Deep linking resurfaces once again...

Ivan Trundle

Manager,
communications
and publishing
ivan.trundle@alia.org.au

Just on a year ago (*inCite*, July 2001) I wrote about website linking, and the dilemma that people then faced with seeking to include links from their own website to others, or more specifically links to other pages on external websites. We roundly scoffed at those people who first sought permission to link to other sites, and scoffed at those webmasters that deemed that permission was required before linking was permitted. The problem has resurfaced, but partly because some commentators are confused about the myriad of 'linking' possibilities, and how to deal with them.

The concept of 'deep linking' requires explanation before I venture further into this morass. 'Deep linking' is the linking from a page on one website to a page on another website that is not the home page. In other words, this article, as it appears on ALIAnet, has a link to a Wired.com article from July 1999 [http://www.wired.com/news/politics/0,1283,20948,00.html] which is defined as a deep link because it does not link directly to Wired.com, but rather skips blithely behind the Wired.com home page to the article in question (which is, incidentally, a very good report on one of the first legal cases involving deep linking, which refers to an April 1997 case involving Microsoft and Ticketmaster).

Problems have arisen because overzealous website owners have decreed that users must arrive at the site through the commonly-accepted 'front door', or home page. This, of course, is a nonsense, but let's run with the idea to see where it takes us...

It is clear that these website owners are attempting to ensure that their site is being viewed in a particular way so that advertising banners are seen *en route*. Without hits on their banners, many of the sites would lose an important income stream and may eventually fold. I have no argument with sites wishing to remain profitable, but I do take exception to sites that dictate how I view them, or in what order, if I have the wherewithal to avoid banner advertising or having to navigate through uninformative and irrelevant 'front doors'.

Instead of working out a technical solution to the problem, aggrieved website owners have taken to employing a barrage of lawyers to argue their case. Attempts to ban deep linking through legal recourse demonstrates a complete ignorance of the technical issues involved, and also demonstrates a gross misunderstanding of the value in linking altogether.

Making websites reference points

The best websites are those that are linked to from many external sites, because for every link that is accessible from outside the site, the more people gravitate to the site for information. The more that other sites link to this site, the more of a reference it becomes, and the more authority that it gains.

This is well-documented across the web, and studies on website linking have demonstrated this for more than seven years. Authoritative websites not only garner more traffic, and thus increase potential advertising revenue, but also become known as reliable sources of information, and attract yet more site visits through reputation. Those sites that attract less linking (deep or otherwise) attract less interest and less authority.

Our own website (ALIAnet) is a victim of its own success in this regard. The site is well-linked from external sites (Google shows that the ALIAnet home page alone accounts for around 4600 links, though this includes a fair number of internal links), and continues to grow in importance and authority because of the information that is found within the hyperwalls of alia.org.au.

Related to this, and following on from the Gillard Report on the Association's member communications and services, we shall be implementing member-only access to parts of the site — which will diminish the authority of the site at the same time as offering exclusive services to members. Linking to these member-only pages will not be possible without password access. Whatever we implement, we will do our best to ensure that users are not forced back to a login page to gain access to the site, and then have to traverse back to the link of interest.

It's a fine line that we have to tread, and not one that is tackled lightly. We are conscious of the desire of members to have access to material that is exclusively member-only, but the overall value of the site (and the value of ALIA to the sector and the wider public) must not be ignored. By restricting access to important material that affects non-members as much as members, we diminish the opportunity to be authoritative on the matter at hand. Naturally, we don't want to lose those who can't gain access, and a locked door is seen by some as a reasonable incentive for recruitment (although I suspect that it is neither the right time nor the right place to conduct such recruitment).

However, it will take a compelling argument for someone to pay to receive information (through becoming a member) when they can get it through other means. And that is the nature of the web. In days long gone, publishers and printers were in control of the flow of information, whereas today, if you can't find it on ALIAnet because of access restrictions, you'll eventually find it elsewhere.

I'd love to be proved wrong. ALIAnet is too valuable a resource to be marginalised by restrictions on access to information. ∎

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