



## Internet Applications, Sites, Trends and Happenings

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This column aims to draw your attention to various interesting Websites 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.

### Wireless Internet use

A recent survey by the Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project shows that 56% of adult Americans have accessed the Internet at some point by wireless means, such as using a laptop, mobile device, game console, or MP3 player. The most prevalent way people get online using a wireless network is with a laptop computer – and 39% of adults have done this, with 32% of all Americans stating that they have gone online to check e-mail, access the Internet for information seeking, or send instant messages with either a cell phone or other handheld device. Some 19% opt for both means of wireless access – portable laptops on fast WiFi networks or handheld access on slower networks from cell carriers. This level of mobile Internet is up by one-third since December 2007, when 24% of Americans had ever accessed the Internet over a mobile device.

African Americans are the most active users of the mobile Internet – and their use of it is also growing the fastest. This means the digital divide between African Americans and white Americans diminishes when mobile use is taken into account. Some 48% of African Americans have at one time used their mobile device to access the Internet for information, e-mailing, or instant-messaging, half again the national average of 32%. Compared with 2007, when 12% of African Americans used the Internet on their mobile on any average day, use of the mobile Internet in 2009 is up by 141%. The high level of activity among African Americans on mobile devices helps offset lower levels of access tools that have been traditional means of accessing the Internet, namely desktop computers, laptops and home broadband connections.

Read the survey report online or download as pdf from

<http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2009/12-Wireless-Internet-Use.aspx>.

### Computational knowledge engine

WolframAlpha is the first step in an ambitious, long-term project to make all 'systematic knowledge immediately computable' and accessible by anyone. Enter your free-text question or calculation and WolframAlpha uses its built-in algorithms 'and a growing massive collection of data to compute the answer'. WolframAlpha is not a search engine, but rather a computational knowledge engine; it generates output by doing computations from its own internal knowledge base, instead of searching the Web and returning links. If the system doesn't understand the input it will say so and suggest alternatives. It also picks up where you are located and tailors responses to that location. For instance, I entered my date of birth and I was informed of the day of my birth (Thursday's child has far to go!), how many days and weeks I have lived, what number day of the year I was born on, who else was born on 'my' day (Marie Antoinette), what national holidays were observed on that day in The Netherlands (where I am located), what time sunrise and sunset were on that day (again in The Netherlands – though it might be more interesting to know it in the country or place I was actually born!). If you put in a city name then as well as population size etc, you can also get map. You can do calculations and so on. There is a gallery of examples and a blog and WolframAlpha is free for personal non-commercial use. Start computing at <http://www.wolframalpha.com/>.

### Citizen journalism

NowPublic is a participatory news network which mobilises an army of reporters to cover the events that define our world. The company, owned by Vancouver-based NowPublic Technologies, Inc., has become one of the fastest growing news organisations with thousands of reporters in over 140 countries. In 2007, *TIME Magazine* named NowPublic one of the 50 coolest Websites and in 2009, the site was nominated for an Emmy Award for advanced technology.

NowPublic is a site where you, as an individual, can make, break, shape and share the news that matters to you – as it happens. Unlike traditional news organisations, NowPublic is an open community that enables anyone and everyone to participate in the news-making process. Whether you're interested in being an eyewitness 'on the scene' reporter, a newshound that seeks out stories about topics that interest you, or any combination of editor, writer, blogger, photographer, videographer, avid commenter, or even simply a general news enthusiast, NowPublic lets you define the news agenda for others. In collaboration with staff editors, guest editors, news wranglers, and other site members, NowPublic harnesses the power and wisdom of the 'crowd' to offer uniquely personalised reporting and a human perspective on the events that define our world. News offerings should be current, newsworthy and put into context to mean something to readers. NowPublic is a global site and is interested in news that is happening around the world – particularly local stories that the mainstream media may have overlooked. You need to set up a (free) account in order to contribute stories (though not for simply leaving comments) and you can do this at <http://www.nowpublic.com/>.

### **Killer apps? The Internet is the killer!**

Some of you might remember the 1979 hit by The Buggles entitled Video killed the Radio Star. Well, on the day this column is being written the *Daily Telegraph* (UK) has a headline that screams (headlines always scream) '50 things that are being killed by the Internet'. The article notes that the Internet has wrought huge changes to our lives – both positive and negative – in the 15 years since its use became widespread. It goes on to give a compilation – in no particular order – of 50 things that are in the process of being killed off by the Web, from products and business models to life experiences and habits. They've also thrown in a few things that have suffered at the hands of other modern networking gadgets, specifically mobile phones and GPS systems. So, the list covers such things as your lunch break, solitaire and minesweeper, the art of political disagreement, photo albums (hard copy ones I suppose), knowing telephone numbers off by heart and so on. If you agree with the newspaper's selections or can think of other examples, then you can post your comments at the bottom of the story – for possible inclusion in a fuller list. Read all about the killers at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/6133903/50-things-that-are-being-killed-by-the-internet.html>.

### **Europe here we come!**

Visiteurope.com is a gateway to the 39 member countries of the European Travel Commission and can become your personal guide for exploring the beauty and interesting diversity these countries have to offer. All the countries have joined together on the Website to provide a unique resource to obtain all the information you need to make your trip to Europe the trip of a lifetime.

You can use visiteurope.com's interactive map of Europe to plan your next vacation there: the site's flight search engine will help you get there, you can search for accommodation and where to eat, plus activities and events, museums and shows, and get advice on the best time to come, as well as the weather. There are things to do, such as skiing, cycling and golf; there is stuff on nature, culture, history and heritage – something for everyone. The site also has currency converters, practical tourist information, descriptions and images of cities and regions of Europe and the latest news items. You can also download various brochures and send e-cards to your friends back home!

The European Travel Commission (ETC) is an association of National Tourism Organisations and was created in 1948 to promote Europe as a destination to long-haul tourism markets outside Europe. ETC is an independent body financed entirely by annual membership contributions.

There are many nice places to visit (it will be off-season and less crowded soon!), so start planning your European vacation now at <http://www.visiteurope.com>.

### **Google Maps mashups**

Google Maps Mania is an unofficial Google Maps blog that tracks the Websites, mashups and tools being influenced by Google Maps. Recent offerings on the site include Parallel Kingdom – a Google Maps based role playing game, for Android and iPhones, that uses GPS to create a virtual world on top of a map of the real world. In the game it is possible to attack, chat and interact with your friends and anyone else around you. Currently the game is free to download.

Another contribution is The Bobs from the German broadcaster, Deutsche Welle, which has a database of over 11000 blogs from all over the world called the Blogopedia (currently ten are from South Africa). All the blogs are geotagged on a Google Map and when you click on the markers, information about the blog and a screenshot and link to the site open in an information window. Deutsche Welle is also calling for nominations for its annual Deutsche Welle Blog Awards – so nominate your blog to get yourself on the map.

And if you are a cyclist, then have a look at JourneyOn from Brighton and Hove Council in the UK which has produced a journey planner for cyclists with the Google Maps API. The cycle route planner is part of the city council's main journey planner that also uses Google Maps for car, public transport and walking directions in the city. To use the journey planner, users enter their starting location and destination. They next choose whether they want walking, cycling, car or public transport directions. If you choose cycling directions you then get the option to choose the most direct route or the flattest route. The returned route is shown on a Google Map, with a full description of the journey under the map. The map also displays the number of kilojoules that you are likely to burn and a gradient chart of the journey. Google Maps Mania also lists other biking and walking maps from around the world.

Google Maps Mania also provides a list of top posts, a directory, special features, mashups by country (none currently from South Africa), developer stuff, archives and more. Navigate over to <http://googlemapsmania.blogspot.com/> and take a different direction.

#### 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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