also gives useful information in your Web search results, like the last time you saw a page or how often you've seen it. Using the calendar you can quickly navigate to any day of your search history and see similar searches you have done via automatic related history detection.

It all sounds great, but concerns have been raised about privacy issues and possible abuse. See, for example, the news item at <http://www.spacedaily.com/news/internet-05zk.html>.

Paying taxes and gambling via the Web

It's always interesting to see who is using the Web for what, and when. Nielsen/NetRatings has recently reported that in the last minute scramble to file income taxes by the April 15 deadline, more than 7.6 million combined home and work Internet users, or 6% of the active Internet universe, visited tax sites, including TurboTax and hrblock.com. While traffic to tax sites had been growing during the past several weeks leading up to the deadline, the first week of February found the highest peak in tax traffic after tax forms were sent to employees. The IRS estimated that of the 120 million returns they expect to be filed on time this year, 88 million had already come in at least a week ahead of the deadline because taxpayers were taking advantage of the free federal e-filing offered by the IRS to save time. Tax sites also reported significantly higher traffic this year over last year.

Follow up the story at http://www.nielsen-netratings.com/pr/pr_050415.pdf.

More recent research from Nielsen/NetRatings reveals that more than 14 million Europeans, or 14% of those online from home, visited gambling and sweepstakes sites in February. Gambling and sweepstake sites were most popular with French and Swedish surfers, but have yet to make a mark in southern Europe, with less than 10% of Spanish and Italians logging on to gamble. In all the countries under measurement across Europe, the majority of visitors to gambling and sweepstakes sites are using a high speed Internet connection. France, Switzerland and Spain lead the way with more than 80% of visitors to online gambling sites connecting via broadband. While high speed users tend to spend the greatest

amount of time online, this is, however, not always the case for gambling and sweepstake sites. In France, Sweden and the UK, the time spent on gambling and sweepstakes sites is very similar, suggesting that slower connection speed is not putting the determined gamblers off in these countries. By comparison, in Switzerland, Italy and Germany high speed Internet users are spending significantly more time than those connecting at a slower speed. Read more at http://www.nielsen-netratings.com/pr/pr_050414_uk.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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