



## **The internet at 40**

*Pioneers: David Filo and Jerry Yang*

**In 1994, David Filo and Jerry Yang were graduate students at Stanford University. Two years later, they were running a multi-million pound internet corporation. In the late 1990's the Open University interviewed them for a series called TheWebStory.com. Their pioneering tale started in a small trailer on the Stanford campus, where they spent more and more of their time putting together what became known as David and Jerry's Guide to the Worldwide Web.**

It was I guess something that was interesting to the both of us. We were certainly interested in the web and so as we were spending time on the web and finding it harder and harder to find things that was kind of useful for ourselves and it was fun and it gave us some more excuse to spend more time on the web so - we certainly didn't start out thinking we would make this a business some day. It was really just as a convenience for ourselves and then – suddenly these other people started using it and that kind of motivated us to continue working on it to add more and more stuff.

It's an index. It's a catalogue about web pages. So you don't want the catalogue to be somewhere else and to go the web. You want it to be to the web and be able to click on something and to go to other parts of the web. So you know put it out there so that other people who are looking for the web can use it.

I think one night we decided to change our name from 'David and Jerry's Guide to the World Wide Web' to something shorter. And we came up with Yahoo primarily because we wanted to come up with an acronym and that acronym for Yahoo stands for Yet Another Hierarchical Officious Oracle. But obviously the meaning if you looked it up in the dictionary means a bunch of very rude, uncivilised people. and we thought that characterised us pretty well. It was for fun, it was zany and we figured people would remember it.

### **Soon Yahoo became much more than a searchable list of categories.**

Well we certainly started out as solely a directory ... not really even a search engine but we had a search capability of the directory. Since then we've continued to add more and more services. And today the kind of navigation directory piece of it is becoming a smaller and smaller piece of what people use Yahoo for. Look at what people get on line for and it's typically email and it's to get your news and it's to get stock quotes and things like that.

I think it all blurs into a kind of navigational guide of helping people find what they're interested in and that could be people type in the search word if they're interested in cars or they could be browsing through a hierarchy to get to the same information. But there's different ways to get to it, different search words where you can get to the same information, different paths you can kind of go through browsing but it's all about how people find what they're looking for. And because the web has so much information it covers everything in one's life and every one else's life out there. It covers pretty much every topic you could ever imagine and then some. It's a very difficult problem of trying to figure out how you get people connected to what they're looking for because you type in one word and I type in the same word and may mean two different things. And so search engine directory it's all about I guess helping people find what they're looking for and they're different ways to do that but it's the same problem and I think no ones really solved the problem. The problem never will be solved to the point where anyone can just come up to the computer and immediately find what you're looking for. I mean it's got to be somewhat of a process to figure out what users are actually looking for and so all these things are just different ways to try to help that process along.

I think what we try to do is be a little different in terms of how we collect our data. We've obviously taken an approach where everything that we collect in terms of web sites and descriptions has been done by humans. There are a lot of other ways in which companies have created big index of web sites or contents of web sites through crawling in automated means. And we've used automation to the extent it helps humans to finally put together a product. And so there are subtle differences but in general I think we are all trying to solve the same problem which is to help the user who may have some preconceived notion of what they're looking for either by browsing or by searching to find what they want and that's – that's the function but you know over time that function itself has evolved to so many other different things where personalisation now is becoming key. How do you personalise somebody's experience on the web because of interactivity and how do you build into not only searching for information but also have information that you want to communicate with other people like email and paging and chatting. How do you involve that around a person? So it really becomes you know less of a search engine and directory game and more of how do you provide a full suite of services that satisfy the user.

**One of the issues they had to address was which sites to include and which to keep off their lists.**

We try to be as inclusive as possible. And when we don't include a site it's usually because they don't meet certain editorial criteria. For example it really doesn't have very much content on it or it really doesn't do much for the category vis a vis the other sites that are already on there. There are certain things that we don't list. For example how to blow up a building or how do you build a bomb or some child pornography stuff. So there is some things that we draw the line for and depending on which country we're in sometimes we face different sets of criteria so perhaps in the UK or in Germany and France because there are certain things that are allowed or looked upon even more negatively we don't do for certain countries. But in general what we try to push it for is being inclusive rather than exclusive. We try to push for finding the middle ground between two different opinions rather than sort of saying one opinion is right and one opinion is wrong. And really highlight that through the Internet because I think the Internet is a great place where people can express different points of views, even though they're not the popular ones. But you know when it gets to the point of hurting somebody or damaging somebody either physically or mentally I think that's when we start looking at it very carefully. We don't want us becoming a medium of hatred and sort of abuse. We want to become a medium of discussion and understanding each other. And so that's where we draw the line.

**A key part of David and Jerry's business philosophy was to give users the service for free.**

This is something fairly fundamental. I think that what we believe is that getting as many people to use the Internet in as many different ways as possible is a good thing and to the extent that we can offer it for free and still have a business around it that's the best way to get people to use it. So you know we don't sit around and say hey which service shall we offer for free and which service we shouldn't. We really sit around and say what can we afford to do for free? And as long as we continue to do that we will keep pushing our new services. Now probably not everything we ever offer we'll be able to do for free but certainly going to try. And I think it's something that pushes the level of what people can do on the Internet faster because it's free because you know having a free product out there versus having to pay, the ability for us to learn from our audience and the people adopting it and for us to scale it's almost the purest form of the fastest way we can evolve as an industry. And I think if the industry as a whole was a paid industry, if subscribers had to pay for us certainly you would not have seen so many features evolve. You probably would not have seen as many people use it. And those are all things that I think has hastened if anything else the growth of the Internet.

We are a media company on the web and in many respects we need to stay ahead of our users but not too far ahead them. I think there are some trends that are very clear. People are not only using this media as a purely information media, they're becoming users as a

transaction, shopping business medium. We need to be positioned there. People are beginning to use us as a communications medium. We need to be positioned there. And it's a truly international global medium and we are starting to be in thirteen different countries in thirteen different languages but when you have so much more to do to make sure that on a world wide basis what we're offering is competitive and value added to the consumer, a web user in that country. And all these things are just very difficult to do. We have a lot of competitors and the technology changes every day you know, so clearly just guiding this ship and making sure we're going in the right direction is very difficult but at the same time it's the kind of challenge that you maybe once in a lifetime and you know people like us love to do.

You know we follow a fairly simple algorithm which is to keep figuring out what users are likely to use next. And that's you know that's the magic. If we can do it right we will be able to stay ahead. And if we don't do it right we fail.