sotto voce-Taking the Step from Speaking Softly to Listiening Loudly

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sotto voce — Taking the Step from Speaking Softly to Listening Loudly

by Bob Schatz (everbob@yahoo.com)

After giving it serious thought, I’ve decided to discontinue my contributions to “sotto voce,” at least as a regular column. As I drive around North America visiting libraries, I’ve become aware of how much less I know for certain than when I was younger. I also find my thoughts turning more often to things of a personal nature than to the vagaries of the world of librarianship, publishing, and vending.

A column written for a professional publication should expand readers’ knowledge, or at least reveal otherwise hidden truths. That is difficult to accomplish when the writer has far more questions about his world than answers. I know that somewhere out there is a person who knows what kind of books will exist in the future, who understands how libraries will serve the very different demands of patrons in the coming years, decades, and centuries. This person will be able to reveal what kinds of publishing will remain in the electronic era of the 2000s, and will be able to answer the age-old question, “What is the hell is a publisher doing buying a systems vendor?” As I ponder these questions myself, I’m fairly certain that it will not be me. Coming to grips with that, I don’t think it fair to ATG readers that I intrude upon your time by spouting more conjecture. Our world is cluttered-up enough with writing that is centered on form instead of content for me to want to add to the noise. Thus, I take my leave of this column rather than risking its deterioration to that level.

In parting, I’ll share with you the one thing I feel certain about, (and it doesn’t take submitting it six times each year to get this message across): It’s about people. It always has been and always will be. The work we all undertake, whether we be vendors, publishers, or librarians, is about helping people improve their world and their lives. The way we interact with each other is far more important than the way our computer systems interface. The books, journals, and technologies we deal with are conduits through which information flows. They represent the means, not the ends, of librarianship. Technology exists as a tool to help us help each other. It is supposed to work for us, not the other way around. If we are not careful, though, we’ll find ourselves working for the machine, a process which, I fear, has already begun. In the face of that, it is worthwhile to dedicate ourselves to whatever it takes to retain our humanity in this age where innovators too often ask “can it be done” rather than “should it be done.”

And with those revelations, I bring this column to a close (or at least a hiatus) for my contributions. Thanks, Katrina, for giving me the opportunity to express my thoughts. To those of you who responded to my columns via email, thanks for that too. It was fun getting “fan mail.” If the clouds part on one of my trips and new truths about librarianship and vending are revealed to me, I hope you’ll allow me to share my thoughts with you again as a guest columnist.

I’m beginning to embrace the idea that the truth is not so much in the telling as it is in the living, and I look forward to the time I’ll share with many of you in my continued work with Everett’s. Through our professional interactions, I hope we’ll be able to expand the human values that still surround this profession. Those actions, not the columns we write, are the real statements we make about what is important to us, even if, in this complex world, they are only heard as a sotto voce.

Editor’s note: We will miss Bob Schatz; and his astute comments! Does anyone else out there want to pick up “sotto voce”? — KS

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products from the project—a set of tools, processes, and techniques—will be useful to the library community in general as it looks to provide electronic resources to their communities. A separate task force from within the project will focus on working with vendor-based database products to arrive at agreements upon data element definitions and terms, specific data that can be collected, and methods for reporting data to libraries. This ARL Task Force on Statistics from Vendor-Based Da-

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