"A good Web portal: How to?"

develop and maintain
listen to users
organize content

Report from the Panel session R-1 (Sep 26, 2000)
Chair: Hrvoje Stipetic, Zagreb Fair
Co-chair: Maja Matijasevic, Faculty of Electrical Engineering and Computing, University of Zagreb

Invited panelists (in alphabetical order) and their portals:

1. Matija Babic – Vlast.net
2. Nenad Bartolcic – Moderna vremena online
3. Vjekoslav Benussi – Travel-Around.com
4. Vladimir Braus – Mathematica referral center
5. Dobrislav Klement – hr.aquatica
6. Jasmin Klindzic – SBNet.Hr, Slavonski Brod online
7. Vinko Kojundzic – The first Croatian student portal
8. Vlatko Kosturjak – HULK
9. Berislav Kucan – Help Net Security
10. Davor Lamza – Buga pet
11. Ante Magzan – KLIK magazine
12. Mladen Majetic – ZaMirNet
13. Ante Milardovic – CroLinks
14. Dino Mileta – STAR TREK center
15. Nenad Motika – Iskon Internet portal
16. Anina Ostric – Boa daily electronic magazine
17. Drazen Patarcic – Sport Net
18. Marin Pavletic – CRO-Web
19. Jadranka Stojanovski – Ruder Boskovic Institute Library, Online Databases center
20. Goran Sikic – Internet Monitor

The purpose of the panel session was to discuss main issues pertaining to a "good Web portal", and specifically, those of development and maintenance, communication with users, and content organization. The panel was envisioned as a place where interested broad audience could learn and converse with the finalists of the CUC 2000 Web Festival. All together, twenty Webmasters of top portals in each of the three categories (general portals, subject-based portals, and portals for special interest groups) were invited to participate as panelists, and thirteen accepted.

The panel started with a welcome to all participants and a brief introduction from the Chair, after which each portal was introduced by its respective Webmaster. During this introduction, the home page of the portal in question was displayed on the big screen. In addition, for the audience to receive a good general overview, all Webmasters were kindly asked to use the following questions as guidelines:

?? How and when was the portal started?
?? What content does the portal offer?
?? How many people are working on portal's content? on design? on technical development/maintenance?
?? What is the primary goal and mission of the portal?
?? What is the average number of (unique) visitors per day?
?? How do you see the future of your portal?

The answers have shown that some portals date from the earliest days of the Web, while some did not yet celebrate even their first birthday. The content of each portal was commented on separately and

some highlights were given by Webmasters as the portals were displayed. As for the number of staff involved in portal's content, design and technical development/maintenance, it ranges from one person to, surprisingly, almost forty people. Typically, general portals have the largest teams, while the subject-based and portals for SIGs have much smaller teams. However, regardless of the team size, several of the latter two groups of portals also produce their own news on a regular basis. Goals, missions, and statistics also differed a lot. As for future plans, the majority of sites plan to go commercial – eventually. The biggest obstacle most Webmasters see as preventing this from happening now (or soon) is the fact that the Internet market in Croatia is still too small to bring business success to their portals.

The discussion that followed was steered towards getting some answers to the three questions raised as the motto of the session. Thus, the Webmasters were asked to answer any of them directly, and/or at least one of the three additional related questions:

?? Regarding development and maintenance ... If you could start again, what would you change?
?? Regarding listening to users... What was the greatest surprise, according to the user reactions?
?? Regarding organizing content ... Do you perform usability testing of your site? If you do, how?

Many issues were brought up, and some were discussed with lot of passion. It seems that one of the most provocative subjects was the source of the daily news for portals, with inevitable question of copyright of those news. The audience did not stay calm as well, thus confirming that this indeed is a hot topic, and that better days may come for authors and their intellectual property on the Croatian Web.

With reference to users' reactions, several Webmasters shared some touching personal memories. It may be concluded that the Web, since its beginnings, has brought Croats in the homeland in touch with those around the world in a unique and remarkable manner.

The question of using WAP has divided the Webmasters, and has shown that more understanding for new technologies comes from non-profit portals than from the commercial ones, with praiseworthy exceptions.

An interesting observation has been made on the issue of Web usability. Although there was a tutorial and some papers dealing with usability studies in CUC program, the panelists' experience with formal studies and usability testing are virtually non-existent.

The next issue was cross linking. Most agreed that extensive cross-linking among their sites, which is now not widespread, would be beneficial for all. The initiative for establishing an association of Croatian Internet magazines (or e-zines), that has been around for some time, was mentioned again. Also, the principle of collaboration between portals was proposed, such that the content which is a primary subject of another portal is (reciprocally) linked, rather than replicated.

In general, the panel session has shown that there exists comprehensive understanding of goals and purposes of portals in the Croatian Web community. However, it has also demonstrated that Webmasters did not exhaust all existing opportunities in creating better portals and thus getting more visitors, which is a necessity for the business success that many desire.