Stanford CIS Phase 0 Stakeholder Interview Summary

Prepared For:

Stanford CIS
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Overview

This document summarizes findings from interviews conducted with CIS stakeholders from May 24 to June 8, 2011. These interviews delved into questions of audience, site purpose, strengths and weaknesses of the current CIS site, and needs and goals for the new site.

Respondents were generally in agreement regarding the site’s audiences, though emphases on relative audience segments’ importance varied somewhat. There was also general agreement regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the current site, and all those interviewed described a vision for the new site that largely fits within the plan outlined in the RFP.

People Interviewed

• Barbara van Schewick (CIS Director)
• Elaine Adolpho (Project Leader)
• Ryan Calo (CIS Fellow)
• Alex Moss (CIS Student)

Purpose and Audience(s) of Site

All respondents felt that the central purpose of the site is to “inform people about who we are and what we do.” Though this was stated in several ways, both the “who” (that is, the faculty and fellows of CIS) and the “what” (events, research, and so on) were emphasized by all.

Audiences mentioned by respondents included: students (both prospective and current), press/journalists, interested academics, lawyers, and regulators/policymakers. These different segments, however, fall under a general umbrella of “Cyberlaw geeks,” and while there may be some differences in their priorities or objectives when visiting the site, generally everyone in this group is at least somewhat familiar with the issues CIS deals with, and is looking to learn more about their given topic of interest. This combination of different audiences with similar information needs suggests that the site doesn’t need to siphon audience groups into separate sections. However, the information needs of this heterogeneous audience are still complex, as visitors may be interested in many different kinds of information on a variety of topics.
Weaknesses and Pain Points

Stakeholders identified a number of problems with the current CIS website. These include:

- Site is dated visually
- Content on homepage is not curated to highlight important content but is strictly chronological
- Blog lumps content together without differentiating kinds of content well
- Hard to identify staff expertise and cross-reference people with their activity
- Drupal backend is confusing and non-intuitive
- Tag cloud is ugly and of limited use.
- Events calendar doesn’t provide information on upcoming events well
- Hard to find things (this was an oft-heard refrain)

Strengths and Items to Retain

Praise for the CIS website was in short supply. The only truly positive thing about the site stakeholders identified was the depth and richness of the content on the site: respondents felt the site contained a wealth of high-quality, unique and valuable information — information that needs to be retained on the new site. However, respondents generally emphasized that the value this content brings to CIS’ web presence is diminished by the difficulty in navigating the site to find particular content.

Homepage & Navigation

Respondents generally felt that the homepage needs to continue to emphasize currency — that is, that new & recent content should take primacy over stable content (such as a description of CIS) so that “there’s always something new to read.” That said, while the “latest” content is important, a need to curate the homepage so that important content — even if not necessarily the most recent — can be featured and is easily accessible. Shortening the homepage so it doesn’t present a “wall of text” was also identified as important, as was having a clear section for upcoming events. Offering search and quick access to “experts” were also seen as important to include.

All respondents emphasized that the site architecture needs to make it easier for users to find sought-after information, and cross-referencing related content will be an important positive step toward this. However, the actual site information architecture — the organization of the navigation — remains somewhat in doubt, as the many different types of content and the crisscrossing of issues, topics, programs and projects presents some challenges. The new site needs to take a thoughtful approach to simplifying and clarifying navigation to facilitate information finding.
Look & Feel

The current site’s visual presentation was characterized as “uninteresting” and “outdated” by stakeholders. Stakeholders agreed the new site needs to look more current and professional, without abandoning the existing CIS “brand” or wandering too far from established standards for Stanford-affiliated groups.

Competitors and Model Sites

When asked about organizations that the CIS needs to differentiate itself from, nearly all respondents cited: The Berkman Center at Harvard; Yale Information Society; and the Berkeley Center for Law & Technology. It’s clear the new site must be crafted to be clearly distinct from these entities’ sites. Fordham and CU-Boulder also have programs that were mentioned.

Model websites with useful lessons on organization and information presentation for the new site mentioned were:

- EFF.org
- Mozilla.org
- Center for a New American Security (CNAS.org)
- AmericanProgress.org
- Freepress.net

Measuring Success

When asked what would constitute a successful redesign project, responses varied, with some offering quantitative goals and others cited more qualitative measures. Among the measures of success mentioned were: driving more traffic to the blog; getting cited more often by media outlets and online content aggregators (e.g. Digg); receiving fewer complaints and requests for assistance sent to the wrong (or non-optimal) recipient; increased mailing list size; more Twitter followers; and fewer resources dedicated to maintenance and upkeep of the site internally. Respondents also alluded to the fact that just having a new site that looks different would be a success, even if the results of the new site were hard to measure quantitatively.
Recommendations

Based on these stakeholder interviews, we recommend moving forward with the site plan as sketched out in the RFP, with a few modifications and areas of focus as work moves into information architecture and wire framing. Particularly, careful attention will be made in spelling out how the sitemap will organize and group content, so that different kinds of content will be separated out (rather than employing the current catch-all blog). Special attention also needs to be paid to upgrading the site’s visual presentation, which will be spelled out by both the wireframe and design processes.