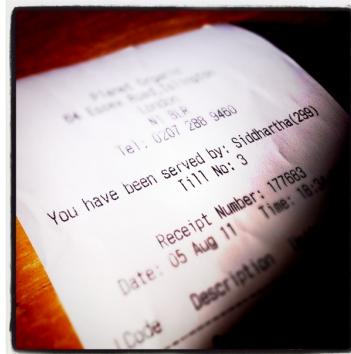


Web, Rust and Patina

A (hopefully) short rant on Information, Time and the Web
Translated and abridged from a presentation at Paris Web 2013

@OlivierThereaux - #rustyweb - 31 October 2013

BBC R&D



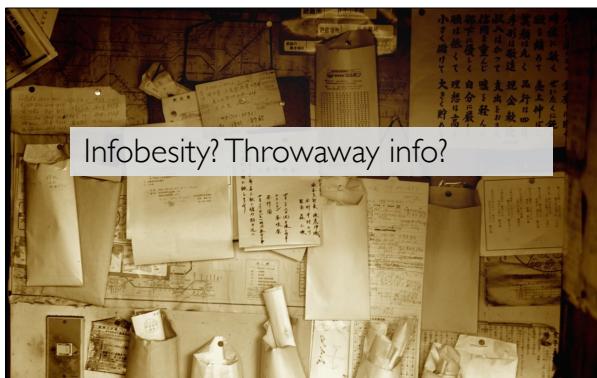
@OlivierThereaux - #rustyweb - 31 October 2013

BBC R&D

Shopping receipt. Its usage and usefulness changes over time.

Minutes, days, months... centuries? Except: Ink and paper are unlikely to last.

This is a technology choice on behalf of provider and (identified and potential) users of the information. Compare to rosetta stone.



@OlivierThereaux - #rustyweb - 31 October 2013

BBC R&D

So this is about information and time.

The cliché is: we are in an era of Infobesity / Throwaway Information cliché. But not really: through history there always has been someone complaining about too much info, can't cope, etc. Nothing new.

Beyond the cliché however, there's our relatively new ability to:

- * record everything,
- * archive all the records
- * and access all the archives.

@OlivierThereaux - #rustyweb - 31 October 2013

BBC R&D

The really hard question is whether we want to keep everything or would rather not. Some online services keep everything indefinitely and make it hard to erase history, when some of us “generating” content there would like to treat is as transient.

See also: the new bill in California forcing online services to offer an “erase digital past” option for youth turning 18.

@OlivierThereaux - #rustyweb - 31 October 2013

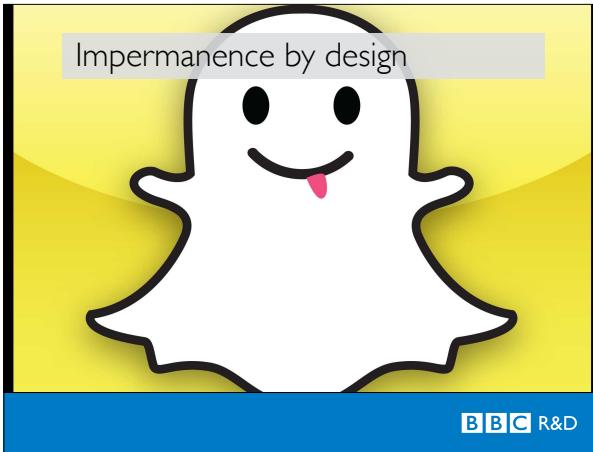
BBC R&D

Conversely: whether the fact that you have been hosting content gives you the right to decide to wipe content off the web. See geocities. Yahoo decided it was crap and had no value and deleted everything after a warning to site owners. But the community decided otherwise.



The point is: we rarely know whether information will be useful in the future, and to whom.

So really, the question is less “what to keep / discard” but “who decides”?



And now it's interesting to see a new crop of services where a commitment on the shelf life of information is the central value proposition. Snapchat is an example of a service where the information is very temporary by design. Other services (?) may have the reverse commitment, of a quasi-permanent record of everything contributed.



For the rest of us who don't design services to autodestruct content after a few seconds, there's the question of how you manage the information over time.

Redesigns, change of platforms and evolution of tech are typically big headache.

We do have a set of good practices for that, e.g.:

- * tech-independent URIs
- * separation of style and content
- * interoperable export/import formats



But beyond the technology, there's a lot of issues with how we manage the ageing of content.

So many web pages have information written in the present tense, but no longer true. Especially bad when not dated. It becomes "lying in the present tense".

Is our information design taking time into account? Making sure we date it whenever possible, or even give a way to surface the versioning/evolution of the content. e.g: wikis, or the recent trend to host websites (along with versioning and collaboration) on github.



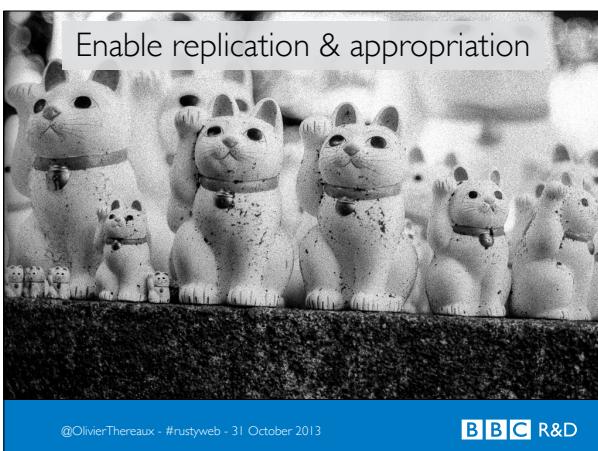
Beyond the “expected lifetime” of a website, and as a recognition of the importance of the web on our culture, there’s the question of preservation of the web.

This is really complicated by the layering of technology. When we talk of preserving the web, are we preserving “content”, “pages”, system, knowledge of how to re-build the whole thing?



The archivist's model (put something in a box, protect from air and light) is (useful but) limited and not adapted to digital nature of web, where information can be copied for free, replicated without error.

That's why a number of us have started thinking about a different model of preservation.



This new model is nothing new: duplication, evolution of information as means of preservation is exactly what life / DNA is about.

Applied to the preservation of digital artefacts, it becomes a “digital Panda breeding program” – cooper hewitt museum (Planetary app)
<https://www.cooperhewitt.org/object-of-the-day/2013/08/26/planetary-collecting-and-preserving-code-living-object>

Enabling replication and appropriation is just as important as preserving “as is”.



In order to allow such preservation through duplication and adaptation, we need to have the right legal framework. If our content is (c) all rights reserved forever (except for countries with copyright expiration and public domain) we are limiting the possibility of this evolution.

Licenses, and their changes through time, should be part of our design of information. What is the right license to allow others to "help preserve" content? At what point do we want to change licenses to allow remix/reuse/evolution.



If we don't, then we get a web that rusts, that just sits there, unused, unlinked and unliked.

The flip side of that "rusting web" is the concept of patina of the web. The concepts of patina and ageing for the web are now explored but often mistaken.



Recent studies show user reject prototypes with artificial ageing/patina of the web. It is a mistake to try and apply physical processes to digital. We must get away from "yellowing paper" and "vintage filters", and need to define a digital "native" notion of web patina.

What is that? Get back to the basic definition: patina is the memory of use.

For the web, that means: layers of interaction, information accumulating over time.

Think of the slow polish of wikipedia articles.



@OlivierThereaux - #rustyweb - 31 October 2013

BBC R&D

Let us strive to not only embrace impermanence of the medium, but also know how it works and know when to work with or around that impermanence.

Thank you.

Questions?

<http://github.com/olivierthereaux/rustyweb>

with thanks to Karl Dubost, co-presenter @ ParisWeb2013

BBC R&D

Read more – collaborate:

<http://github.com/olivierthereaux/rustyweb>

Currently mostly in french, because the material was originally in preparation for Paris Web Conference.

Credits for a lot of the ideas (and half the photos) go to ParisWeb co-presenter Karl Dubost.