Introduction:

Craigslist began as a "local community classifieds and forums" that began in the San Francisco area (Craigslist.org). The original site has grown in the range and amount of local content, and other Craigslist sites have developed for major cities and countries around the globe which has increased the scope of the Craigslist site community. The site(s) have grown to a traffic level of "more than 4 billion page views per month" and are ranked seven out of all English-language sites for page views. The goal of the site is to provide users with a "useful, down-to-earth, common-sense" functionality for finding local information in a "trustworthy, efficient, relatively non-commercial place."

Context, content, users:

The Craigslist site is widely and highly utilized. It is the amount of local users contributing to and using the sites content that make it such a useful space. The users of the Craigslist site can include users of all ages and backgrounds, in various communities, cities and countries around the world at any time and place. Craigslist estimates that more than 10 million people use the site per month (Craigslist.org). The key pieces of information they access are the "local community classifieds and forums." Information is being continuously contributed and viewed on the site to both the classifieds sections and forum sections. The information on the site is used 24/7 but the information becomes less likely to be viewed and used as it ages since information is presented in a reverse chronological format. Because the content is so dynamic and the users are so varied, both browsing and searching functionality are important to the organization and the
navigation of the homepage’s information.

Figure 1. Screen-capture of Craigslist site

**Organization of content:**

The content of the homepage is organized similarly to a sitemap with a few other features. Every major category of the site’s content is presented hierarchically as a table, with links to sub-categories or sub-region contained beneath (see Figure 1 above). The categories within the subject hierarchy are not organized alphabetically or chronologically. It is possible that they are presented according to traffic and usage--that the areas of the site receiving the most traffic are placed at the top of the page--but this is
not stated explicitly by the site. If it this is not the case, it would certainly seem advisable to present the most useful information in the most visible area of the homepage.

There is also a side bar of information organized, separate from the subject hierarchies, containing a search field, a calendar and a list of relevant links. Aside from the “Craigslist” heading at the top-right of the home-page, there are no logos or visual identifiers for the organization of the content. The result is an extremely text-heavy and visually overwhelming homepage with a lot of information for the user to process.

**Labeling and Controlled Vocabularies:**

The labeled information on the homepage includes headings, links and navigation-menu options. There is no use of formal controlled vocabularies for the content on the homepage. Rather, all of the information, from links to category headings, are presented in logical chunks that are mostly internally consistent, but do not always match their neighbor links and headings well. Further, the labels for links and category headings are not sufficiently differentiated by size or color: the headings are bolded and surrounded by gray cells, but this is not a very powerful means of visually distinguishing content.

The labeling for the Craigslist site follows the hierarchical category and sub-category link structure, but that is where the labeling logic ends. The wide scope of the content presented creates a problem in labeling the information consistently. The site’s subject headings include geographical titles, activity categories and item categories. Though the classified headings are labeled similarly to typical classified sections, they are combined with categories of links leading to community discussion forums and Craigslist sites for other cities/countries.
Further, links within the subject categories are sometimes listed alphabetically and sometimes appear to be arranged as they were created. This ad-hoc labeling is not a problem for some of the smaller categories, but larger categories suffer from the lack of alphabetical labeling consistency and cause the user to scan the entire category for the required link.

Finally, the language of the labeling is informal English, which is sometimes shortened or in the form of slang (ex. "sm biz ads"), which is potentially less friendly to any non-native English speakers, international users, or children who are unfamiliar with informal slang. There is also no capitalization of terms throughout the site, which can be visually confusing at first for those who are not used to reading entirely in lower case letters, and fails to distinguish labels effectively from each other. The abbreviations and informal language are most likely utilized to preserve space (since there is such a huge quantity of content competing for space on this page), but it is potentially at the expense of younger or low-level English speakers.

Figure 2. Navigation of site through Browse and Search
Navigation of website:

Both the browsing and the searching functionality on the homepage are highly developed, almost at the expense of the overall navigation (see Figure 2 above). The majority of navigational information on the homepage is devoted to browsing functionality. The search bar is highly functional, providing the ability to search the entire site or to limit a search by content categories, but it is limited to the sidebar and gets very little space on the homepage. The site creators seem to operating under the assumption that users would rather scan through the abundance of links on the homepage than have to navigate to deeper page for the information options they want. All of the major content areas are accessible at the heading level or through sub-links that limit the scope of the content to be presented.

As mentioned previously, the arrangement and navigation of the browsing categories strongly resembles a sitemap—however, sitemaps are usually included deeper in the site as a supplement to primary navigation systems, not as the contextual navigation system for the homepage (Rosenfeld & Morville, p. 107). The likelihood of a user getting lost deeper in the website, after they have drilled down through the category hierarchies to select a content area, is unlikely, but the likelihood of a user being overwhelmed by the navigational information on the homepage is very high. A simplified homepage might include less sub-category links and require navigation to separate pages to reach deeper information, in order to reduce the amount of content vying for attention on the main page.

Accessibility:
The bare-bones, grayscale visual simplicity of the site’s presentation might make it more dial-up friendly, but it doesn’t necessarily make it more accessible to users who are visually interpreting the site’s information. Similarly, the organization of content in subject hierarchies of links is hard enough for a user to navigate visually, but it is a complete nightmare for a visually impaired user listening to the site through a text-reader. The lack of alt-tags contributes further to the lack of accessibility this site presents to users.

**My recommendations for improving the site:**

Operating under the assumption that the site creators have chosen the one-page-fits-all model with good reason, the most straightforward way to re-design this site would be add color and size to heading labels to help differentiate them from sub-links, and to add color to category tables to distinguish them from neighboring chunks of content. In my redesign of the site (see Figure 3 below), I have added color and whitespace, increased border pixilation of tables, and changed the size of text where appropriate—all in the hopes of helping users to effectively and efficiently navigate the abundance of information on the homepage.

A more radical future re-design of the homepage, if the site creators were willing to make users navigate to a separate page to see all the sub-links for regions, forums, items and activities, might involve removing all sub-links from the main page in favor of just providing a stripped-down menu of links to the subject-headings, which would lead to sub-links on a separate page.
Figure 3. Screen capture of my changes to Craigslist site

- Increased size of heading text
- Use of color to distinguish content categories
- Whitespace to highlight content separations
Citations:

Craigslist, Inc. “Craigslist Fact Sheet.” Accessed at

http://www.craigslist.org/about/pr/factsheet.html on Sunday, October 8, 2006.

Rosenfeld, L. and Morville, P. Information Architecture: Second Edition. O’Reilly:

California, 2002.