

Open Directory Project Website Broken for over 7 weeks

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The Open Directory Project (ODP), which is the 'largest, most comprehensive human-edited directory of the Web' is broken and has been for the past 7 weeks. Apparently they experienced a 'technical problem' around 20 October 2006 and have not been able to recover fully from it yet (9 December 2006).

The ODP (also known as dmoz.org) is a human-edited directory of websites with over 4 million sites listed in over 590,000 categories. Because each submission to the directory is checked by a human editor, it has a good reputation for being low on SPAM and high on relevant listings.

As a result, it is apparently well respected by the major search engines as well. The logic is that if a human has checked out your site and deemed it to be worthy of inclusion in the directory (and not just SPAM), then that counts in your websites favour. As a result, many Search Engine Optimisation consultants strongly recommend adding your website to the directory.

However, it appears that they had some serious technical problem around 20 October. They managed to get the site back on-line, but it seems that even the backup they used to get the site on-line again itself was slightly out of date (the DmozGrunt blog indicates it was at least 1 - 2 weeks old).

What I find most surprising is that the ODP is effectively owned by AOL (through it's purchase of Netscape - see Wikipedia for more information on the history of the ODP) and as a result, I would have thought that the data centre hosting this project would have been managed professionally by AOL, including decent backups and a tested disaster recovery plan.

It appears that after the failure they managed to restore a slightly out-of-date version, but they have not been able to restore the real functionality behind the site (programming - scripts, etc). Therefore the directory can still be viewed, but submitting of new URL's, login for editors, etc does not work.

From a disaster recovery / business continuity perspective, another major failing is how ODP/AOL appear to have handled the communication of the issue. There has been very little information made available on the site. When trying to submit a new URL for example, the message displayed indicated the service was temporarily unavailable and suggested checking back in a day or two.

In the ODP user forums, there is a message from 25 October that simply states there is a technical problem, that the static pages have been restored from a backup, that scripted pages are not functioning and saying that they have no estimated time for when the problem will be resolved and asking people not to create threads in the forum asking about the problems. What a complete lack of decent communication!

Due to their lack of communication, most of the discussion is taking place on blogs and other outside forums and as a result, rumours are spreading. For example, on the DigitalPoint forum one poster indicates that they would not be surprised if the directory never comes back. Another blog post and comment on the Acclivity Blog indicates that the reputation of the directory is at stake and the GoodROI blog has a theory on what caused the failure.

Once again, this outage reinforces the importance of a Disaster Recovery / Business Continuity strategy that includes good backup, regular testing and a good crisis communication strategy.

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