

Webology, Volume 3, Number 4, December, 2006

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**Editorial
Sociology of the Web**

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Many young scholars at the start of their careers ask, "How can I get published?" An answer to this problem is provided by the Web, which is in fact academia's rich new frontier, providing many excellent opportunities for publication in journals of the highest standards of peer review, with the additional advantage of being referenced by Google (Wise, 2005). Even so, when the Call for Papers for a Special Edition of *Webology* on the Sociology of the Web went out, response was not immediately overwhelming. Therefore it was necessary to supplement the Call for Papers with personal contact, but in the end, many excellent contributions came along, of which ten plus one book review were selected after a rigorous review process and will cover two editions of *Webology*. These explored a wide range of perspectives but all had in common a desire to understand the complex relationship between society and the Web. This said, such a vast topic leaves room for many more discussions of the role of the Web in: science and engineering, medicine and health including mental health, food supply, intercultural understanding, welfare and education, including such specific areas as open access, intellectual property and online encyclopaedias.

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Jia Lin and Alex Halavais, in *Geographical Distribution of Blogs in the United States*, examine the distribution of 121,294 weblogs sampled in 2003. While blogging is very popular throughout the USA, bloggers were more frequently located in particular cities, such that a "blogging divide" exists. They found that cities with populations that are young, urban and tolerant of differences are likely to host more bloggers. By understanding where people blog, an insight into local culture can be gained, though a map of the blogosphere is still some way off.

In *Egyptian and American Internet-Based Cross-Cultural Information Seeking Behavior. Part one: Research Instrument*, Paul L. Hover scientifically studies the information seeking behavior of eightyfour academics and librarians from Egypt and the USA. His conclusion is that retrieval programs and translation engines are becoming more intelligent, using millions of pages, which have now become instantly accessible. He observes that the Internet is now bringing together masses of users in what he calls an "international cultural information dynamic", with the corresponding emergence of an international system of user interfaces, resources and facilities. While the problem of intelligibility in different human languages may not be solved, the Internet is going a long way towards opening communications to all.

In *Reshaping Digital Inequality in the European Union: How Psychological Barriers Affect Internet Adoption Rates*, Homero Gil de Zuniga addresses the issue of the Digital Divide (DD), or the social division between those who are using digital technology and

those who are not, in the context of the European Union. He shows that only a moderately sized population in the USA have Internet access, while in the EU countries this is even lower, at between 30 per cent and 50 per cent (and in developing countries this is far less). Generally, the DD is revealed in differences of race, gender, education, income, age, and rurality, but these are diminishing. Gil de Zuniga identifies other levels of DD: those of proficiency and those of psychology. Here we find gaps of power and participation, representing a loss of opportunity of access to the poorer, less educated and rurally-based members of society, with dysfunctional implications for democracy.

In *Getting Connected: Can Social Capital be Virtual?*, Megan Alessandrini brings to the forefront the key concept of social capital. Tracing the history of the concept from Bourdieu through Coleman to Putnam, who fomulates it as the features of social organization such as networks, norms and social trust which facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit. In America, Putnam sees it as in decline and crisis, where alienated Americans are "bowling alone". In contrast, Alessandrini and her collaborators, after a survey of 14,000 Australians in relation to the Australian Red Cross Blood Service, concluded that social capital was not in decline in Australia, but rather it was taking new forms, often labelled as virtual, but in effect as real as any other. The Internet was not found to be detrimental to social capital or civic engagement and was, if fact, quite likely to enhance it.

In *Texting Tolerance: Computer-Mediated Interfaith Dialogue*, Ally Ostrowski introduces yet another dimension to our discussion. In the present time of religious unrest and tension throughout the globe, the Internet is providing a new and highly appropriate venue for interfaith dialogue, on account of its relatively anonymous nature, the disappearance of proximity limitations, access to a very wide spectrum of participants, the opportunities to develop closeness to others, and an adjustable time frame to ponder questions and responses. But despite its manifest attractions and advantages, Ostrowski's research indicates that religious organizations and congregations are not using the Internet to the fullest advantage. This is because of the lack of a dynamic element, the possibility of online addictions and virtual living, the risk of miscommunication and offence (heightened by the lack of physical and nonverbal cues), difficulties of moderation and control, and lastly the presence of *lurkers*, who may listen without contributing, thereby suppressing participation. Despite the difficulties, the opportunities for interfaith dialog are enormously rich in potential for harnessing the resources needed to combat religious intolerance.

In *More Effective Web Search Using Bigrams and Trigrams*, David Johnson, Vishv Malhotra and Peter Vamplew investigate the effectiveness of quoted bigrams and trigrams (groups of two words or three words) as query terms to target web searches, which is quite a large task considering that in 2006 Google was indexing over eight billion web pages! They also deal the problem of the inherent ambiguity of human language, where most words are polysemic. The extent of the problem is shown by the fact that a group of 25,000 words could generate 6245 million bigrams and over fifteen trillion trigrams. Johnson, Malhotra and Vamplew propose a software model to address this issue, where useful phrases are extracted by means of straightforward part-of-speech tagging and template matching phrases that are much more useful in searching than single words.

Articles in Volume 4, Number 1, March, 2007

In *Mystery Meat revisited, Spam, Anti-Spam Measures and Digital Redlining*, Christopher P. Lueg, Jeff Huang, and Michael B. Twidale address the huge issue confronting Internet use: the presence of unsolicited commercial email (UCE), otherwise known as spam, and the consequences of anti-spam measures. These are causing issues of access and what they call *digital redlining*. *Redlining* refers to the practice of drawing a redline around areas of a

map where, originally banks would not invest, and where in the current discussion, emails are blocked as Spam because of their country or area of origin. Anti-spam measures work by filtering words such as "free porn" or "get rich quick", or mail servers known to be used by spam friendly countries, in an arms-race between spammers and anti-spammers. The unintended consequences are limited reliability, digital redlining, the blocking of whole countries, and issues of economic power. Lueg, Huang and Twidale conclude with the aim of promoting a discussion of equity of measures, thereby reducing the impact on the poor and those without influence.

In *A Study of Email Spam and How to Effectively Combat It*, Mansoor Al-A'ali studies the effect of spam on Bahrain's email society and discusses the concerns that were raised in his survey. His conclusion is that a legislative response is necessary to control the problem, in conjunction with a raised awareness of the effects of spam, not only in Bahrain but in other Arab countries as well.

In *Bridging the Mire between E-Research and E-Publishing for Multimedia Digital Scholarship in the Humanities and Social Sciences: An Australian Case Study*, Andrew Jakubowicz discusses the challenge confronting the Humanities and the Social Sciences (HSS) through the development of the digital media. The HSS have yet to exploit the potential of the digital revolution, and this paper proposes important and realistic strategies to bridge the gap between isolated silos by building an interactive multimedia research environment or m.i.r.e.

In his second contribution, *Islamic Book and Information Culture: An Overview*, Paul R. Hover assists readers less familiar with Islamic history to understand the cultural background in which Arab information seeking behaviour takes place. The tradition of orality, resistance to printing, the effects of European invasion and the emergence of publishing are all discussed. From the Arab Awakening of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries through to current information dissemination practices in the Arab world are discussed.

Finally, Isabel Galina reviews the book *The Institutional Repository* by Jones, Andrew and MacCollaren, which deals with the very important matter of the storing, publishing and distribution of electronic resources within institutions of higher learning.

In conclusion, we can say that the adoption of the world's latest information technology by members of some of the world's oldest cultures is an appropriate note on which to end this Special Edition of *Webology*. With my sincere thanks to all of our contributors and best wishes to our readers

William.

Reference

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