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Suggestions for Website Modification and Improvement

Introduction

The BSS web site has been maintained and developed by four webmasters over the years. The second webmaster operated his own proprietary business in web-based catalogues and so used his own editing software. A mistaken policy was adopted by the next webmaster of only using free web editors obtained from the Internet. By the time that Richard Mallett came to take it over it had become almost unmanageable.

It was decided to start again and to rewrite the site in conformity with the Society's newly approved IT Policy and additionally we decided to place all of our three domains under one hosting arrangement. However the Society could not justify the expense to have this done professionally, indeed it could not (and even now cannot) afford the money necessary to maintain an existing web site so the membership was consulted and Richard Mallett, who was already maintaining another business website, offered his services free of charge. Over the succeeding months and as time and especially his health, has permitted and with guidance from an appointed panel of Trustees, Richard has developed the present new website which uses compliant code and which by all measures is extraordinarily successful. By March 2011 the BSS web site was top in the world rankings of all Timekeeping/Sundial sites; above (in decreasing order of rank), Wikipedia, NASS and SOTI. Now that it has been running for some time in its new livery and structure, it is appropriate to review it.

Existing suggestions

Jackie Jones has circulated an extensive list of suggestions for further improvement. All of them are to be recommended for implementation. The Google translate facility is most important but as Jackie points out it doesn't have to be at the top of the page.

Further suggestions

Above all we need to ensure that we do nothing that might cause us to be propelled into using external services without a serious study of the consequences. Using *any* external services for web design or for simple maintenance is hugely expensive and always results in the use of proprietary software which in turn eventually locks us into that supplier. We have been though this once and must not rashly go through it again. We should retain in house control as far as possible for as long as possible.

I believe the following additional ideas should be considered in any review.

1. We should set up a password protected Members area where Society related material like the Miscellany, Constitution, Newsletters, past editions of The Recorder, notifications to Members, society questionnaires and their results, post conference follow up information and maybe even some back issues of older Bulletins can be available to Members without being accessible by the public. This will alert every viewer of the site to the fact that there are 'benefits' to membership and properly set up, this will also permit much improved communication within the Society.
2. The part of the website that is open to public view should be recast with the main purpose of attracting new members. This especially applies to that part of the home (or index) page that, in the parlance of these things, is "above the fold". We need to make the layout attractive and not as a tabular listing as now. We need to devise a whole new way of encouraging people to join and this means that we need to review how much information we give away freely and how much we give away only to Members. This will need careful balancing since our need to meet the CC's Public Benefit requirement must not be forgotten.
3. I personally would prefer to see the page template changed so that colour was maintained toward the edges with the main page background set to white. I think that looks 'cleaner' and the eye is drawn into such an area. However this may not be how others see it.
4. I think there might be a case for a few (but only a few) videos on the site. These can easily be implemented via YouTube links or they can be embodied within the site.
5. We should add a site map and a search facility to make it easier for those visiting the site to locate areas that they may know are (or might be) there.
6. A mechanism needs to be found whereby those Trustees responsible for areas of the site where information changes on a regular basis can, after instruction and within certain limitations of

layout, maintain their own pages. This is often called a *Content Management System* and there are many such available. Joomla is an open source version that might suffice. It is used by nearly 3% of the Internet and is compatible with the cPanel and Apache software used by our web site hosting company.

7. All Trustees with responsibility for page content must be encouraged to keep their pages up to date. Richard cannot be expected to do that.
8. A special facility will be needed if the Conference Organiser wants to be able to operate his own web page such as that which we have used for Exeter, Wyboston and Cheltenham. These pages need daily update on occasion and special access is needed. For these I have used a page on my own website linked from the Conference page of the BSS site but, as from 2012 a different way will be needed. I suggest an orphaned page in one of our other domains or perhaps a sub-domain might be used along with a Content Management System or separate upload facilities.
9. Now that the system of '*Generic Addressing*' (that is the use of email addresses of the form conferences@sundialsoc.org.uk or secretary@sundialsoc.org.uk etc) has been in safe use for three years for conference communication, we should re-implement it society wide. These addresses allow a permanent email address even as Trustees change and they hide personal addresses from spammers. An earlier perceived problem with it was not a consequence of the system per-se and is now no longer a problem.
10. We should implement a '*Contact Us*' web mail facility that goes to the Secretary's email. However we should do it using code that sends a copy of the message back to the sender. The Secretary's address on our contacts page should be that of the RAS and not the Editor. The current system is unprofessional and conveys the impression that the Editor takes all queries.
11. We need to add reciprocal links to our newly created Facebook page since this will aid publicity. We might also consider Twitter and Google+ too. Twitter may however require rather too much management. If we do permit any of these to solicit comments then those comments should not be reflected in the publicly visible area since it will be almost impossible to monitor misuse.
12. As Jackie has already suggested, we should group the page links into a deeper menu system so that visitors are encouraged to explore the site.
13. We should reconsider the use of a floating menu on the left hand side. This is a menu which always stays visible as a visitor peruses a long page so making it unnecessary to go back up to see something else. Some people don't like this or have reservations. I was to be so classed at one time. However after seeing some imaginative recent uses I think it is worth reconsidering.
14. We should implement PayPal purchasing (which also permits the use of all major credit cards) for membership fees, books, conference bookings and any other web selling we may use.
15. As all will know, BSS Member Peter Ransom has almost single-handedly brought sundials into the Mathematics National Curriculum. It is surprising and disappointing that on the BSS site there is no mention of this or even a link to his facilities etc. I think we should make the most of any initiative that brings dialling to youngsters. Peter is very busy and almost certainly will not want to sit on the Council again but I am sure that he would welcome a dialogue on how both of us might benefit from some collaborative work. This would be especially valuable if what we upload could be interactive. If anything can bring in more members in the future it has to be this. Perhaps we could have a young members programme? Maybe we should upload Peter's origami sundial?
16. Now that deposits are being made we should shortly be alerting the public, as well as our Members, to the use of the Borthwick Archive in York. There should be one or two pages of our website devoted to the importance of this, to how the material is archived and how it can be accessed by the public. Publicity of this important agreement (and the more so if the FDR also comes to be accepted by them) will much enhance our status as an academic society and might even attract membership as a consequence.

I am sure that there are very many other aspects that might be considered but the above must serve for now.