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About FreePint

FreePint is an online network of information searchers. Members receive this free newsletter twice a month: it is packed with tips on finding quality and reliable business information on the Internet.

Joining is free at <<http://www.freepint.com/>> and provides access to a substantial archive of articles, reviews, jobs & events, with answers to research questions and networking at the FreePint Bar.

Please circulate this newsletter which is best read when printed out. To receive this fully formatted version as an attachment or a brief notification when it's online, visit <<http://web.freepint.com/>>.

Editorial

By William Hann

As FreePint passes its seventh birthday this month, it's also the seventh time we'll be exhibiting at the Online Information conference and exhibition. The event kicks off here in London next Tuesday, and it's a busy and exciting time for us exhibitors.



Not only does FreePint have all the preparations for the exhibition stand and talks to do, but working near the airport means we'll spend the next few days ferrying around our friends and colleagues from overseas. It's a pleasure, of course, and a great annual opportunity to catch up.

Thank you to Katherine Allen, from the event organising team, for last issue's Guest Editorial. We'll be with Katherine at the Information Industry Awards gala dinner next Wednesday to announce the winner of this year's 'Online Information / FreePint Award for Best Customer Service'. The winner has been chosen from a raft of nominations, but unfortunately the announcement is embargoed until the night of the awards ceremony. Consequently, you'll have to wait until next time to find out who's won.

If you have yet to register for Online Information then visit:

<<http://www.online-information.co.uk/>>

It's incredible to think that FreePint is now seven years old, with its sister publication 'VIP' only just reaching its first birthday. This month's edition of VIP reviews Corpin's CompanyQuery and BvD's Mint <<http://www.vivavip.com/>>. VIP now has a section in the just-published FreePint Author Update, with suggestions of ways to contribute to our publications <<http://www.freepint.com/author.htm>>.

Getting involved by contributing to FreePint and the wider information industry is a great way to promote yourself and your organisation -- something espoused by Sue Hill in last week's FreePint Jobs Update <<http://www.freepint.com/go/b30614>>. To receive the twice-monthly Jobs Update by email, visit <<http://web.freepint.com/jobs/>>.

Sue Hill will be joining us and over 200 other exhibitors next week in London. We do hope you'll consider visiting if you're in the vicinity. If not, then visit the online event at <<http://digbig.com/4cct>>.

William Hann

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The FreePint Jobs Update is being circulated widely every two weeks. This free newsletter now has 2,000 direct subscribers and is posted at the Bar and in the Bar Digest (circulation 12,000).

To see the Jobs Update No.85 and read the new 'Jobs Advice' section, visit <http://www.freepint.com/go/b30614>. To subscribe, modify your account at <http://web.freepint.com>.

Fully-formatted PDF version available at: <http://web.freepint.com/jobs/FreePint-Jobs-Update-85.pdf>

Here are some of the latest featured jobs:

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<http://www.freepint.com/go/j3574>
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Recruiter: Sue Hill Recruitment

Researcher / Information Analyst

<http://www.freepint.com/go/j3671>
Researcher/Analyst who is highly inquisitive and investigative with 1-2 years' industry or business research experience.
Recruiter: Glen Recruitment

Customer Relationship Manager

<http://www.freepint.com/go/j3672>
Co-ordinating product training, seeking out sales opportunities and prospecting, whilst maintaining current vendor relationships.
Recruiter: The IEE

Corporate Finance Researcher

<http://www.freepint.com/go/j3673>
Join one of the happiest information centres in the City and a company which really values its staff and promotes their development.
Recruiter: City Professionals

[The above jobs are paid listings]

NB: There are 39 other jobs in the current edition of the Jobs Update
<http://www.freepint.com/go/30502>.

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VIP reviews Corpfin's CompanyQuery and BvD's Mint

As well as two product reviews, VIP No.12 also has guest comment from anacubis:

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NEW: "Information Auditing: A guide for information managers" ISBN: 1-904769-08-X

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Carey McIlvenny undertakes marketing, writing and website evaluation for various companies. She has 10 years' creative industry experience and an MA in Journalism Studies. Please contact <careymcilverny@yahoo.co.uk>.

Submit your top five favourite Web sites. See the guidelines at <<http://www.freepint.com/author.htm>>.

My Favourite Tipples by Carey McIlvenny

- <<http://www.theanswerbank.co.uk>> - Got a burning question? Find the answer here.
- <<http://www.vam.ac.uk>> - Information about the vast collections at London's amazing Victoria and Albert museum.
- <<http://www.bbc.co.uk>> - Long-established and still excellent. Great for a short, sharp burst of news - their news archive is also a good research resource.
- <<http://www.cntraveller.com>> - Daydream about all those glamorous destinations.
- <<http://www.vogue.com>> - I can't resist the shoes, bags and daily fashion gossip. It's also very good for planning shopping trips.

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FreePint Author Update

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FREEPINT BAR In Association with Factiva a Dow Jones & Reuters Company

With only 26% of FreePinters being in the UK, and therefore able to visit the Online Information show next week, it's the FreePint Bar which enables all members of our community to get together -- if only virtually.

The Bar is currently helping people get up-to-speed quickly on the content and purpose of intranets <<http://www.freepint.com/go/b30650>> and on how to run public-facing corporate discussion forums <<http://www.freepint.com/go/b30658>>.

The new 'Google Scholar' <<http://scholar.google.com/>> has immediately been investigated (of course) by ResourceShelf, Search Engine Watch and others <<http://www.freepint.com/go/b30646>>. The topic of classification systems for small collections has made its almost weekly appearance <<http://www.freepint.com/go/b30678>> along with a request for current information on book censorship in the UK <<http://www.freepint.com/go/b30626>>. Very specifically, do you know of a supplier of book rests to support delicate books whilst in use? <<http://www.freepint.com/go/b30704>>.

If you are in the UK and able to visit Online Information next week, then you might consider joining the European Chapter of the SLA for breakfast on Wednesday. They're especially keen to welcome European colleagues <<http://www.freepint.com/go/b30636>>.

There are a number of current company- and market-related queries at the Bar. Are there other services like CompanyWatch for identifying companies who risk financial failure? <<http://www.freepint.com/go/b30705>>. What about UK court information for SMEs? <<http://www.freepint.com/go/b30624>>. Any idea where to find statistics on UK corporate spend on customer service? <<http://www.freepint.com/go/b30709>>. Or data on the new US trend for 'Superfoods'? <<http://www.freepint.com/go/b30684>>. Is there a UK-based equivalent to PR Newswire with a searchable archive greater than 30 days? <<http://www.freepint.com/go/b30683>>. Or a site with the digital equivalent of adbrands.net? <<http://www.freepint.com/go/b30632>>.

Can you help with grant information for a cattle business <<http://www.freepint.com/go/b30671>> or a way to contact academics in the LBS (Location Based Services) field? <<http://www.freepint.com/go/b30673>>. What about information for a student at the Student Bar writing about disposable mobile phones <<http://www.freepint.com/go/s4291>> which hit the headlines a couple of years back.

On the software front, ingenious advice for an Excel user wanting to extract only the decimal part of a number <<http://www.freepint.com/go/b30657>> -- you learn something new every day! Do you remember software which collated a number of Web pages for viewing as one page? <<http://www.freepint.com/go/b30642>>. Are you a webmaster with experience of payment gateway providers who use credit scoring (rather than credit checking)? <<http://www.freepint.com/go/b30615>>.

Don't forget to sign up for the twice-weekly Bar Digest to keep abreast of the latest postings <<http://www.freepint.com/subs/>> or the VIP Wire Digest with the latest information industry press releases <<http://www.vivavip.com/order/digest/>>.

William Hann <william.hann@freepint.com>
Managing Editor, FreePint

Twice-weekly email digests of the latest postings can be requested at <<http://web.freepint.com/>>.

Tips Article

"Advanced Search Techniques using Natural Language Processing" By Tony Rose



Tony Rose is an independent consultant specialising in the management of unstructured data and content, with particular interests in search engine design & deployment.

In his previous position at Reuters he was responsible for leading innovation in the area of information search and navigation, and prior to this led a team at Canon's R&D labs in the development of advanced information management solutions and technologies. He has published over 30 scientific papers and holds 3 patents in the area of information management and retrieval. He is also Vice Chair of the BCS Information Retrieval Specialist Group, and can be contacted via <tgr@nxfrontier.com>.

Most readers will, no doubt, be familiar with Google and other Internet search engines: type in a few key words to describe your information need, hit return and within a second or two you are presented with a list of links to documents that you hope will be relevant to your query. Evidently, a proportion of them will indeed be relevant (we refer to this measure as the 'precision' of the search engine) and, if you are lucky, you may also find that all the known relevant documents will be in the list somewhere (we call this measure 'recall'). Of course, on the web we can never really calculate a true recall figure, as there is simply no way of ever knowing just how many relevant documents there are out there. But for a fixed collection such as a library or corporate database, the recall figure can be a very important measure of a retrieval system's effectiveness.

So how do search engines actually work?

Well, if we ignore the part that is concerned with actually creating the index in the first place (i.e. gathering up all the content, cataloguing it, etc.) and just focus on what happens when you type in a query, it is actually quite simple. The objective of most commercial search engines is to measure the 'conceptual distance' between your query and each document in the database, and then return those documents that provide the best match. To do this, it must employ some kind of model or representation for the documents and queries. However, most current text retrieval technology is built around relatively primitive models that represent documents simply as unordered sets of terms (i.e. character strings) with numeric weights that determine their relative importance. Moreover, the matching process is often equally simple, being based around a few basic statistical formulae that return a measure of how well one set of terms matches another.

Incidentally, one reason why Google has been so successful compared to other search engines (apart from its adherence to a minimalist approach, concentrating on effective search when many other players were trying to become universal 'portals') is that they make very effective use of what little structure there is within web pages: the hyperlinks. By processing the link structure of documents, and identifying which documents are linked to which other documents, they can develop a notion of the 'value' of each document, independently of its relevance to any particular query. Therefore, by combining this information with the traditional term-based relevance, they can maximise the probability that only the best, most relevant documents will be returned to the user. Not surprisingly, Google and other web search engine companies keep the precise details of their ranking algorithms confidential, as part of a continual 'arms race' with the search engine optimisation companies (i.e. companies who try to get their clients listed high up in the search rankings for particular key words).

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<<http://www.freepint.com/reco.htm>>

Enter NLP

However, despite the innovations of Google and others, it is clear that a document is much more than simply a collection of terms: words can be combined into phrases with specific meanings dependent on their order (e.g. a "blind venetian" is not the same as a "venetian blind"); and phrases may then combine to form structural or discourse dependencies, or make co-references to each other, and so on. But as long as the fundamental unit of representation remains the "bag of words", then much of this conceptual content will be lost. Inevitably, the experience for the search engine user is that they are often presented with a list of irrelevant documents, and they must then endure the chore of inspecting each one until they find the one that addresses their information need. Whilst this may be (just) tolerable for the casual web user, it can often prove unacceptable for corporate clients or professional information researchers, particularly those in the legal or financial sectors, where the cost of erroneous or out-of-date information is especially high.

Consequently, much information retrieval (IR) research effort in recent years has been directed toward developing more sophisticated representation models and matching algorithms, often based around natural language processing (NLP) techniques. NLP technology can provide many of the basic building blocks for advanced search, such as:

- Summarisation: the ability to produce a coherent summary or abstract of a document (you can obtain an open source summariser from CPAN <<http://search.cpan.org/~tgrose/HTML-Summary-0.017/>>)
- Named entity recognition: the ability to identify key conceptual units within a document, such as the names of people, places, companies, etc. (you can obtain a royalty-free recogniser from LingPipe <<http://www.alias-i.com/lingpipe/index.html>>)
- Topic detection and tracking: the ability to follow different themes in a changing news feed (e.g. see the NIST TDT Project <<http://www.nist.gov/speech/tests/tdt/>> for further detail)

Related FreePint links:

- 'Internet Searching' articles in the FreePint Portal <<http://www.freepint.com/go/p185>>
- Post a message to the author, Tony Rose, or suggest further resources at the FreePint Bar <<http://www.freepint.com/bar>>
- Read this article online, with activated hyperlinks <<http://www.freepint.com/issues/251104.htm#tips>>
- Access the entire archive of FreePint content <http://www.freepint.com/portal/content/>

- Word sense disambiguation: the ability to differentiate the particular senses <<http://digbig.com/4cedn>> a word may have, e.g. "bank" as in "the edge of a river" and "bank" as in "financial institution"
- Information extraction (also known as text mining): a combination of the above and other techniques to enable specific patterns or facts to be extracted from text or other unstructured data (you can obtain an open source information extraction system from Sheffield University <<http://www.aktors.org/technologies/annie/>>)
- Machine translation: the ability to translate one natural language to another, e.g. English to Japanese (AltaVista provides a convenient service for this <<http://world.altavista.com/>>)

Yet despite many recent successes in NLP research (and the subsequent over-inflated claims of many search technology providers), we are still a long way from the Holy Grail of "understanding" the conceptual content of a document. Consequently, the many information professionals who rely on such tools will have to wait a little longer for an answer to their prayers, and the numerous artificial intelligence (AI) researchers around the world need not fear for their jobs just yet.

Future directions

Despite all the efforts and investment put into search technology, there is one aspect of the IR paradigm that still remains largely unchallenged: the notion that the objective of most commercial search engines is to return documents that provide the best match for a keyword query. But why should this be so? After all, a great many information needs would be better expressed in the form of a specific question rather than a general statement of intent expressed as a set of key words. For example, if my information need is to answer the question "Who are the major search technology providers in the UK today?" I would rather ask precisely this and be given a concise list of company names in return, than issue a keyword query and receive a set of documents through which I must wade to find the specific pieces of information I need.

But to support this functionality, the search engine must employ much more sophisticated content models and matching algorithms from the most advanced NLP research in 'question answering'. Indeed, some search engine companies have already established a brand identity or value proposition in precisely this area: AskJeeves <<http://www.ask.com/>> being the most well-known example (although their service relies on the work of significant numbers of human editors rather than through the exclusive use of technological solutions). Perhaps a more modest intermediate goal would be to focus on passage retrieval, i.e. the ability to return specific sections or paragraphs, rather than whole documents, so that the user can focus more immediately on the key sentences.

Another potential challenge for search engine providers is 'multi-linguality'. English may currently be the most popular language on the Internet, but its dominance is becoming less pronounced, and other languages (particularly

Chinese) are growing rapidly. Information searchers from these communities will inevitably want to be able to access English content using queries expressed in their own native languages, and to accommodate this a search engine needs to support 'cross-language retrieval'.

And of course, there is the problem of how to access data that isn't visible to web search engines at all, i.e. the content of numerous product catalogues, library catalogues, patent filings, flight schedules, biomedical data, etc. that reside in corporate databases around the world. For example, Salon.com <http://www.salon.com/tech/feature/2004/03/09/deep_web/index_np.html> has estimated that the major search engines index as little as 1% of the known web, and the remaining content, with all its rich structure, remains inaccessible behind a wall of registration gateways and dynamically generated links. Evidently the challenge for the next generation of web search engines is to find ways to mine this 'deep web' and take advantage of its vast quantities of structured data to provide meaningful, interactive views onto the search results.

Visualisation tools make sense of information mountain

November's issue of VIP features an item by Greg Coyle from anacubis on transforming information into actionable business intelligence, via the use of visualisation tools. The issue also contains in-depth reviews of two new UK company data products - Corpin's CompanyQuery and Bureau van Dijk's Mint.

<<http://www.vivaVIP.com/>>

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Veronica Bezeal works for Surrey County Council's Adults & Community Care Service as an Information Officer.

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"Buying Information Systems"

By David James

Reviewed by Veronica Bezeal

"80-90% of IT investments fail to meet their performance objectives"

This book covers all stages of buying and implementing off-the-shelf software systems, but particularly majors on the earlier part of the procurement process, where problems are most likely to have their root. The author states his intent as helping readers to "reduce the risks associated with information system procurement".

Types of systems covered are configurable packages which would support business processes, e.g. enterprise resource planning (ERP) systems. The author spends time ensuring we understand the distinction between the different tasks involved in buying systems such as these and buying PC packages such as word processors. He states "A configurable package is really just a toolset that we need to apply to our own problem and which will involve a number of people and many hours of work to realise our stakeholders' expectations", and, bearing in mind the complexity of the task, advises us not to believe anyone who says they can guarantee success.

Chapters cover an analysis of the problems involved, where to find advice, who should be involved, how to manage the purchase, how to decide what you need, which package/supplier to choose, how to manage the implementation, how to know if the system is successful and a final overview chapter at the end "putting it all together".

Proformas for key documents such as 'Invitations to Tender' and 'User Requirements Specifications' are included throughout, as well as checklists for key parts of the process such as vendor

selection, and managing the implementation. Pointers are also given out to sources of further information on more specialist aspects of the process.

The examples used are from the manufacturing industry but the book is clearly intended for a much wider audience - a comprehensive glossary is included in the back of the book to explain any specialist terms. This book is fairly obviously aimed at managers involved in some way in the introduction of new information systems, and associated process changes for their organisation. They will find much to assist them in here, but they would be most well advised, first of all, to heed the authors most important piece of advice to those considering embarking on such a project: "If you haven't bought an information system before, hire someone who has".

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FreePint

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Feature Article

"Ephemera: the stuff of history" By Sue Broughton



Sue Broughton started her career within public libraries, working with ephemera in local studies collections as part of her general professional public library work. In 1995 she went to work as Information Manager at the Library Association, where she was administrator for four years to the Preservation, Conservation, Security and Heritage subcommittee. During this period she also set up the Library Association Information Centre, which now forms a major research and reference resource for members. She is currently the Information Officer dealing with Freedom of Information for West Berkshire Council.

During 2001 the Preservation, Conservation, Security and Heritage subcommittee of the Library Association (now the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals - CILIP), raised concerns about the preservation of -- and access to -- ephemera collections within archives, libraries and museums, as well as collections which are privately owned.

Ephemera are in many cases essentially mundane everyday items (bus tickets, theatre posters, advertising flyers) which many people would dismiss as valueless. Their intrinsic value tends to lie within the information they provide about social life, the development of a variety of industries (for example, printing or paper making), the provision of services, or aspects of cultural change, and other historical, demographic or sociographic subjects. Those born in the 1950's and 1960's may remember the use of 'Jackdaw' folders which were essentially collections of copies of relevant ephemera supporting particular historical subjects. Educational use or research are often the major reasons for the collection of ephemera, although some collections are created by chance (comics from the 1950's or 60s for example, which have simply not been thrown away), or may be relevant to a specialist interest of the collector.

However, the subcommittee recognised that there were some important aspects of collecting ephemera which would cause long-term problems, particularly to the use of the collections, and it put together an initial discussion paper which looked in more depth at problems of collection, preservation and access to ephemeral material. From this paper it was agreed that the best way forward was to organise a colloquium to bring together representatives from organisations with an interest in promoting the cause of ephemera within the cultural community and amongst private collectors.

The Colloquium, held on 18 March 2002 and reported in the Library Association Record, invited a range of speakers to address the wide variety of ephemera types and problems. Ephemera turned out to range from a steam engine (one of the larger items) to bus and train tickets, via a quite incredible variety of material. However, common problems became clear: cataloguing and classifying items as well as labelling them; preserving, conserving and displaying ephemera; and keeping track of collections where quite varied types of items related to each other (imagine a dress Jane Austen wore, together with letters she wrote, and jewellery she owned). There were also problems associated with the private collector field -- for example, collections might be broken up when a collector died even if the items all related to each other and their intrinsic research or cultural value was greater if the collection was kept together.

Amongst other conclusions, the Colloquium decided to ask the subcommittee to form a small working party to carry forward the issues which had been raised and produce a final report suggesting some recommendations which the

archive, museum and library world would then be able to take forward. Michael Twyman, Director of the Centre for Ephemera Studies agreed to chair the group, and various attendees from the Colloquium, members of the subcommittee (now a Panel of CILIP), and others with a relevant expertise were asked to join. In some cases the communication and provision of information was entirely by email or in written format but the group did have a core of members who met regularly to discuss the information already received, and to take this forward to the creation of a report and recommendations. In doing so, the group was aware that they were attempting to represent a very diverse community of specialists. It is to be hoped that the final report has done justice to the expertise it summoned.

Some areas were difficult to deal with in any detail - particularly the subject of electronic ephemera in digital format, existing as emails or on the internet where the question of content and access is constantly changing - and where the group felt they could not offer much expertise the

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subject was touched on somewhat lightly. However, on what could be defined as hard copy ephemera - objects existing within the material world - the problems were much easier to address, even though solutions might not be easy to find. It was recognised that many problems stemmed from a lack of funding, since in most cases ephemera are not seen as 'sexy' items for a budget - although digitisation and extended use of promotion on websites is helping here. Or problems came from a lack of knowledge in cases where staff took over ephemera collections by default, and had no in-depth knowledge of how to deal with them.

The final report: 'Ephemera: the stuff of history' was approved by CILIP in May 2003 and published in the September of the same year. It was made available on the CILIP website and sent in hard copy format (with an offer of a PDF for websites) to over 70 professional and specialist organisations around the world. The report is available on the CILIP website at:

<http://www.cilip.org.uk/professionalguidance/preservation/ephemera.htm>

Much work still has to be done, although this needs to be taken forward as much by the archive, library and museum community as by the members of the working group and the CILIP Panel. The recommendations contain a number of actionable points which are 'best practice' rather than budgetary, and which culture change and better awareness would promote within organisations. Some, too, are suggestions for the wider community of private collectors, which would enable them to work more closely with professional organisations in helping to preserve the myriad transient materials which document our everyday life. However, some will require better funding for long-term projects to use, promote and preserve valuable or overlooked collections. This article is intended to promote a better awareness of this publication, and its implications in a throwaway culture where much of our minutiae will not exist in a month, a year, five years or more. If you work within an archive, library or museum, then you undoubtedly have some contact with collections which may be valuable and greatly used, but which are ephemeral in their nature. This report seeks to provide guidance for those working on defining future policies and plans for their collections - and ammunition to promote the use and funding of such collections in the future.

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