



Technology news

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Guardian Technology news

Viral Video Chart: Darth Google and the invasion of the teddy bears

Google's growth animated and digital teddy bears storming Worthing seafront in this week's roundup

"Meet Google. The noun that became a verb." That's how this little film starts, going on to list all the vast projects that the company is involved at the moment using lovely animation. Made in the style of the viral "Did you know?" videos, it gives you a pretty good impression why people call Google a "frenemy". So is Google Darth Vader? Or just a business?

Remember Charlie Brooker's parody of TV news reporting recently? Here's the American equivalent. Enjoy the Onion ripping apart up-to-the-minute coverage of some irrelevant story that has no ramifications whatsoever. Excellent – but not to be watched if you dislike strong language or dead fish.

Finally, we have teddy bears invading Worthing seafront. They hop above the streets, play with some cars, and kill some pigeons – all the stuff that you do when you are an animated teddy bear in a viral video fantasy from a rather talented young man.

1 The Beast File- Google (HUNGRY BEAST)

If you want to know why they call Google a "frenemy," watch this info-animation from Hungry Beast for Australian TV channel ABC.

2 BMW S1000 RR. Dinner for RR

You know that conjuring trick where you pull out the tablecloth so quickly and smoothly that dinner remains undisturbed? Well, BMW has tried it with a food bank and one of their motorbikes, and ...

3 The Handsome Men's Club

A post-Oscars Jimmy Kimmel gets Robert Downey Jr, Sting, Patrick Dempsey, Tad Dampsey, Ethan Hawke, Ben Affleck, Matt Damon and others to make fun of Handsome Men – that is, themselves. Really kicks off with when Lenny starts to sing. So who is most handsome?

4 Turning into Michael Jackson

Amazing transformation: Why beauty operations? Séverine takes you on a tour using make up and scotch tape to look like Michael Jackson!

5 Teddys storm Worthing sea front

Cutie of the week! Watch an endless row of teddy bears taking over the seafront of Worthing. Internet creativity at its best.

6 Iron Man 2 Trailer 2

Marvel Comics meet blockbuster featuring machines, special effects, Robert Downey Jr, Scarlett Johansson and Mickey Rourke to perform a film fest coming in May. But the trailer has already made it into the charts.

7 TRON: LEGACY - Official Trailer

Another movie in which technology plays the main role, and this time its a father and son tale that puts us back into 1980s cyberspace. Oh, but in 3D. Is that enough?

8 NEW E*TRADE Baby - Girlfriend

Animated human baby boy and baby girl have a serious relationship talk. What happened last night? And was that milkoholic Lindsay there as well? Very well made ad, deserves to go viral.

9 PS22 Chorus "LISZTOMANIA" Phoenix

You think Glee is TV fiction? Than watch this! Here is the pop video of the week featuring the elementary school chorus from Public School 22 in Graniteville, Staten Island, who cover Lisztomania by Phoenix.

10 Captain Kirk deals with a strange alien culture

Looking at the screen, Spock and Kirk can't really believe their eyes. Or ears.

*Source: Mostly taken by Unruly Media, but heavily inspired by Mag.ma.
Compiled from data gathered at 18:00 on 11 March 2010.*

- Digital media
- Google

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The lunchtime technology newsbucket: chock full o'links

Wired's past predictions, solicitors accused, Amazon clicks it, Sony's Move move, OSS on Windows, emerging sites, and the web's real Cold War

A quick burst of links for you to chew over, as picked by the Technology team

Wired Reread - seeing how well old copies of Wired forecast the past
Ah, those far-off days when the year 2000 and the millennium bug were ahead of us, and handheld computers were not at risk of slipping down the sofa. Or of being held in your hand, come to that.

Two solicitors accused over file-sharing 'bully tactics' | The Law Gazette

"Mark Stephens, a partner at Stephens Finers Innocent who is representing the two solicitors involved, rejected the consumer group's allegations. He said Davenport Lyons has a long tradition of protecting the rights of creators, and its methodology for handling illegal file-sharing cases conforms to industry best practice, and has been adopted in the Digital Economy Bill currently going through parliament. Stephens said it was not correct to say the solicitors' conduct was inappropriate in the manner alleged by Which?, adding that Davenport Lyons has a 100% success rate for the illegal file-sharing cases that it has taken to court." We'd like to know: how many cases has it taken to court?

Amazon.com's 1-Click patent confirmed following re-exam >> Techflash.com

Is it a software patent, or a business method patent? Either way, the USPTO reckons it stands. Until 2017, anyhow.

GDC: Sony's Motion Controller Is 'PlayStation Move' - Gamasutra
It works like a Wii-mote but looks more like a sex toy. PlayStation Eye camera also required.

Geeknet at OSBC 2010 - Port 25: The Open Source Community at Microsoft

Scott Collison from Geeknet reports on the share of open source on Windows at Geeknet (which owns SourceForge, Slashdot, ThinkGeek, Ohloh, freshmeat etc). He says: "the amount of Open Source Software (OSS) that is Windows compatible has been steadily climbing over time, from 72% in early 2005 to some 82% in late 2009."

YouTube - THE NEW DORK - Entrepreneur State of Mind

A geeky spoof of Jay-Z and Alicia Keys' Empire State of Mind, from the guys behind Grasshopper.com. The lyrics and in the info panel

5 Emerging Social Media Sites to Watch in 2010 - Social Media Examiner

You mean there's more to life than Facebook and Twitter? Well, there's Foursquare...

Does HTML5 Really Beat Flash? The Surprising Results of New Tests - ReadWriteWeb

Tests at streaminglearningcenter.com confirm that Flash works better on Windows because it can't use hardware acceleration on Mac OS X.

Flash and Standards: The Cold War of the Web - A List Apart

"Until we realize the foolishness of faith in technology, we'll see the same cycle repeated," says Dan Mall

Drudge Report accused of serving malware, again - CNET News

To be precise, it looks like a "malvertising" hit - malware served up via third-party advertising systems which have been conned by the bad guys. Drudge will be a huge target, which potentially means thousands affected. ""This will be a problem (for sites) as long as JavaScript and Active Content, like Flash ads, are allowed" on sites, said Mary Landesman, a senior security researcher at ScanSafe." Quickly solved then..

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Google Reader Play: a new way to browse the web

Google's new interface turns the web into an interactive entertainment magazine

Google has launched Google Reader Play, an experimental feature that offers a new, highly visual way to browse the web.

The new interface displays only one story at a time, focusing on pictures, videos, visual statistics and maps.

"We think Reader Play is a fun way to browse interesting items online that you wouldn't find otherwise," said software engineer Garrett Wu in a blogpost announcing the new product.

Unlike the standard Google Reader in which users have to subscribe to feeds, Google Reader Play requires no set-up. It learns new users' preferences by asking them to mark items they like with a star to read later.

"We designed it especially for people who don't want to spend time curating their own set of feeds," said Wu.

Google Reader Play is thus easy to use, and as the items are displayed in full-screen, there is one type of content it is perfect for: television.

As Nick Bilton of the New York Times puts it: "Although Google doesn't address television in the description of the product, the promising use case for many people could be the ability to use Google Reader Play on a computer hooked up to a larger screen."

Launched a few weeks before Apple's iPad hits the stores in April, Google Reader Play makes it clear that the big tech companies are aiming to take on the consumer market.

Do you like the idea of Google Reader Play? Please have your say in the comments

- Google
- Digital media

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Sony gets its PlayStation plans on the Move

- It's heading for a year since **Sony** first unveiled its motion controller at E3, in what most people considered a fairly hurried demo to combat Microsoft's Project Natal. But now the Japanese electronic giant has lifted the lid on the finished product: at the Game Developers Conference it said the device, known as PlayStation Move, will go on sale in the autumn for the US price of around \$100. Is it more than the Eye? Or just another me-too attempt to cash in on the Wii trend?

- We mentioned software patents in yesterday's briefing (courtesy of Jonathan Schwartz), but here's a biggie: **Amazon's** 1-Click patent - which has caused so much controversy over the years - has been confirmed once again after being re-examined. Looks like Amazon will be on top of that one for some time to come. Meanwhile **Microsoft** failed in its appeal against i4i, which accused the company of infringing its patents. That's got to sting.

- Ever wonder whether **Google** would actually do anything to follow up its threat to lift censorship in China - or whether it was just posturing? You're not alone. Talking in Abu Dhabi, Eric Schmidt said that "something will happen soon", though it's not clear whether that is a decision to take action - or an agreement with Beijing. Let's see how it pans out.

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- Games
- Amazon.com
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Bobbie Johnson

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Microsoft tries again in XML patent case it lost against i4i: and the court's decision is...

Suffering under an injunction against versions of Word that deal with particular forms of XML, Microsoft sallies forth once more against i4i

Remember Microsoft, and the case taken out by i4i alleging that it held particular patents relating to XML, and that later versions of Word infringed it - and that Microsoft should therefore be enjoined against selling it?

Yes, that case, which got its first result last August. (And you'll recall our interview with the chief executive of i4i.)

At that time, both sides were waiting for the outcome of an appeal lodged by Microsoft - which, being big, would expect to prevail.

And now, the result:

"a panel for the United States Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit issued a revised opinion in i4i v. Microsoft which affirms the August 11, 2009 Final Judgment by The Honorable Judge Leonard Davis that ruled in favor of i4i and found that Microsoft had wilfully infringed i4i's U.S. Patent No. 5,787,449."

Oh dear, Microsoft, that has to hurt.

"Loudon Owen, Chairman of i4i, says, "The appeals court has again upheld the lower court's decision in its entirety. In addition, it issued a more detailed analysis in concerning the finding of willfulness in this case. The determination that Microsoft willfully infringed i4i's patent stands.""

"Michel Vulpe, founder of i4i and co-inventor, says, "i4i is especially pleased with the court's continued decision to uphold the injunction, an important step in protecting the property rights of inventors. i4i continues to offer custom XML solutions.""

The Court of Appeals is still considering a petition by Microsoft for en banc review (which, to save you the click, is granted pretty rarely - about 94 cases get it per year).

Which may mean that that's that for the XML-infringing version of Word, which is the 2003 version - though of course Microsoft is perfectly able to sell other versions that don't.

As Jack commented way back when the first case came up:

"anyone who has read a chunk of i4i's US Patent No 5,787,449 might well have doubts about the competence of the US Patent Office in granting it, and it seems even more unlikely that the average judge or juror in East Texas is competent to adjudicate on it. Perhaps someone should tell POTUS that the US software patent system is broken.

"Having said that, you have to wonder whether Microsoft has a rational legal strategy. Given its track record for losing lawsuits, and its presumed familiarity with the East Texas courts, you'd have thought it would either have found some way to move the case or change its Word code so that it couldn't be seen to infringe i4i's patent. If the latter is impossible, of course, then the XML open standard could be in trouble, too."

i4i has subsequently indicated that it's not going after the XML open standard.

- [Microsoft](#)
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Google partners with Italy for groundbreaking book scanning deal

Google and the Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage have reached an agreement to digitise up to a million out-of-copyright works at the national libraries in Florence and Rome, including some by Galileo.

And it's just two weeks after an Italian court gave three Google executives suspended prison sentences over a video of bullying on YouTube that had been removed once the company was told about it.

Google is not only to work closely together with the Italian libraries, but also with the Italian ministry of culture – the first time that the search engine has had a government department as such a close partner on such a project. Google called it a "groundbreaking deal".

"The libraries will select the works to be digitised from their collections, which include a wealth of rare historical books, including scientific works, literature from the period of the founding of Italy and the works of Italy's most famous poets and writers," says Google's strategic partner development manager, Gino Mattiuzzo, in a blogpost announcing the deal.

While the costs will be covered fully by Google, the company will pass the scans on. The books will be available to groups including the EU's Europeana project, which already has scanned 6 million digital items of cultural value.

"We believe today's announcement is an important step, and we look forward to working with more libraries and other partners," says Mattiuzzo.

Google has similar arrangements with Oxford University, Madrid's Complutense University, the Bavarian state museum and others.

However, it's not clear whether Google is creating the world's biggest library or the world's biggest bookshop. Some fear the search engine is exploiting cultural heritage as a cheap context for advertising.

Recently, a New York judge postponed a decision on whether the company should be allowed to display parts of books still in-copyright.

Google on the other hand claims good intentions: "We envision a future in which people will be able to search and access the world's books anywhere, anytime. After all, Antonio Beccadelli and Anastasius Germonius – like Shakespeare and Cervantes – are part of our human cultural history."

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Google launches app store

Web giant takes on Microsoft with Google Apps Marketplace offering cloud-based applications

Google has announced that it has opened the Google Apps Marketplace to developers.

More than 50 companies will be involved in the Apps Marketplace, which will offer business software such as a project management application, a tax and a payroll program, an electronic fax program, an e-signature service, and a design tool for Google Docs.

The third-party cloud-based applications will be integrated within Google to work like native Google apps. It will charge developers 20% of the revenue from sales on the marketplace site, apart from a one-off fee of \$100.

"The Google Apps Marketplace eliminates the worry about software updates, keeping track of different passwords and manual syncing and sharing of data, thereby increasing business productivity and lessening frustrations for users and IT administrators alike," said product manager Chris Vander Mey in a blogpost that announced the move.

Google is challenging Microsoft with the aim of becoming the operating system of the web. Up till now the search engine offered users and businesses several web applications such as Gmail, Google Calendar and Google Docs. It already has 25 million Google Apps users, with 2 million of them businesses.

"More than 2 million businesses have adopted Google Apps over the last three years, eliminating the hassles associated with purchasing, installing and maintaining hardware and software themselves," says Vander Mey.

Cloud computing applications, which are internet-based rather than desktop-based, were looked upon as promising but have been slow to take off. Computer users tend to choose names they already trust, and seemed to be confused about cloud-based applications. For a long time the market position of Microsoft seemed secure.

But Google might now be changing the game. It might also have found a new revenue stream – 97% of its income currently comes from advertising. As it already has released the Google Chrome browser and is working on a Google Chrome OS, the App Marketplace is the next logical step towards becoming a software company.

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MyPolice angry at plans by HM Inspectorate of Constabulary to create 'My Police' site

Why is a government body setting up a website that has almost the exact same name and function as a private sector one that's been around since last year?

At some stage, the government has to get over its habit of trying to not just reinvent the wheel, but to build cars and sell them. Once upon a time it owned British Leyland - which didn't make its cars any better (in fact there were some right lemons). BL was a debacle. The UK government swore off nationalisation. A bit.

However when it comes to the digital domain, it seems that it has to learn the lesson all over again. One gets little steps forward - the opening up of data.gov.uk, which provides the raw data that people need to build apps on government data, is a notable (and big, actually) one.

But then you get situations like MyPolice.

It's a snappy name - and the idea of setting up a site so you could evaluate and compare and converse with local police forces might seem like one that would spring pretty easily from any meeting of motivated geeks. And indeed it did, last summer, from the Social Innovation Camp: say hello to MyPolice, which aims to provide data and feedback on police forces.

Here's how it describes what it's about:

"MyPolice is an online feedback tool that enables the public and the police to have a conversation. It fosters constructive, collaborative communication between people and the Police forces which serve them."

"MyPolice helps communities identify weaknesses and opportunities in Police services. In providing analysis and data for the Police to act on, MyPolice challenges policy decisions that are made and ensuring that service users have an active part in changing the Police for the better."

All well and good until this morning - when HMIC (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary, a government body which assesses the performance of the police) announces that it's going to launch a site

called My Police (see the difference?) from Saturday, and that it will have the domain of mypolice.org.uk.

Naturally, the people behind MyPolice aren't thrilled. Kate Ho at [StartupCafe](#) has the full conversation, which includes the fact that the HMIC has bought up domains around the MyPolice name - including mypolice.org.uk, which is rather close to mypolice.org, after all.

Lauren Currie, director of MyPolice (the non-HMIC one), is very unhappy:

We are in an extremely narrow market, and it is incredibly likely that confusion would arise if they continue to use our name, Mypolice.

It is extremely unprofessional to view all our channels and move forward with the name mypolice.

If HMIC launch as Mypolice, they will run the risk of confusing the public to think they are an independent company, which they are not.

It's really not good - and does raise the question of why HMIC is trying to do it this way, rather than putting its data out through data.gov.uk so that people can build on it, rather than get stomped on.

- [Police](#)
- [Government data](#)
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The lunchtime newsbucket - chock full o'links

Pink Floyd, Vodafone malware, Windows's origins, WiMAX, Apple's iTunesLP, ad blockers, iPhone App licensing, I Can Afford Cheezburger?, CEOP lack of buttons and more...

A quick burst of links for you to chew over, as picked by the Technology team

[Pink Floyd Suing EMI Label Over Online Royalties - BusinessWeek](#)

Because their songs are seamless, see, and fade into each other, every single download should count as an album. Something like that. Forecast: could get ugly. Of course in the old days, a top person at EMI would have just said "Get me Pink on the phone - he and I can sort this out..."

[Vodafone distributes phone that spreads Mariposa botnet >> Panda Research Blog](#)

Ooh, dear, Vodafone, we think that this counts as an enormous mistake.

[The Secret Origin of Windows >> Technologizer.com](#)

A year after first being announced, Windows was still vapourware - which meant Tandy Trower (no, really) had the job of wrestling it into real, running code in a product with a price tag and a strategy. When he started, it looked "a bit clunky" due to the system font. A fascinating read.

[Melting down the crown jewels >> Information World Review](#)

Tim Buckley Owen on the contradictions generated by the fact that data.gov.uk will make Ordnance Survey data available, but hasn't managed to get Royal Mail to do the same for postcode data. (Note though that the OS consultation proposes making CodePoint - a long/lat set of postcode locations - available for free reuse.)

[Gaming sites losing out to 'social networking games' >> BBC News](#)

As the Games Developers Conference comes into sight, the problem is that Farmville and Mafia Wars are sucking up peoples' time that used to be spent on games sites

[Another one bites the dust: Cisco steps out of the WiMAX game >> Engadget](#)

WiMAX isn't quite a dead duck, but it's starting to look distinctly peaky.

[Apple's iTunes LP 6 Months Later: LP What? >> GigaOM](#)

Noticed how everyone is talking about Apple's iTunes LP format? Um...perhaps they're doing it on Google Wave? Or perhaps it was

launched in a hurry to placate the record industry, which wanted to have some way to tempt people to buy albums, rather than singles. Even so, it might work well with the iPad, if that ever reaches us...

[Should you use ad blockers or not? >> Guardian Technology](#)

Worth reading for the debate in the comments too - but why is nobody discussing the idea of the subscription to get rid of ads?

[All Your Apps Are Belong to Apple: The iPhone Developer Program License - EFF](#)

The Electronic Frontier Foundation "used the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) to ask NASA for a copy, so that the general public could see what rules controlled the technology they could use with their phones".

[Inside the Low-Paying Cheezburger Empire >> Ben Huh - Gawker](#)

Those pictures of furry cats won't post themselves, you know. Oh, wait, they do. Unexplained: why are the people working at cheezburger so lowly paid?

[Should Microsoft get into the PC hardware business? >> Ed Bott at ZDNet.com](#)

Maybe not all PCs, but a few reference versions?

[Click CEOP Button - Add-ons Gallery >> IEAddons: where's the Firefox one?](#)

CEOP has a "panic button" so kids can report scary people, but is this really only available for IE8? Can't they implement a bookmarklet?

[Tim Berners-Lee: The year open data went worldwide >> TED.com](#)

That's *Sir* TBL to you. The year before, he was getting the audience to chant "raw data now". This year, he's showing them the how of raw data.

[Popular \[not Frequently Asked?\] Questions >> UK Council for Child Internet Safety](#)

Perhaps a frequently asked question might be "why is your website so amazingly uninformative?"

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Engage your users to survive, Google tells newspapers

Charging might work with specialist content, says Google's chief economist – but engaging readers with online content during their leisure hours is a more promising strategy

The key to most newspapers' survival online is engaging more with readers, rather than seeking to charge them directly, Google argues.

The case was put by its chief economist, Hal Varian, yesterday at a workshop of the Federal Trade Commission in Washington on "The Future of Journalism".

Google denies any responsibility for the problems newspapers face. "The news industry's financial problems started well before the web came along," Varian said in his speech, which he also published as a blogpost.

Google estimates that charging for access is only a solution for news organisations with specialised content, since competition for generic news is too high.

A more promising approach, Varian argues, is to increase the involvement of readers with news during leisure hours, when they have more time to look at content and advertisements. Google recently introduced several experiments in displaying news differently, such as Fast Flip and the open source project Living Stories.

According to Google, declining print circulation hadn't been offset online because news readers tend to look at a disproportionate amount of online content during working hours, when people have little spare time. "The average amount of time looking at online news is about 70 seconds a day, while the average amount of time spent reading the physical newspaper is about 25 minutes a day," Varian says.

Furthermore, analysing search clicks, Google finds that the traditional cross-subsidization model of newspapers is broken. While before, in print, advertisements in special interest sections such as motoring, travel, or home & garden helped finance the general news production, now most of the search clicks are in categories such as sports, news and current events, and local.

According to Google, which doesn't display any advertising with its overview page Google News, there is money to be made in the sectors of travel, health, shopping and computers and electronics while news is hard to monetize, despite being frequently accessed.

In general, Google's outlook for newspapers isn't too good. "The transition to a fully online news will be difficult, but there's a good chance that we will emerge with a significantly more compelling user experience," Varian says.

Newspapers don't exploit fully the information they have and use their analysis and statistic tools, Google argues. A more direct measure of what users seek and read such as reviews, video and local news would improve online news, as would better advertisement measurement and a more intense contextual targeting.

Google, which wants the world to know that it is "keen on working with the news industry", sees some hope in new devices – such as the iPad – that could make online reading more attractive in leisure hours.

Therefore, Google's strong advice for newspapers is to increase user engagement, summed up clearly in one of Varian's bullet points: "Engagement is currently low, need to increase it".

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No Smoking Day? There's an app for that

Facebook and iPhone applications can help you stub out your smoking habit

Are you one of the more than 2 million smokers ready to quit on No Smoking Day? Then today is your day! Don't worry, you won't be alone as there is an app for it – well, several. And this is how you can call it a day:

First of all, you install the WeQuit Facebook app to let everybody know what your are up to. It's best to grab one of your chain-smoking friends for a competition. The Facebook version of WeQuit helps you to reward your friend if they achieve success and punish them in case of failure, perhaps by throwing a sheep at them. You can also use WeQuit to bet your Facebook friends to see who can give up for longest, or sponsor someone to quit to raise money for charity.

Secondly, you can use your iPhone to download a free NHS Quit Smoking app. Here a real-time counter keeps track of the money saved – a significant amount considering the cost of cigarettes. It also displays the minutes, hours and days you've been smoke-free.

If you are in danger of a relapse, a button on the app can connect you to an adviser on an NHS helpline. If not, you might find some solace in downloading the No Smoking PhotoBook for £1.19 to show you beautiful "no smoking" signs from all over the world.

Good luck!

- Digital media
- Smoking
- iPhone
- Facebook
- Apple

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Twitter now screening links to protect users

- After a spate of phishing scams and attacks, **Twitter** is cranking up safety for users by blocking all dubious links. Essentially it routes all links through Twitter's filter and eliminates the bad ones before potential victims reach the destination. Looks like good news for users - but possibly bad news for the URL shortening services that have emerged in Twitter's wake?

- If you're looking for some fun reading, it's worth taking some time to look through the blog of **Jonathan Schwartz**. Now liberated from his job at Sun Microsystems, Schwartz is delivering a few stories of his time at the company - the sort of things he couldn't say while there. The latest morsel? Tales of patent bluster with Steve Jobs, Bill Gates and others. And there are fighting words in there: while he says he gets the value of patents, he also believes that "for a technology company, going on offense with software patents seems like an act of desperation".

- And it's time to tune in again to the latest edition of our **Tech Weekly podcast**, headed by the effervescent Aleks Krotoski. the latest show features a dissection of the BBC's apparently contradictory digital plans - is it pushing out or pulling back? - and a look inside San Francisco's wonderful mechanical museum. Click here to listen now.

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- Twitter
- Internet
- Data and computer security
- Sun Microsystems

Bobbie Johnson

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Tech Weekly podcast: Digital changes at the BBC, and inside San Francisco's mechanical museum

Charles Arthur, Rick Wray and Aleks Krotoski take on the BBC in this week's podcast, picking apart the latest news on the corporation - from the director general's strategy review to the battles with iPhone app developers. What's behind the BBC's contradictory new media messaging? Is digital really the future, or will they abandon a decade of investment to the archives?

Meanwhile Bobbie Johnson takes the team through the Musee Mecanique in San Francisco, the leading collection of pre-digital entertainment machines; and Mercedes Bunz speaks with Blaise Aguera y Arcas, the man behind Bing Maps.

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Microsoft reshuffles code for browser ballot screen to make it properly random

What happens when you copy code off the internet and supply it to randomise your results? Non-random results, that's what (updated)

Microsoft has shuffled the algorithm which produced the browser choice ballot screen, because it wasn't random.

If you can't remember why it's running a browser ballot screen, here's your reminder - including a pointer to the fact that the code to "randomise" the browsers at browserchoice.eu, which was supplied by Microsoft, wasn't random. (IBM's Rob Weir analysed it.)

Two questions: why wasn't that noticed, and where did Microsoft get the flawed code from in the first place?

To which the answer for both seems to be: someone searched for the code to do the randomisation - after all, why reinvent the wheel? Someone must have written code to do a random sort with Javascript - and got code with a flaw in it.

To be fair, the code actually disadvantaged Microsoft: it put Internet Explorer into fifth position in the list of available browsers about twice as often as it should have, and put Chrome ahead too often. (See Weir's illustration here.)

As Tim Anderson points out, if you do a search for "Javascript random sort" on Google, you get a list which includes a link to a Javascript library which has the *exact same flaw* as the Microsoft code.

But hold your horses - if you do that search on (Microsoft's) Bing, you get the same top result. So don't assume that Microsoft's people were being unfaithful.

However as Anderson points out,

"I am sure I am not the only person to turn to Google when confronted with some programming task that requires some research. In general, it is a great resource; and Google's own algorithms help a little with filtering the results so that sites with better reputation or more inbound links come higher in the results.

"Still, what this case illustrates – though accepting again that we do not know how the error occurred in this instance – is that

pasting code from a Google search into your project without fully understanding and testing it does not always work. Subtle bugs like this one, which may go unnoticed for a long time, can have severe consequences. Randomisation is used in security code, for example."

Now that's scary. Got any copied/pasted Javascript in your security code? Fess up.

Update: Weir's conclusion on his second post, where he finds that the new shuffle algorithm works much closer to expectation, is instructive:

In the end I don't think it is reasonable to expect every programmer to be memorize the Fisher-Yates algorithm. These things belong in our standard libraries. But what I would expect every programmer to know is:

- That the problem here is one that requires a "random shuffle". If you don't know what it is called, then it will be difficult to look up the known approaches. So this is partially a vocabulary problem. We, as programmers, have a shared vocabulary which we use to describe data structures and algorithms; binary searches, priority heaps, tries, and dozens of other concepts. I don't blame anyone for not memorizing algorithms, but I would expect a programmer to know what types of algorithms apply to their work.
- How to research which algorithm to use in a specific context, including where to find reliable information, how to evaluate the classic trade-offs of time and space, etc. There is almost always more than one way to solve a problem.
- That where randomized outputs are needed, the outputs should be statistically tested. I would not expect the average programmer to know how to do a chi-square test, or even to know what one is. But I would expect a mature programmer to know either find this out or seek help.

Supply your own jokes about programmers needing to seek help, of course.

- Microsoft
- European commission
- Programming

Charles Arthur

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Why do we ignore 'real-time' results from Google search?

Eye-tracking shows that tweets added into search results don't get much attention. Too soon to be useful, or never going to be useful?

Users ignore "real time" results in searches. That's the conclusion of some eye-tracking studies carried out on people doing usability studies with Google results, and it might not be good news for Twitter - which has done deals with Google and Bing to let them index its content and serve it up in the results for searches. Google is reckoned to be paying \$15m, and Bing \$10m - though the length of the deal isn't known.

The study is unequivocal: tweets are the gorillas in the passing game of search results.

Come again?

"It was right in front of you. Why didn't you see it? That's what a group of researchers investigated over a decade ago when they asked their study subjects to watch a video of a group of people passing a ball around. For the study, the participants were asked to count the number of passes completed. The participants were surprisingly accurate in their counts. And what about the gorilla? (Well, not a real gorilla, but a woman wearing a gorilla suit). In one group, less than 10% of the participants reported seeing a gorilla pass through. It is precisely what the study participants didn't see - a woman in a gorilla suit - that interested the researchers."

The news will bring a quiet smile to Nick Carr, the author and blogger who has been compiling his sardonic Realtime Chronicles (like the Martian Chronicles, but more terrestrial) about the faint whiff of idiocy that attaches to attempts to orient the web, and particularly search, around the leavings of folk on Twitter.

But why don't we care about real-time results? Over at Scripting News, ur-blogger Dave Winer suggests that it's because

"It's impossible to convey much information in 140 characters. So when a search hits a tweet you get at most a soundbite, telling you something you probably already knew. When you search you're looking for information you don't have but want."

He adds:

"I have a collection of Google Alerts that report once a day or immediately, via email, telling me about occurrences of my name, products I've made, other topics I'm interested in. These used to be pretty useful until they started including tweets in the body of stuff they search. Now the alerts are mostly useless. So in this case, adding real-time stuff actually subtracts value. "

(Though I've also heard separately from other people that Google Alerts are becoming useless to them because of the prevalence of SEO efforts which push useless results into the alerts. Now the interesting point: I heard it on my Twitter stream, without searching it out.)

To which Josh Young's comment, also linked by Winer, makes sense: "Yes, real-time results in search suck because the feed is what's important, not the individual tweet."

The intriguing thing is that Google's senior vice-president of search products and user experience, Marissa Mayer, sounded absolutely certain when I interviewed her in the middle of last year (before the deal with Twitter was signed) that real-time search would be really useful, and was something that Google absolutely should include. Here's the relevant quote, in response to the question:

"We think the real-time search is incredibly important, and the real-time data that's coming online can be super-useful in terms of finding out whether – something like, is this conference today any good? Is it warmer in San Francisco than it is in Silicon Valley? You can actually look at tweets and see those types of patterns emerge, so there's a lot of useful information about real-time interactions that we think ultimately will really affect search."

But it's already looking as though stuffing Twitter results high into the search results isn't quite the way to do that "useful information". Possibly Google - and Bing - will need to have a rethink about how results are presented: should "real-time" results (stop sniggering, Carr) be roped off in their own space, as sponsored results and text ads already are? But in that case, where? How does that gel with Google's aim of having plain, simple pages that load fast and also lead you to the information that you really want?

There's an associated question: are real-time search results any use? When you're trying to find out about breaking news that affects you,

they'll definitely look damn useful - for instance, if you've heard about a natural or other disaster at a location where you know a relative is living or visiting, you'll want to search and find out what's happening. (Assuming the telephone system isn't working.) Possibly if you could see a flow of tweets from that region, it would go some way to helping.

For the other situations, though... harder to make out. Over to you: can you frame a use for real-time search results from services like Twitter (and perhaps even, who knows, Facebook), and can you solve Google's presentation problem?

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BBC technology news

'Console killer' launches in June

A gaming service that aims to kill off the traditional gaming console will begin streaming games over the net in June this year.

Web censure 'curbs human rights'

Freedom of expression on the web has been curtailed in 2009, the US state department says in its annual human rights report.

Telegraph poles to take broadband

Virgin Media has begun trials of technology to deliver high-speed fibre-optic broadband over telegraph poles in the UK.

Tories pledge 'fastest broadband'

The Conservatives say they will make Britain the first country in Europe to have widespread super-fast broadband.

Sony shows off motion controller

Sony reveals details about its new motion controller the PlayStation Move, as a contender to market leader Nintendo Wii.

Mobile phone allows boss to snoop

Mobile technology that could allow prying bosses to monitor every movement of their staff is developed in Japan.

Internet up for Nobel Peace Prize

The internet is among a record 237 individuals and organisations nominated for this year's Nobel Peace Prize.

Facebook calls for 'iconic games'

Facebook calls on game designers to make an iconic title, such as Mario or Halo, specifically for the social network.

File-sharing sanctions 'unfair'

Illegal file-sharers should be fined, rather than have their internet connection cut off, says the boss of BT.

Farming future

The dawning age of the agricultural automatons

dot.Rory

New skirmishes in war of Daily Mail v the internet

Mobile clinic

Phones transform healthcare in the developing world

Vital statistics

Explore the inner workings of the web and its growth

dot.Maggie

Gaming pioneers finds the old magic returning

Final Fantasy

Costumed fans queue for launch

Hard drive evolution could hit XP

Hard drives are about to undergo one of the biggest format shifts in 30 years but it could cause problems for Windows XP users.

Porn domain name plan revived

A plan to create a .xxx net domain for adult content will be revisited three years after it was rejected by internet regulators.

Nanotech 'fuse' for novel battery

A never-before-seen reaction in nanotubes could make for batteries that pack a mighty punch, say researchers.

Banking fraud 'moves to internet'

Fraudsters are continuing their switch from traditional card fraud to raiding online bank accounts, research suggests.

Games migrate to the social side

The merging of social networks and games is set to dominate this year's Game Developers Conference in San Francisco.

Internet access 'a human right'

Almost four in five people worldwide see internet access as a fundamental right, a poll for the BBC World Service suggests.

Sony eyeing June launch of 3D TV

Electronics giant Sony says its new 3D television will be on sale in Japan from June, with a cost of $\text{¥}2,600$ for a 46-inch screen model.

Has copyright gone too far?

Has copyright gone too far? asks Bill Thompson.

Open society and open systems

Openness must be defended, says Bill Thompson.

The past is the future for tech

Bill Thompson keeps an eye on the future

The media and the message

Innovation is the key for papers says Bill Thompson

Sun spotters protect the Earth

Your help is needed to watch the surface of the Sun

Naples' online 'ethical' city

The web community founded on morals and manners

Will people pay for net news?

Can newspapers charge online and survive?

Are all bits created equal?

The US struggles with the battle over net neutrality

Digital Revolution

Internet Blog



www.feedbooks.com
Food for the mind