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## Adventures in Librarianship: Crystal Clear

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# Adventures in Librarianship — Crystal Clear

by Ned Kraft <NKRAFT@sil.si.edu>



"Hello. Acquisitions."  
"Hello? Ned? This is Carlos..."  
"Oh, hi Carlos."  
"From the STRI Library, in Panama...Ned?"  
"Yes, this is Ned, Carlos, you can..."  
"May I speak to Ned ... Oh, it is you, I..."  
"Yeah, go ahead."  
"... didn't recognize your voice. I'm calling about..."  
"Well I have a cold and..."  
"... a problem we're having with a very ... Hello?"  
"... sore throat ... You have a problem? A monograph order? Carlos?"  
"Hello?"  
"Go ahead."  
"Is Ned there?"

It was going to be one of those days.

Between my Washington office and Carlos's office at the library of the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute, the phone lines pass through an echo chamber. I imagine it as oil drums lined-up end-to-end with the boys playing telephone, shouting, trying to spy each other through the long tunnel. "Hello. Hello. Hello." "Yoddle-Ay-Hee-Hoo!"

Before Carlos called, I was working on a letter to a rare-book dealer in Luxembourg, drafting a difficult response to an account statement he sent us. "Dear Mr. Antiquariat, Responding to your statement (attached), we are, I'm sorry to say, confused. Your form letter notes no specific order number and the title listed is abbreviated beyond all recognition. Further, although we appear to have ordered from you two books in early 1963 (and paid for those books), we show no subsequent orders placed. In short, we cannot find an order for which you are still owed. Please check your records, identify the order, and let me know if there's been some terrible mistake. Yours Indefinitely..."

But when corresponding with foreign parts you have to choose your words so carefully; you have to imagine that the reader speaks no English, that he may have to translate word-for-word from a dictionary. With zero idiom tolerance "beyond all recognition" might be tricky. And how about that contraction: I'm. Chuck it. Won't work.

"Orders placed?" In the good old U.S. of A. we "place" orders, but in Luxembourg "place" might just mean somewhere to sit. "In short." I imagine Mr. Antiquariat looking up the meaning of "in," then looking up the meaning of "short" and scratching his Luxembourgian head. And "let me know" is an odd concept, when you really sit down and obsess about it. "Let me know." "Allow me knowledge." "Give me wisdom." No. No. No. Won't work. I'll have to start all over again. (Try to picture that: "all" .. "over" ... "again." Isn't that a gymnastics routine?)

"I'm here, Carlos. You've got a monograph problem?"

"Ned, I'm having a problem with a monograph order ... It's order number..."

"What's the order number?"

"It's a monograph order ... I have the num..."

"If you give me the number or the title I'll..."

"That's Z ... A ... two ... four ... nine."

"Is that a Spanish title?"

"No, it's an order number."

**Clarity** — that's the issue. The root of all workday evils, at least for librarians. How do we describe complicated system quirks to new staff? How do we pull from patrons a clear idea of what they need? In a meeting with other departments, how do we explain why a project that sounds so simple will, in our particular office, be a complicated, nearly-impossible nightmare? Which vendors define "standing order" the same way we do, and which think it is something altogether different? If I use the word "serial" with Dr. Doe, will he imagine an ongoing publication, or will he think I'm hungry?

A few years ago, preparing for the opening of fiscal 1997, we nearly broke the bank through the misunderstanding of one word. Our administrative officer speaks the language of our parent institution's accounting system. In the Acquisitions Office, we work with the language of the local, library system. Apparently, the word "commitment" carries a few shades of gray, just enough to ruin somebody's career, if we hadn't caught the mistake.

Every word is a land mine. Commitment? Would you like fiscal, moral, or marital?

"Carlos? That order is still open, reported as out..."

"Z... A... two... four... nine."

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**International Dateline**  
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was that the traditional distribution chain in serials publishing had had the effect of keeping publishers, agents, libraries and readers/authors in isolation from each other. The processes of evaluating and deploying electronic journals requires all parties in the chain to have a much greater understanding of the other environments. To date this has not happened, and it was clear from the meeting that this was to the overall detriment of the level of service being provided to the ultimate user of the information, the reader, who also needed considerable support and training. The way forward in the corporate sector may be for individual industry sectors to start to develop some generic guidelines for licensing agreements, along the lines of the pharmaceutical industry, but there are also issues here of resourcing these initiatives.

If nothing else, publishers left the meeting recognising that there was much still to be done, librarians were recognising that everyone else had the same problems, and subscription agents were working out how to take advantage of the situation. 🐼

**On the Road**  
from page 82

we New Englander's say when we see an alligator on the golf course.) We are used to finding cows, moose, deer, foxes, bears, and squirrels, but I have never run into an alligator!

I probably won't see another alligator this year, especially since we've already seen snow. But, I do look forward to next year's conference and a reunion with the "ATG" Alligator that I met this year on the seventh hole. 🐼

**Adventures in Librarianship**  
from page 83

"Yes I know. It's out of stock with the ven ..."  
"Atlas of the Birds of Peru."  
"Yeah, it's out ..."  
"Not in Spanish, in English."  
"The vendor doesn't have it."  
"Yes. We don't have it either. That's why I ordered it."

Every word a land mine, so as I write this I pray you will understand, that I haven't done anything humiliating with the language, anything that future generations of Krafts will have to carry with them, their heads hung low. You measure your audience. You chose your words. But every act of communication presents a million possibilities, a million opportunities for misstep. If I have tripped, will you forgive me?

"Ned? This is Carlos. Are you still there?" 🐼

**And They Were There**  
from page 62

ing quarters in separate buildings. Among other things, they share staff development activities. With every gain there may be an expense, but for now they are satisfied with the way things are going.

Final panelist was **Ann Palkovich**, Deputy Director, Department of Instructional Improvement and Instructional Technology (also Anthropology Instructor), **George Mason University**. George Mason presents another model. They have created a triumvirate, which includes the computing center, library technology, and instructional technology services. All this is directed by the non-academic campus administrator for information technology. Ann's speech was very positive and energetic. She feels that the merger has eliminated redundant services and brought about better communication. At this time, she also feels that the model is working well and the departments are meeting their goal of providing as much information as possible to as many as possible as quickly as possible. 🐼



**Innovations**  
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nect the screen and hold it in portrait view as a lightweight reader?

Initially the novelty will appeal to those who are gadget oriented. It will take a year or two to amass a sufficiently large number of titles to attract readers. The standards

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issues that will enable any book to be read on any machine once you've bought it also need to be resolved. For the readers to go mainstream, however, they will need to deliver some increased level of functionality that enables us to more easily manage the rapidly growing amounts of information in our lives. 🐼

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