

On the Utility of Academic Websites

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Introductory Remarks

When attending the 2001 annual assembly of the IIPF in Linz, Austria, I was asked to make some suggestions for the improvement of the Institute's homepage. Herewith, I briefly summarize some ideas which might be useful. First of all, let me assure you that I am no web designer and have no designing skills (so please don't look at my web page as an example for a good page, I just don't have the time to make it work the way I would like other pages to be like). I am just a sophisticated and demanding internet user (because a lot of information concerning my research topic of "tax culture" is exclusively available on the internet). The lack of my designer skills doesn't seem to be a problem, though, because Birgit Schneider told me that she had a web designer at her disposal. What you will find below are some personal recommendations, i.e. what I think an academic web page ought to be like from a user's perspective. I gratefully acknowledge valuable comments by Julian Alworth.

General Technical Considerations

For academic purposes, a web page does not need to have fancy gimmicks, like e.g. Shockwave intros or MP3-Sound intros. The main goal should be that the page can be accessed even with antiquated computer equipment to ensure a broad coverage. In that sense, it should be viewable by both, Netscape and MIE, in both at minimum with versions 3.0 or newer. Furthermore, no unusual fonts should be used to assure printer compatibility to old needle printers (in fact, where money is scarce, even some academic institutions in Germany still run that prehistoric equipment). Finally, the pages colors should be easily printable. Thus, all letters (except those in the border frames) have to be black or darkest blue or green. Otherwise printing (parts of) the page are a real nuisance.

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The Contents in General

What an academic web page should provide is *information*. This information must be focused depending on the pages purpose and/or owner(s). E.g. I would not assume to find tomorrow's weather forecast on an academic page (except on that of the national association of meteorology or something like that!). On the other hand I would expect to find *all relevant* information concerning the web page's purpose. This relevant information should be easily accessible and due to a *logic structure* of the sub pages/sub domains. Finally, the information provided should be kept *up to date*, outdated information should be moved to special section of the page ("History-Section").

Possible Contents to add to the IIPF-page

There are some possible features to add to the page. One could think of a directory of members, conference and job announcements, information on *International Tax and Public Finance*, working papers etc.

- **directory of members :**

This is a "must" for any academic society. If some members are worried about personal information being accessible through the net one could think of only providing that information in the directory, that is already publicly available, e.g. via the member's employing institution's homepage. If you can find information there, it would be a shame if you cannot find it on the IIPF page. I would provide members names, affiliation, email and research interests (JEL classifications).

- **conference announcements :**

In Linz, with the conference folder every participant received some calls for papers for other conferences organized by members of the IIPF. A section of the IIPF page should contain any calls for papers of conferences where a member of IIPF is involved in the organization. You could do the same by a frequent email newsletter, but still, the information should be provided on the website, as well. By that means, smaller conferences and workshops get better publicity and IIPF members get the possibility to participate.

Concerning the IIPF annual meetings I would suggest to publish at least the abstracts of all papers to be presented – even better the papers themselves! – on the (conference) IIPF

page.¹ As the program is always very tough, one hasn't got the time to scan all abstract during the conference. It would be very nice to have them in advance to develop a "session attendance strategy" or even read interesting papers to be able to give more sophisticated comments in the discussion.

- **job announcements:**

If the occasion occurs that there is a vacancy at a member's institution or chair it should be made public on the IIPF page as well. Thus, IIPF members would get the chance to send an application and the employing institution might attract more applicants, some of them even personally known from former IIPF annual meetings.

- ***International Tax and Public Finance [ITPF]:***

As far as I see it, ITPF is the journal of the IIPF. Therefore, one should find some information about it on the IIPF page. This might be a simple link to Kluwer Online, or even better contain the contents of all previous issues (including abstracts of the articles) and a search routine (by author's name, by title, and by topic).

- **working papers/publications :**

It would be nice if members could submit recent working papers (or just the information – i.e. the hyperlink – where to get access to the papers) to the IIPF page. Thus, the website would become some sort of marketplace and information would spread more rapidly. This section could also include information of publication in journals and in/of books by IIPF members.

The Utility of Academic Websites: Concluding Remarks

As economists one always seems to be to maximize utility subject to certain constraints. So where do we go from here? What are the constraints? One might definitely be money, of course. The IIPF secretary Birgit Schneider just told me that there is an annual budget for the internet presence of less than five hundred euros. This would not be sufficient to keep the website up to date as demanded above. One possibility would be to hire a student instead of a

¹ Some very good examples include the 2001 annual conference of the German association "Verein fuer Socialpolitik" <http://www.uni-magdeburg.de/vfs2001/> and the 28th annual meeting of the European Finance Association <http://goedel.upf.es/EFA/> (the latter proposed by Julian Alworth).

professional (as is the case now) who could work from his home computer (or at university) on an hourly basis, because once the general framework is established the updates don't take too much time. Still, 500 euros per annum would not be sufficient. I would propose to the Board that it at least triples the amount for the internet page, because the website is a kind of business card of the IIPF. Maybe one could even find a sponsor...

Despite the money constraint one could summarize my proposals as follows:

- Keep the page simple in terms of web technology to assure a broad accessibility and compatibility to realize positive economic network externalities!
- Set up a logic structure for the page!
- Provide all relevant information concerning IIPF and its members!
- Make it a marketplace to spread information more rapidly!

Let me conclude with the remark that of course all proposals are highly subjective. But most of them are shared by other IIPF members who make extensive use of the information rich medium "internet". Pages which create value or utility to the user are those which pool all information that might be of interest in one place (or better: domain) in a timely manner, such that the user can capture the time economies of the internet. It would be a pity if the IIPF would continue to be an "information poor" element of the information rich academic cyberspace.

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