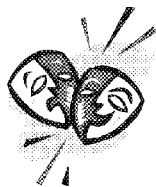


péter's picks & pans



Péter Jacsó
University of Hawaii

Forbes Digital Toolbox

Scout Report Signpost

Merriam-Webster Biographical Dictionary

This month's picks include the Web site from Forbes Inc., with its treasure chest of corporate directories. Featuring customizable output options along with the lists of people famous for their wealth (and some for their talents), Forbes' approach represents the perfect example of how to digitize existing assets for the Web. My other favorite is the Scout Report Signpost. This stands out among the subject guides to Web sites for its excellent classification, organization, site descriptions, and meta-data. It richly deserves the financial support it receives from the National Science Foundation. The pan is a biographical dictionary from a normally well-respected publisher. Licensed for CD-ROM deployment to a third party, Merriam-Webster Biographical Dictionary represents the perfect example of how *not* to digitize existing assets for the Web.



the picks

FORBES DIGITAL TOOLBOX

The Forbes site (<http://www.forbes.com>) is a superb example of how a

The user-customizable Forbes 500 list on the Forbes Digital Toolbox site

Forbes 500s ANNUAL DIRECTORY

Read "The Forbes 500s" in the April 15, 1999 issue of Forbes

Search the updated Forbes 500s Annual Directory, our comprehensive database of the 500 largest American public corporations as measured by sales, profits, assets and market value.

Search by company name

The Super 100

Alphabetical by Company

Rank by Sales

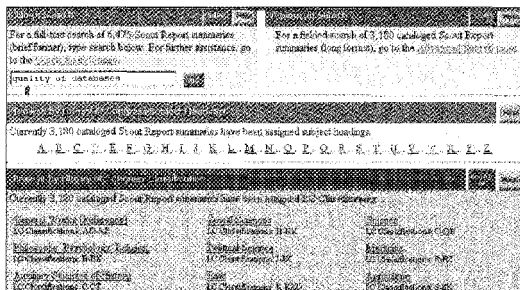
Rank by Market Value

Rank by Assets

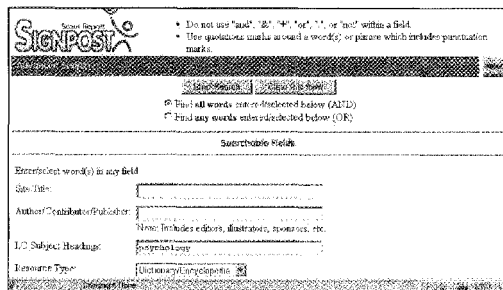
journal publisher can add tremendous value to the traditional content of a much respected journal. Current issues with (freely) searchable archives, guides to best Web sites, hotlinks to complementary services, such as a bookstore, are now common on the sites of the best newspapers and magazines. Forbes adds a lot more than the typical journal Web site and does it with an excellent collection of digital tools. Not accidentally, it has a section called Forbes Digital Toolbox featuring very useful resources. These tools offer various calculators (mortgage, fund expense, growth flow, tax rate), indexes, and

top lists. The trick is that the indexes and lists are not static as in the printed publication. They are generated ad hoc according to the user's preferences, mostly using Java applets. This means that nothing needs to be installed, and you still can retrieve only the subset in which you are interested, in the rank order you need.

Although Forbes offers many resources, such as WireDesk and forums, I want to focus here on the structured directory databases that are the sources for the esteemed Forbes lists. The famed Forbes 500 Annual Directory, which went online



The Browsing options of Signpost



The Advanced Search options of Signpost

before the April 19, 1999 printed issue of the journal, illustrates the beauty of the free digital version. You can search by company name to find the financials and the ranking of the company, or you can sort the list alphabetically by company name, sales, market value, assets, or profits. You can also limit your search by state and by industry. The database of the top 500 privately-held companies is also available. The list can be restricted by state and industry, and can be displayed by rank or alphabetically. For good measure, the 1998, 1997, and 1996 listings are a click away for both the public and private company 500 lists.

The variety of databases, modestly listed under the subcategory "Forbes Lists" which doesn't reflect the fact that most are searchable files with dynamic output capabilities, cover a really impressive spectrum—200 Best Small Companies, Forbes Platinum 400, Forbes Annual Report on American Industry, Top 800 CEOs (by compensation), the International 800, the 400 Richest People in America, The World Richest People, the Forbes Celebrity 100, the Top 40 Entertainers, and Athletes, among others. Not all have the three-year retrospective coverage and the dynamic search and output generation capabilities of the 500 lists, but most do, with appropriate criteria. The International 800 database, for example, offers sorting by country, and two years of retrospective data.

The Tech 101 Financial Index provides, in a list and graph format, the stock price average of 101 technology companies, contrasting them with the total NASDAQ average. One click

switches you from the year-to-date list and chart to the one-year average or to the top gainers or top losers or most active stocks. One of the digital tools, Rooms with a Clue, is really unique. It lists hotels around the world that have in-room data ports and Internet access. You select a country from a drop-down list, and up pops the list of the hotels. One more click and you see the traditional details about the hotels, plus the Internet services offered, the power voltage and plug type, the phone jack type, and the type of PBX (Private Branch Exchange). Of course, the page is hotlinked to the hotel chain's site so you may make an instant reservation. Forbes Digital Toolbox is an outstanding ready reference source with the most authentic data and intuitive software.



SCOUT REPORT SIGNPOST

Classified guides to Web sites are a dime a dozen, ranging from the very poor to the very good. Signpost (<http://www.signpost.org>) is excellent. Developed by the University of Wisconsin's Computer Sciences Department as part of the Scout Report, it is evident that people with good library science backgrounds were involved in the project, as it clearly shows the traits of top-notch librarianship in organizing, classifying, indexing, and abstracting. Signpost uses Library of Congress Classification and Subject Headings—a logical step given the variety of sites,

the widespread use of LCSH worldwide, and the fact that many of the quality Web sites within the scope of Signpost are extensions to time-honored print publications. Thus, existing cataloging, classification, and indexing practices are highly appropriate.

There are two types of records: those with short descriptions and those with substantial descriptions, plus very well-organized and presented metadata. These include resource types, author, contributor, publisher, type of resource, language, LC classification codes, and LC subject headings in addition to the URL, the date of review, and very importantly, the date the URL was last verified. As a practical matter, all data elements are hotlinked so a search for sites with identical subject headings, resource type (database, document, directory, chart, table, and map) are only a click away. The subject headings and the classification categories can be browsed more efficiently than in many online public access catalogs. They include posting information for the categories.

The advanced search query form offers access by the title words of the sites, LC Subject Headings (there should be a hotlink here to the list), language, resource type, and location (with a pull-down menu of choices), primary URL, and author, contributor, or publisher (so Fortune as the publisher can be differentiated from fortune as a descriptive word). The search engine is Excite, which allows Boolean AND, OR, and exact phrase searching. I would prefer the Inktomi search engine with its more powerful and varied options (like proximity and positional operators, and date searching), but at this stage Excite is

adequate. There are three options for the content of the result list (Site Title only, Site Title and URL, and Site Title, URL, and Annotation Summary). The number of records per page can be all, or the first 5, 10, 20, 30, or 50. The result list can be sorted by site title or date of review. As of this writing, there are only 3,200 full records (and 6,500 short records), but hopefully the National Science Foundation funding will suffice to keep this excellent project going.



the pans

MERRIAM-WEBSTER BIOGRAPHICAL DICTIONARY

I have long been a fan of the Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary, and the Merriam-Webster Web site (<http://www.m-w.com>) is on the top of my bookmark list. It is a perfect combination of utility and fun, serious stuff, and entertainment. I never really liked Merriam-Webster's printed *Biographical Dictionary* even though Robert McHenry of Encyclopedia Britannica fame has edited it for a long time. The primary reason for my dislike is its exclusion of biographies for those not yet deceased. The preface to the

printed version explains that "living persons, whose biographies are virtually impossible to keep up-to-date in a book of this nature, are not included." Since famous people don't die to coincide with the timing of a new edition of *Biographical Dictionary*, years can pass before a noteworthy person makes it into the dictionary, a flaw that is exacerbated by the irregular frequency of its updating.

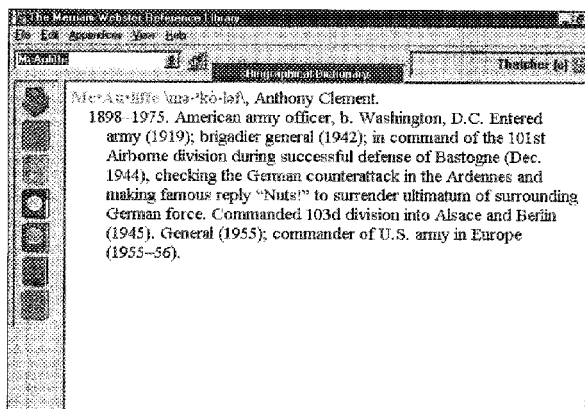
I had high hopes that the CD-ROM version (published by Zane) would solve this problem. It did not, and it is disappointing in every regard. Let me count the ways. Only those persons of note who passed away before 1994 are included. The reason is that Zane took the 1995 edition of the dictionary and shoved it on the CD-ROM. We would have been better off with the 1997 concise edition. Even with this very severe time restriction, there are odd omissions. Dictator Kim Il Sung is absent, as is Burt Lancaster and Nobelist Linus Pauling. Women are especially given short shrift. You will not find Jessica Tandy, Melina Mercouri (in either of her capacities as actress or government minister), Nobel Prize winner chemist Dorothy Hodgkin, multiple Olympic gold medalist Wilma Rudolph, actress Guilietta Masina (who does not appear even in the biography of her husband, Federico Fellini), or Jacqueline Kennedy (missing both as Kennedy and Onassis).

Those who are included may not be easy to find. There is only a last

name index. In cases of common last names, they are followed by a sequence number. For Brown, the last entry is Brown (32). The poor souls who don't know the time frame of the dictionary (not easy to ascertain, since it does not appear anywhere on the disc) and want to find Robert Brown, will have to click randomly on several of the 32 Browns. Sooner or later the hapless user may figure out that the names are listed alphabetically by first name within the same last name even though the first name is not listed in the index. It just adds to the irritation that if you guess the sequence number incorrectly and the wrong person's record is displayed, you have to go back to the index and click there instead of just having a previous and next arrow within the item display area. After that experience, it really did not surprise me when this software merely advised me to go to the preferred form of a person name (by typing it) instead of providing a hotlink. The text of the biography is not searchable. Neither are numbers, such as year of birth or death. These days, when the best online and CD-ROM biographies can be searched by gender, nationality, occupation, avocation, prizes, place and year of birth and death, this dictionary is an exceptionally bad deal. It epitomizes how not to convert a printed publication into a digital publication.

It adds to my disappointment that World Book, Inc. noted for including high-quality resources in its Family Reference Suite, such as other Merriam-Webster dictionaries and the Information Please almanacs, chose this sorry dictionary. This adds clout to a CD-ROM dictionary that definitely does not deserve it. Merriam-Webster should have also checked out the digitization plan before giving a license to Zane Publishing.

The overly simplistic search and display screen of the Merriam-Webster Biographical Dictionary



Communications to the author should be addressed to **Péter Jacsó**, 322 Aoloa Street #709, Kailua, HI 96734; 808/956-5817; jacs0@hawaii.edu; <http://www2.hawaii.edu/~jacs0/APU.htm>.