Bet You Missed It—Birds and Cell Phones

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Recommended Citation
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.3624

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Bet You Missed It

Press Clippings — In the News — Carefully Selected by Your Crack Staff of News Sleuths

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PRESIDENTIAL POISON
by Pamela M. Rose (University at Buffalo)

How toxic was “blue mass,” a common prescription for hypochondriasis in the 19th century? His interest piqued by a historical note that Abraham Lincoln “ate blue mass” prior to his election, Norbert Hirshchorn and colleagues recreated the pills from an old recipe calling for mercury, liquorice root, rose water, honey, sugar and dead rose petals. Their conclusion: Lincoln’s early mood swings, rage outbursts, insomnia and forgetfulness were due to his ingesting about 9000 times the “safe” level of mercury.


POSTDOC SAID, PROFESSOR SAID
by Pamela M. Rose (University at Buffalo)

In a sweeping landmark reversal, the U.S. Appeals Court has paved the way for junior staff members and faculty to reap a share of financial and career rewards when they are part of a university invention and discovery process. The court granted Joaoy Chou, former postdoc at the University of Chicago, the right to assert her interest and seek legal redress. The judges also admonished senior faculty to keep junior colleagues fully informed of intellectual property claims they file. Chou’s mentor Bernard Roizman, who filed a patent for the variant herpes virus gene Chou claims she discovered, denies the allegations. The University has chosen to prepare for a trial rather than appeal at this point.


CELL BIRDS
by Pamela M. Rose (University at Buffalo)

Australia’s six “mimic birds” that imitate sounds in nature have a new addition to their repertoire — the electronic tweeting of mobile phones. Generally, the males imitate the sound of cell phones as part of their mating rituals. Females apparently know the difference between their potential mate’s tweets and an actual cell phone!


VIOLENCE, SEX, CHILDREN & ANIMALS
by Bruce Strauch (the Citadel)

The Dunn Daily Record has the highest market penetration of any newspaper in the US of A (112%) meaning some folks in the town of 14,000 are buying multiple copies. Downhome news is the key. Local driver hits black bear with truck is front page; major Raleigh plane crash in a back section. And names, names, names — featuring the doings of anybody and everybody.

Other rivals for market penetration like the Hastings, Neb., Tribune prints snapshots that readers send in. The Caledonian Record in St. Johnsbury, Vt. features homeless cats and dogs.


CORNELL WOOS AND WINS
by Pamela M. Rose (University at Buffalo)

The architect of the Los Alamos Electronic Preprint Archive, Paul Ginsparg, is moving his creation to Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y., where he has accepted a tenured position in computer science and physics. Cornell hopes the move will further their goal to establish a world-class center for research in information science. The archive will become a “special collection” in the new Faculty of Computing and Information, where library staff will assume the day-to-day administration of the archive. Ginsparg will then have more time to explore new directions for the archive, and to expand the preprint culture to other fields, particularly biaxial.


SLIPPERY SLOPE
by Pamela M. Rose (University at Buffalo)

BioMed Central, a free online publisher, is considering a sliding scale for author charges (up to $500) to post papers on their Web site. Although the idea is backed by the Public Library of Science, it’s drawing mixed reviews from scientists who argue that a fee will drive researchers to submit their best work to no-charge commercial journals and drive up costs.


POOREST TO PROFIT
by Pamela M. Rose (University at Buffalo)

Under a World Health Organization initiative, the six largest commercial journal publishers (Reed-Elsevier, Wolters Kluwer, Blackwell, Harcourt General, Springer-Verlag, and John Wiley) have agreed to allow WHO to construct an Internet portal. Universities, labs, and health agencies in nearly 100 approved nations will have unlimited access to over 80% of the top 1240 biomedical journals. Initially, the world’s poorest nations will participate; later WHO hopes to arrange deeply discounted subscriptions for additional nations.


CRITIQUE CONCERN
by Pamela M. Rose (University at Buffalo)

The White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB) proposes allowing citizens to critique data disbursed by government agencies. The guidelines, which would require agencies to set up mechanisms for citizen review, alarm researchers who worry that this is an open invitation to industry to trash the work of scientists.

FEIST IS EVER WITH US
by Bruce Strauch (the Citadel)

Legendary Algonquin Roundtable wit Dorothy Parker kept a bunch of poems out of print because she thought they stunk. Stuart Silverstein has edited the "lost poems" and offered them to Penguin which offered him $2,600. He rejected this and sold to Scribner. Penguin then released the Complete Poems of Parker which included a previously uncollected section. And Penguin pretty freely admits Silverstein was the "source."

And so the old Feist v. Rural Telephone question rears its head. Mindful of this, Penguin changed the order of the poems, but they used identical couplets, titles and punctuation.

Silverstein says his originality lies in the selection of the 122 poems. There were others which he could have used but didn’t.


WHEN IS A BOOK AN eBook?
by Bruce Strauch (the Citadel)

Kurt Vonnegut, William Styron and other luminaries are being brought out in eBook form by Rosetta Books LLC. Random House is not happy and has called up the lawyers. After all, they have these titles under contract to publish in "book form."

Rosetta says a book is that familiar object—paper pages bound in a cover. Random House argues that books are anything that "faithfully reproduces the author’s full text in a fashion that allows the text to be read."

An intellectual property law prof at Columbia says if eBooks were foreseeable at the time of contracting, then the author must have specifically held back eBook rights. [Which seems like a non-issue to your astute ATG law advisor: ‘Slaughterhouse-Five’ is one of the books in question.]

Anyhow, agents are licking their lips over recovering rights and reselling famous books. And clearly, Random House’s deep-seated fear is it could lose control over its 20,000 backlist titles.


MUSIC GIANT HITS SOUR NOTE
by Bruce Strauch (the Citadel)

Highly placed Bertelsmann exec Thomas Middelhoff is an Internet fanatic who presciently engineered the $50 million stake in AOL and another big chunk of AOL Europe that are now worth billions. A meeting with Stanford University students convinced him of the awesome presence of Napster and ultimately an alliance to lend the bucks for a legit service. Napster would create the service and Bertelsmann would license music to it. This angered many artists plus it was just prior to the recent appeals court decision ordering Napster to rid its service of pirated music.

Bertelsmann and Napster want to offer the rest of the music industry a set fee rather than a percentage. The industry biggies, struggling to develop their own subscription services, refused.

Middelhoff thinks the obsession with protecting copyrights is denying consumers what they want and leaving the industry with no forward-looking strategy.


PRONOID—ONE WHO BELIEVES THE UNIVERSE IS A CONSPIRACY ON OUR BEHALF
by Bruce Strauch (the Citadel)

John Perry Barlow of the Grateful Dead (and of ATG interview fame—see v.11#1, 1998) and free cyberspace advocacy fame says Al Gore not only didn’t invent the Internet, he doesn’t understand what it is. The fact that Gore calls it an “information superhighway” shows he is an authoritarian who wants the Net to be a “massive, centrally administered and planned government project.”

A strong libertarian, Barlow says central governments provide nothing you’d be willing to pay for. And child pornography is just a stalking horse for “a whole raft of truly malign regulations.” The “rights of artists” is another one, in that case disguising the dead hand control of the music industry which holds most of the copyrights.

“The more inclined an organization is to live on the fruits of its patent, the less inclined it is to be creative.” The Dead always gave music away and always saw their sales zoom. Even the worst albums went platinum.

Of particular interest, Barlow explains why the feds backed off on the demand to have a key to all encryption. And it’s so obvious. The banking world was already using the Net massively. Our government looks like a sieve. The key to your bank account would have become common knowledge within days.


CLOSURE CRISIS
by Pamela M. Rose (University at Buffalo)

The immediate and noisy outcry at the announced closings of two of the Smithsonian Institution’s research facilities made public the long-standing problems behind the exhibits and research of one of the world’s finest museums and its collections, research, and programs. The National Zoo Conservation and Research Center (CRC) and the Center for Materials Research and Education (SCMRE) were tagged for the ax as reported in the April 13, 2001 issue of Science. Other “Jewels in the Crown” face similar budget and leadership crises: the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics (HSCA), the Smithsonian Environmental Research Center (SERC), and the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute (STRI). As the first nonacademics to head the institution, Smithsonian secretary Lawrence M. Small came in January 2000 as a reformer pledging to put the Smithsonian on a firmer financial footing, define a new mission, and subject activities to more rigorous assessment. Small’s plans have created great anxiety not only because they have yet to be spelled out in detail, but also because researchers have been left out of the loop of plans to reorganize into “centers of excellence” and because they feel Small has been critical of the scientists’ work. Given the controversy, Small declined to make the details of the reorganization public and while approved by the Regents, the final plan will be worked out in conjunction with a blue-ribbon committee, who will also consider a plan drawn up by the scientists themselves. Their work is expected to take at least until the end of this year. The announced closings have been blocked, however, researchers in many areas remain in the dark about their reporting structure and future.


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International Dateline —

News from South Africa and Important Developments in the UK over the Reed/Harcourt Merger

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Please Note: British spelling has been retained. — KS

I suspect that most of us have an ambivalent view of conferences. Although in theory they represent an opportunity to learn and to network, all too often the papers are not of a consistent quality, or the organisation was notable for its absences. I am therefore pleased to be able to report that in June I attended a conference which for me set a new benchmark in quality. The papers were uniformly excellent, the time-keeping was within five minutes of the due time for the entire conference, the catering was very good, the workshops were well attended, all the technology worked and all the 320 delegates came prepared to network. In addition, the organisers had laid on a partial solar eclipse!

You might assume that such a conference probably took place in Germany, or maybe the UK, but in fact this was the 6th South African Online Information Meeting, presented by the South African Online User Group (www.sauog.org.za) and held at Caesar’s Convention Centre, Johannesburg, on 20-21 June. I had been invited by SAOUG to present a workshop on corporate portals and give a keynote paper on technology trends. The SAOUG had joined forces with the Special Libraries and Information Services Group and the Organisation of South African Library Associations, and the result was a programme of some 25 papers which covered the broadest possible spectrum of online information access and delivery in South Africa.

Listening to the papers, and talking to the delegates and exhibitors, I gained something of the complexity of the social, political, educational and economic factors in South Africa. One paper in particular brought home to me the problems that librarians and information managers face in South Africa. Di Kruger is the Librarian of the Rand Merchant Bank, and one of her staff wished to work on a telecommute basis, continuing to provide research services from her home office for ten hours drive from Johannesburg. This would have involved providing an ISDN connection, and to cut a long story short the telephone charges for the first month were 12,000 Rand. In straight currency terms this is around $1400, but you need to multiply this cost by a factor of perhaps 3 to translate the cost into US real cost terms! Although the telecommunications cost was able to be reduced in subsequent months it was still a very significant factor and had to be taken into account in assessing the viability of the exercise. Terrestrial telecommunication are still in the hands of South African Telkom, which has a monopoly, and the high cost of telephone calls has a very significant impact on all aspects of online searching.

Another impact of the weakness of the Rand against the US$ is the high price of online service subscriptions and e-journals. Some companies, notably Dialog, have not imposed a monthly minimum rate for South Africa, as this was proving a deterrent to subscribers. In doing so the level of use rose, as it provided easier to justify search costs against an individual project or requirement than have to commit to a minimum in advance without any reliable measure of use. Other companies seem to be taking a less flexible route, and there seemed to be some annoyance with the approach of LexisNexis, which is a key database for South Africa because of the way in which its laws often use UK law as a precedent. However, the attitude of most of the exhibitors I spoke to was that deals have to be done, and it is better to gain some business and a satisfied customer than try to do a deal by the book.

Which leads me neatly onto copyright. The current copyright law dates back to 1978 and was modelled around the UK Copyright Act. A new Act is now in preparation and there is real concern on the part of the library community that the Act will be biased towards the interests of media owners. Denise Nicholson <Nicholson.d@library.wits.ac.za> of Wits University has put an enormous amount of personal effort into lobbying on behalf of the library community, and I know would appreciate support and advice from copyright experts in the USA. This is clearly an important issue in South Africa, and SAOUG had invited Professor Charles Oppenheim, Loughborough University, UK, and an expert on legal issues in information work, to give a keynote. (Incidentally the 4th edition of Professor Oppenheim’s book on The Legal and Regulatory Environment for Electronic Information has just been continued on page 87)