World's publishers face off against Google

By Matthew Buckland
17 Mar 2008

Online publishers and newspapers appear to be heading for a face-off with search engine behemoth. Last week, the powerful World Association of Newspapers (WAN) issued a rather terse statement, calling on Google "to respect the rights of content creators" and embrace a new access protocol for search engines visiting websites, known as ACAP.

ACAP (Automated Content Access Protocol) is a proposed search engine protocol for accessing publisher websites, created by the publishing industry under WAN's leadership.

Publishers world-wide have started implementing ACAP on their websites; WAN claims that publishers in 16 countries are known to have already implemented it. The consortium includes news agencies, book and magazine publishers, libraries and search engines, as well as newspaper publishers.

First salvo

In the statement, WAN president Gavin O'Reilly has implied that Google's reluctance to accept ACAP is as a result of "its own commercial self-interest", adding that the search engine behemoth should "not glibly throw mistruths about". This is the first salvo in what will probably become a key battle between Google and media players in the next few years.

According to the WAN statement, Google European executive Rob Jonas (who was referred to as "Ron" instead of "Rob" in WAN's official PR) implied that Google would not embrace ACAP. He was quoted as saying at a conference last year that the current robots.txt protocol "provides everything most publishers need", implying that the search engine was happy with the status quo.

The very same Jonas was invited to WAN's big, annual conference in Cape Town last year. At the conference, Google was

[both slammed and praised](#) by many publishers.

It's interesting that WAN are firing off at Jonas over his recent comments. It was probably just some off-the-cuff comment he made sometime, somewhere, presumably at some conference. So it might appear at first glance to be an overreaction from WAN, but more likely this is symptomatic of a gradual cooling in relations between the two parties that has reached this point.

The idea behind ACAP is that publishers would place code on their servers that would control search engine access. Currently the [robots.txt](#) method does this, but WAN is saying that it is too simplistic and does not give publishers enough options. Furthermore, it's not a gatekeeping mechanism that online publishers have a stake in - the current access protocol was something imposed on them by search engines years ago.

Stormy relationship

So now it appears that relations, which started off rather cordially, have broken down. Either the parties will enter into some serious arbitration or it's going to go legal.

Fundamentally, I think this is all about money (what else would it be about?). WAN will tell us now that it is about controlling access and respecting their rights. But essentially controlling access will mean that publishers will eventually be in a position to charge Google to crawl or list their content, even in aggregated form.

The relationship between WAN and Google has always been stormy. O'Reilly a few years back slammed what he called the "Napsterisation" of content - pointing to the fight between the music download service and the record industry. O'Reilly went on an all-out offensive, saying [in interviews](#) that we're dealing with "basic theft" and "kleptomania" here. Rather strong stuff.

Since these fighting words and the arrival of ACAP, relations with Google appeared to become cordial again. The adults decided to sit around a table and there were sweet words of co-operation for a while.

Now that ACAP is becoming a reality, it now it looks like the temperature has risen again.

In many respects, Google has become a victim of its own success, and now the rest of the Internet wants an even bigger piece of the pie. The search engine giant is getting bigger and scarier every day, or as *Wired* magazine puts it, going from "guerrilla startup to 800-pound gorilla".

The argument for and against Google

You can see both sides of the story here:

The argument against Google: Why should Google aggregate and list content it does not pay for? This is content that publishers originate and there is a cost associated with it.

The argument for Google: How else is Google supposed to behave if it is to be a search engine? It has to aggregate headlines and blurbs, in order to send traffic through to websites. Arguably [Google News](#) is a competing news brand, using content that belongs to other news sites. But the search engine has also been very careful NOT to monetise Google News by listing Adsense on it -a move which would infuriate publishers who would then claim that Google is directly profiting off content that is not theirs.

WAN also needs to be careful here. Although it represents a powerful publishing lobby of newspapers and online publishers, the publishing community is anything but united on this issue. Google may aggregate publisher content, but it is also a huge source of traffic and in some cases, revenue, for many publishers. Many online publishers would be reluctant to give that up, especially smaller and mid-size publishers that rely on Google heavily.

• *Adapted from [original blog post](#) published 13 March 2008.*

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