

Web Taxonomy & Directory – Sustainable Living

My taxonomy and “directory” are designed to organize web resources on the topic of sustainable living. Sustainable living is growing increasingly popular as a term which brings together topics like conservation, environmentalism, “green” shopping, and the back-to-basics movement and views them through the lens of personal lifestyle choices. The intended audiences are individuals or families looking for actionable information they can apply to their daily lives. The nature of the resources include how-to guides, quick tips lists, general informative articles, and personal stories. Realms outside the scope of this directory are public policy, education & advocacy, and business & commerce. The schema consists of a taxonomy organizing topics into three layers, with three additional facets to accommodate the various ways users think about or wish to retrieve the content.

User Base & Accommodations

I assume an adult user base accustomed to the conventions and advances of the contemporary web. These users encompass a wide variety of motivations and levels of experience and commitment. People are interested in sustainable living for widely different reasons. For example, some care intensely for the welfare of the planet, while others are more interested in saving money and becoming more self-reliant. For this reason, I identified a facet called “motives.” These labels can be applied on top of the taxonomy to filter or prioritize the resources. The motives facet is additive in nature; for example, an article on organic farming may be tagged with the motives “respect plants and animals,” “be healthy,” “reduce pollution,” and “be self-sufficient.”

A highly relevant consideration to this user group is level of commitment and/or experience. Some people simply want a few quick tips to reduce their environmental impact, while others radically reshape their lives to live in closer harmony with the earth. Still others are looking for a starting point, with a clear direction for further action once they master the information they've found. This is best

conceptualized as a spectrum, with ease/simplicity/inexperience on one hand and commitment/complexity/advanced knowledge on the other. Defining terms and usage for this facet proved a major challenge. One reason is that the concept can be emotionally charged – those who are willing to make small changes do not wish to feel belittled for not committing more, while those who take radical action want to emphasize the seriousness of the issues. This need to account for all levels of experience and commitment affected naming choices for the topical taxonomy as well.

This spectrum also affects information seeking behavior. Those on the committed end of the spectrum are more likely to engage in known-item searching, whereas those toward the introductory end may be either in a convenience-retrieval mode or an exploratory mode. It also may affect the nature of resources desired – brief tips lists, detailed how-to guides, and general informative articles may have more appeal at different points in the spectrum. The “types” facet addresses this need.

In considering the challenges and needs this spectrum presents, I concluded that the “levels” facet should not be presented as an explicit choice to the users, as in a prompt asking users to rank themselves “beginner, intermediate, or advanced” but rather, it should implicitly inform design and presentation choices. For example, items tagged with the label “quick & easy” would be presented in teaser form at the top of each subcategory page, where casual browsers will find them. A search box and A-Z category list will serve the needs of experienced users best. Exploratory users will benefit from browsing the topical “navigation” and finding term-rich content as well as a third, more specific, level of categories on the subcategory pages.

Design Process & Challenges

In designing my taxonomy, I consulted a number of websites on my topic to get a sense of the content domain, terminology, and groupings. These included the [Green Wiki](#), [Eartheasy](#), the [Mother Nature Network](#), and the [Important Media blog network](#). After a cursory “card sort” with a

representative sample of content, I loosely based my top-level categories on the top-level navigation of Eartheasy and Mother Nature Network. These two provided clear, easy-to-understand terms in well-organized groupings so I copied quite a bit. For example, from my cursory card sort I had “Style & Beauty” and “Travel & Recreation” as separate top-level categories. However, Mother Nature News groups them under “Lifestyle” alongside “Recycling” and “Responsible Living,” important concepts which I had previously been unable to place. Eartheasy is in part an online store and Mother Nature Network contains news, so some of their label language reflects content of a type not included in my domain. Where terms were not appropriate I took from other sites or crafted my own. For example, I omitted the news-related category “Arts & Culture,” and renamed “Non-Toxic Pest Control” to “Natural Pest Control.” This wording encompasses techniques in addition to products.

The second-level categories are exposed from every page within the directory in the form of dropdown navigation. The third level of categories appear as a list on each subcategory page next to a “feed” of content pulled from the various resources. This prevents “information overload” and facilitates exploratory browsing and query refinement. This division point strongly affected the design of the taxonomy. Crucial to the placement of terms are the concepts of “bounded horizons” and “information scent.” A site needs to imply the total breadth of content, and users need to reasonably know where to expect to find the topics of interest to them (Leise, 2007).

Applying these concepts in the decision to bring “Travel & Recreation” and “Style & Beauty” under “Lifestyle” meant that the subcategories were affected differently in each case. The subtopics “Natural Beauty” and “Sustainable Fashion” follow easily from the category “Style & Beauty.” Thus, the “information scent” to find these subjects is strong when those labels are hidden. However, the subtopic “Hobbies & Crafts” was not so clearly implied within the term “Travel & Recreation.” While this term was top-level, the subtopics were exposed, but once when it moved to the second level with the subcategories hidden on a separate page, it would be easy to assume there was no content related to

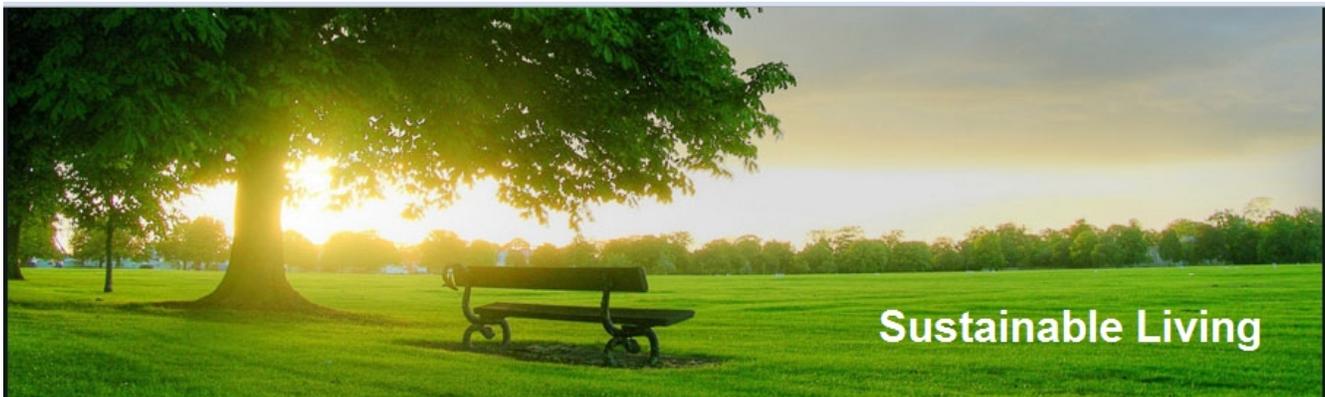
crafts. To solve this, I brought “Hobbies & Crafts” to the same level as its former super-category.

In other instances, terms are so well-known they could be hidden in the third level without implying they were not there. For example, vegetarianism is a popular enough concept that even if it did not appear in the 2nd-level categories, I was confident it would be found. As one of many concepts which span different subtopics in different ways, it may appear in the context of vegetarian recipes in the cooking section, vegetarian-friendly restaurants in the dining out section, or general info about vegetarianism in the Foods & Diets section. This points to one more distinction between the second and third levels. Topics such as fair trade, organic, and vegetarian do not belong exclusively “within” any particular domain such as fashion or food. These “third level” terms may appear on multiple subcategory pages, inheriting the context of the “parent” category (Denton, 2009).

Reflections

As I worked on this assignment I saw that many of the governing ideas in library science, such as hierarchical classification, bring the constraints of the physical into the digital and thus fail to meet the challenges or rise to the opportunities of the web. It confirmed the importance of Ranganathan's principles, RDA, and the entity-relationship model. Since the invention of the hyperlink, and increasingly as web content grows more adaptive through API and Semantic Web concepts, the lines between finding, selecting, and accessing resources blur. Users expect to see and even interact with resources as part of their selection and discovery process. As I imagined a contemporary finding aid, it became an aggregator as well as an index. Assuming a domain of well-described and well-structured content items, my taxonomy is designed to facilitate an interactive web browsing experience which emphasizes content and user need over authorship, format, or organizational affiliation.

To make this taxonomy and directory truly usable, I should incorporate user testing into term selection and the design of the browsing experience. Lack of user research is this project's major flaw.



Sustainable Living

Lifestyle Health Food & Cuisine Home Yard & Garden Energy Green Tech

Topical Taxonomy (Dropdown menu keeps top 2 levels accessible at all times.)

Browse Sustainable Living Topics

This directory collects resources from all over the web to help you live a more sustainable lifestyle.

Lifestyle

- Recycling
- Responsible Living
- Beauty & Fashion
- Recreation & Travel
- Hobbies & Crafts

Health

- Natural Remedies
- Fitness & Well-Being
- Family Health

Food & Cuisine

- Recipes & Cooking
- Dining Out
- Greener Groceries
- Foods & Diets
- Hobbies & Crafts

Home

- Housekeeping & Maintenance
- Home Improvement
- Home Decor
- Home Buying
- Alternative Construction

Yard & Garden

- Organic Farming & Gardening
- Small-scale Livestock
- Greener Landscaping
- Natural Pest Control

Energy

- Clean Energy
- Energy Efficiency
- Home Energy Production

Green Tech

- Green Driving
- Car-Free Transit
- Research & Innovation
- Computers & Gadgets

Find Ideas

I want to...

- Conserve Energy
- Reduce Waste
- Conserve Water
- Reduce Pollution
- Respect Plants & Animals
- Shop Wisely
- Be Self-Sufficient
- Save Money
- Be Healthy

"Motives" Facet

Show me...

- Quick Tips
- How-To Guides
- Articles
- Personal Stories

"Types" Facet

Search

Categories A-Z

[see more...](#)

"Categories" listing combines all three levels of topical taxonomy.

Resources

Denton, W. (2009, March 28). How to Make a Faceted Classification and Put It On the Web.

Miskatonic University Press. Retrieved April 6, 2012, from

<http://www.miskatonic.org/library/facet-web-howto.html>

Leise, F. (2007, March 12). Content Analysis Heuristics. *Boxes and Arrows*. Retrieved April 6, 2012,

from <http://www.boxesandarrows.com/view/content-analysis>

Steckel, M. (2002, October 7). Ranganathan for IAs. *Boxes and Arrows*. 2002/10/07. Retrieved April 9,

2012, from http://www.boxesandarrows.com/view/ranganathan_for_ias