

## INNOVATION

By **MATTHEW SHAER**  
STAFF WRITER

NEW YORK

**L**ate last month, media giant Google launched an online featured called SearchWiki, which allows users to rate, annotate, and store results they've found particularly useful. The notes have no direct bearing on public rankings, although individual comments are visible to all users.

On the company's blog, Google said SearchWiki moved search one more step toward a "dynamic" search experience – one in which a community will be able to shape, refine, and organize the raw matter of the World Wide Web.

The concept has a considerable amount of ballast in Silicon Valley, where developers have long predicted that the future of search lies not in proprietary algorithms, such as Yahoo or Google, but in the power of the hive mind.

**TO IMPROVE RESULTS,  
NEW SEARCH ENGINES RELY ON  
USERS INSTEAD OF COMPUTERS.**

# Google or the gaggle?

Over the past few years, a score of so-called "people-powered" search tools have entered the fray, including Stumpedia, Mahalo, Sproose, and Gravee. Most of these sites couple the raw processing power of an algorithmic engine with the functionality of Digg, the community-controlled news aggregator.

"There are a lot of smart people who have looked at Google and Yahoo and said the fundamental way of searching has not changed in nine or 10 years," says Bob Pack, a founder and CEO of Sproose, which allows users to influence search results with a simple voting mechanism. "You've got algorithmic search results, organized into a set of blue links going down the page. Search needs to become richer and more intuitive."

This community-based approach to search will likely never replace traditional engines when it comes to simple searches, such as checking sports scores or the state of the stock market. But more complex tasks are still handled more effectively by a

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LISA HANEY

## How to engineer serendipity online

By **VIJAYSREE VENKATRAMAN**  
CORRESPONDENT

**I**n a wired world, finding information about events in a distant part of the world – the score of a soccer game, the aftermath of a military coup, or a nascent hip-hop movement in a conservative country – is straightforward.

Even if news sites overlooked a certain event, chances are that a blogger has not.

"But how do you find stuff you don't know you are looking for?" asks Ethan Zuckerman.

This koanlike question comes from his work as a fellow at Harvard University's Berkman Center for Internet and Society. Mr. Zuckerman spends a lot of time pondering the intricacies of the Internet and how to realign its many moving parts to make the Web more useful.

He helped start the Web-hosting service Tripod and later founded Geekcorps, a nonprofit that aims to help emerging nations get online and join the global conversation.

While wearing these many hats, Zuckerman has seen again and again that people love what the Internet can provide them, but they have no idea how much they are missing.

"People generally pay attention to what they already know about and what they care about," he says.

Serendipity can strike – users can occasionally stumble on a marvelous new site – but that rare find shouldn't be left to chance, he says. It should be engineered into the system.

For example, even a film buff may be unaware of Nigeria's movie industry. But

Nollywood, as it's called by fans, is the third-largest movie industry in the world after Hollywood and India's Bollywood.

"These movies made in Lagos [Nigeria] will probably not be on your Netflix queue anytime soon," he says. But the Internet puts the films, directors, and Nollywood fans within reach for Americans.

Discovering such gems in the online rough can be difficult when you rely on people much like yourself to expand your online horizons. News aggregators such as Digg and Reddit help, but their audiences are still pretty homogenous.

"The Reddit community, for instance, is 92 percent male, 70 percent employed in the IT industry or as students, and 70 percent from the US," says Zuckerman.

There's a word for this social quirk, See **ZUCKERMAN** page 16

## INNOVATION

## horizons

## What's new in sci-tech

## The landers of (Mars') summer

Cue up Don Henley's "The Boys of Summer," tweak the lyrics a bit, and it's time to bid adieu to the Phoenix Mars Lander.

The craft's summer fling on Mars is over. Winter has set in around the red planet's northern reaches, where Phoenix landed. The craft's solar panels no longer intercept enough sunlight to power the craft or keep it warm.

So the National Aeronautics and Space Administration has ordered the Mars Reconnaissance Orbiter (MRO) – the lander's radio relay station – to stop listening for the its telltale signal.

But if the hardy little chemistry lab on a platter is now a memory, the MRO lives on in the reams of data it sent back on Mars' summer weather patterns and especially on the soil and ice found at its landing site.

The information may hold clues as to whether the landing site could become a temporary host for microbial life as the planet's orbit changes. Those periodic shifts alter the climate on Mars much like changes in Earth's orbit triggers ice ages here.

## Name that bat for the holidays

When science budgets get tight, one can imagine folks sitting around the lab bench and brainstorming, if only half in jest: Do we need to hold a bake sale?

No? How about an auction? Say, auctioning the right to name a new species? That's the approach Purdue University professor John Bickham is taking to help fund expeditions to catalog biodiversity in far-flung places. Just in time for the holidays, you can bid for the right to tack your name – or that of someone you hold dear – onto species he and his team discover. Naming opportunity No. 1: a small yellow bat from Mexico and Central America.

The name game as fund-raising tool isn't new. The Keck 10-meter telescopes in Hawaii comes to mind, along with the Allen Radiotelescope Array in California. Each facility was built with a hefty chunk of change coming from the checkbook of its namesake or of a foundation.

Dr. Bickham's hunt for new species – recording them and verifying them as truly new – is expensive. And while researchers and funding agencies recognize the importance of discovering more about the remarkable diversity of life on Earth, the spirit often is more willing than the wallet.

The right to name a species falls to the

scientist who identifies it as new. Last May, for instance, word filtered out of East Carolina University that biologist Jason Bond had christened a new species of trap-door spider *Myrmekiaphila neilyoungi*, in honor of rock legend Neil Young.

## Hawaii seeks a 'Better Place'

Hawaii has an "extreme oil addiction," according to Gov. Linda Lingle. Ninety percent of her state's energy comes from imported oil, costing about \$7 billion a year. With gas on the islands hovering around \$2.65 a gallon, Hawaiians, on average, spend more money on their cars (taxes, insurance, and fuel) than Americans in any other state. Governor Lingle's solution? Go electric.

The state has called in California start-up Better Place to seed Hawaii with 50,000 to 100,000 electric-car recharging stations by 2012. The \$100 million project comes as a grand effort to radically overhaul the state's energy diet.

Better Place says Nissan-Renault has already signed on to make vehicles compatible with



MOTI MILROD/AP

**FILL UP:** Better Place official Tal Agassi demonstrates how to use a charge spot for an electric vehicle in an Israeli car lot.

the proposed network. America's Big Three automakers may soon follow suit. Each has sketched out plans that call for new electric cars in the next few years. As part of the Hawaii project, the islands promise to invest heavily in renewable resources. Since January, the Hawaii Clean Energy Initiative has prodded state officials to slash oil imports by about two-thirds by 2030.

While Hawaii is the first US state to embrace electric cars so vigorously, Better Place says the San Francisco Bay area, Israel, Denmark, and Australia are considering similar plans.

– Peter N. Spotts and Chris Gaylord

## Advertisement



## ALASKAN HANDKNITS

by Musk Ox Producers' Co-Operative



Since 1969 "Oomingmak," The Musk Ox Producers' Co-Operative has been making the exquisite Qiviut hand knit items as a unique northern gift. All the hand knit scarves, nachaq, stoles, caps and headbands are made from QIVIUT (pronounced "kiv-ee-ute"), the downy-soft underwool from the Arctic musk ox. This luxurious fiber is shed each spring, when the animals on the Musk Ox Farm in Palmer, Alaska, are combed, without harm to the animals, so that the fiber can bring income to the Alaskan Native knitters and pleasure to the eventual buyer.

Qiviut is a truly Arctic fiber, which keeps the musk ox warm during a winter and then through the skilled members of the Co-Op can continue to bring warmth and softness to people who appreciate one of the finest natural fibers in the world. It is easy to admire the superb workmanship of the Co-Op knitters, Alaskan Native people, who live in small, remote villages along the coast of Alaska. The cash income from the knitting supplements the members' mostly subsis-

tence lifestyle. Life in the village is hard, not only because of the weather, but because of the distance from the supply of heating fuel and other goods makes everything many, many times more expensive than in Anchorage or the lower 48 states. The only way in and out of the villages is by small planes or a few barges during the summer months. There are no roads or rail service to this part of the U.S.

The traditional line of items are all hand knitted in patterns unique to each village or area in a 100% Qiviut yarn. These patterns were derived from artwork such as beadwork, skin sewing, basketry or ivory carving found in the culture of these areas. They are knitted in delicate lace patterns that are both warm and durable despite their lightness and elegance. The newer Tundra and Snow Line is more sporty, and knitted in patterns made by using a shade of off white and a natural Qiviut color with a yarn that has had 20% silk added to the Qiviut.

The Qiviut scarves, stoles, nachaq, caps and headbands are as comfortable to wear on cool days in a warm climate as they are in the frozen temperatures of the north. Unlike most wool, Qiviut is not scratchy when worn right against the skin, nor will it shrink in any temperature of water. Qiviut can be hand-washed in a mild detergent and will last for many years.

Qiviut is a great gift for those that you hold dear.



## OOMINGMAK

604 H Street, Dept. CSM, Anchorage, AK 99501  
(907) 272-9225 or 888-360-9665

www.qiviut.com

## Zuckerman: Hunt for voices

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where people tend to hang out with like-minded individuals: homophily.

"This can make you really dumb," says Zuckerman. "We need to break out of such echo chambers." Part of the solution, he says, could come from tapping into the informed bloggers of the world.

Right now, the blogosphere gets a bad rap. Without a good filter, its many diverse viewpoints can come off as babel.

That's why, Zuckerman cofounded GlobalVoicesOnline.org in 2004. He wanted a site that could help guide readers through the international maze of citizen journalism.

A team of "bridge bloggers" contextualizes the news coming out of Asia, Africa, and elsewhere for an international audience. "Their insight can help us connect the dots," he says.

Mahmood's Den is one of Zuckerman's favorite blogs. "I try to dispel the image that Muslims and Arabs suffer from ... in the rest of the world," says blogger Mahmood Al-Yousif, a Bahraini engineer who has worked in the United States. Mr. Al-Yousif's goal is to "create a better understanding that we're not all nuts, hell-bent on world destruction."

Zuckerman's mission, in turn, is to amplify voices like that of Al-Yousif.

"The Internet can only make the world smaller when we let it," says Solana Larsen, the Managing Editor of Global Voices. "The truth is: we're still trying to figure out a way to make people – and

bloggers and journalists – more curious."

Step one is letting them know that it's possible to figure out what bloggers in other countries are saying, she says. Hopefully, her team and other sites will soon figure out a good step two.

"Homophily, in itself, is not a bad thing," writes Amy Gahrn, an independent media consultant on her blog contentious.com. Nor does Zuckerman dismiss the value of "commonality," she points out. Zuckerman's aim, she notes, is "to recognize broader and subtler commonalities – by gaining respect for divergent views and experiences." In other words: Tuning in to diverse viewpoints prevents us from being blindsided, as many were after 9/11 and the invasion of Iraq. Suddenly, many Americans needed to learn a whole new vocabulary – Sunni, Shiia, al-Qeada – words that were within reach online but somehow outside of many people's line-of-sight.

Zuckerman refers to our news diet as a problem of "broccoli versus chocolate cake." Right now, he says, it is as if we are at a buffet of news stories and we reach out for whatever gratifies us immediately. We are unlikely to change our habits without compelling reasons, he says.

"Perhaps our information diet should come with the equivalent of nutritional labels," he says. "Search in the future needs to lead us to people, to places, to voices." The possibility of that accidental discovery that could essentially alter one's world view cannot be left to random chance, he emphasizes.