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## Notes

1. We feel confident that readers will recognise the initials of the US space agency; ESA, on the other hand, is almost unrecognised by the majority of Europeans, let alone the citizens of other countries, and we felt obliged to spell it out.
2. The bookmakers will have done well out of those willing to take either set of odds.
3. The top UK football division.

## Biographies

**Blanka Jergovic** lectures in journalism at the Universities of Zagreb and Dubrovnik in Croatia. She also works for Croatian Radio as a science journalist and programme editor. Her research interests are in science communication and media studies. She is a council member of the European Union of Science Journalist Associations.

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Both authors are members of the European Commission Framework 6-funded *European Science Communication Workshops* network (ESConet), which Professor Miller directs.

# Building a Wall-Free Digital Tomorrow

Opinion

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## Key Words

Collaboration  
Web 2.0  
New Technologies

I live a strange life. There is no way around it. I have contracts to work with universities and programmes in Sonoma (California), Swinburne (Australia), Washington DC and Edwardsville (Illinois) where I live.

This spread of employer locations wouldn't be possible if it weren't for this fabulous thing called the Internet. Across its high-wires and by-wires we shoot our lives across the world,

meeting for lunch across the desk from one another, with a video camera bringing our collaborators' multi-continental faces to us.

This is an alternate reality that doesn't belong to all of us. As I find myself symbiotically connected to the Matrix, doing Education and Public Outreach (EPO) via a cellular broadband card from random corners of

this country, I know there are others who still linger in the land of landlines and dialup.

And there are those without computers.

The computer literacy of my collaborators and myself opens up a world that will make us EPO providers to a separate society. We will be part of a New Media tomorrow, where our video content goes up on YouTube, Google Video and other streaming content providers. We will brainstorm via Skype, and forego the telephone as a thing only called by telemarketers. We will set up iGoogle pages, write blogs, share our drives across the continents, and answer every "I wonder... who/where/how/when" with an instantaneous IMDB / Wikipedia / Google search. Our news will come from Fark and SlashDot as we read Digg and our collected RSS feeds more than we read the *Times* or the *Post*.

We will? No, actually, we have. We live in that tomorrow.

These amazing resources allow me to walk into work and talk to my colleagues about the latest outrage in funding allocations with world-weary knowledge gleaned from too much outraged Googling. These amazing resources allow me to learn at home every day, constantly experiencing life-long learning as I freely explore tutorials, learning videos, and even online classrooms in Second Life as I work to understand things beyond my astronomy degree (video editing anyone? No, how about German?).

But I am a freak of a high-speed, 10 Mbit/sec down and 1 Mbit/sec up, world.

"Did you see on Stumble Upon...?" I asked a colleague of a different generation. Blank stare.

"Did you see on Google Sky...?" I asked a student. Blank stare.

"I'll show you how to use that software later. Let's screen-share in BRIO", I said to a real-world associate. Blank Stare.

Just as there is a small segment of society that falls into the "richer than God category", there is a small segment of society that falls into the "more wired than Bill Gates" category. (I don't think anyone is more wired than Steve Jobs ;-).) I'm not in either of these categories, but my household is definitely closing in on one of these boundaries faster than we're closing in on the other.

There is irony embedded in the markup language of the digital divide. Online content is largely free and ranges across almost all topics. Because I can access broadband, I

can access the world's libraries, avoid international telephone charges, pay bills without buying stamps, and generally self-select to be a shut-in if I decide the real world is just way too scary. I can even order groceries, pizza, a freshwater fish freighted to my front step thanks to the likes of Amazon, Pizza Hut and Live Aquaria.

I suspect I save more money using the Internet than I spend on our broadband bill.

Let me say this again more clearly: Because I can afford the upfront expenditure — installation, hook-up, routers, computers — I can save money on life, learn effectively, live virtually and collaborate LAN-to-LAN as all boundaries are erased between my computer and yours.

As a Web 2.0 content provider, I have to wonder if podcasting is polo for the digital generation. We often gather around and root for our favourite ~~player~~ blogger, and occasionally try riding the ~~ponies~~ RSS. When we talk about our popularity (hey, *Spitzer's Hidden Universe* was a Best of 2007 podcast!), do the mainstream masses know what this means? Are we leading a tsunami of content over the LAN, or are we just a small crest created by a 2 ~~horsepower-engine~~ MHz processor on a really small pond.

I understand why people still create television shows. Do you know anyone who wants a television and doesn't have one?

I understand why people still create radio shows. Do you know anyone without a radio?

Just as there are gestures designed to redistribute wealth in the US, there are also gestures designed to redistribute the Internet. Libraries give free access. Schools give free access. There are free hotspots for the laptop-lugging among us. Even McDonald's is in on the digital distribution of content with its free Internet.

But are there similar gestures in other countries? Can a kid in Kathmandu kill time in an internet café for free, for fun, for more than a few minutes at a time?

One of the Cornerstone projects of the International Year of Astronomy 2009 is the creation of a New Media Portal, The Portal to the Universe, that will allow the astronomy aficionados of the world to log in and lounge around in the stars. There will be links to live satellite feeds, twitter feeds, press feeds, pictures aplenty and widgets with which to wend your way around the sky. I am part of the Task Group that will be creating this portal, and as I sit here, working to learn how to program widgets, I wonder what segment of the world our worldwide portal will reach? Do

I need to have different interfaces for high and low speed surfers? Is Flash fair on an international playing field?

Are there things I haven't anticipated — invisible digital walls that keep the surfers from breaching the content castle?

Yes. Yes there are.

I know there are many of you out there reading this online who are in other nations. Where are you reading? Can you reach all online content? What are your limitations? What do we, the content providers need to provide you with to make our world part of your world.

I want to know. Which digital walls need to be shattered?

## Biography

**Pamela L. Gay** is an assistant research professor at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. Her research interests include variable stars and assessing the impact of new media astronomy content on informal audiences. When not in the classroom or doing research, she co-hosts Astronomy Cast and writes the blog StarStryder.com.