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Acquisitions Archaeology — It's the Platform

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In my last column,¹ I looked at “media packages” circa 1993 — hardware-intensive and proprietary set-ups that were a best attempt to capitalize on the possibilities unleashed by the suddenly popular but inherently doomed CD-ROM.² What emerged was a hardware environment so cumbersome (and, presumably, expensive) that it is now difficult to contextualize such apparatuses anywhere near the cutting edge.

But hardware is only half of the story. **Judy Luther** was also writing about “Multimedia” in fall of 1993.³ Rather than looking at the environment required to provide a multimedia experience, however, **Luther** gives an overview of several CD-ROM-based multimedia resources. As challenging as the physical multimedia environment was proving to be, it is here in September 1993 I think we start to comprehend the development of a Kuhnian “crisis” or Derridian “aporia” of sorts — the point at which CD-ROMs actually proved to be their own worst enemies...

It is difficult to read the following statement by **Luther** without inferring an ironic undertone: “While multimedia was introduced about five years ago, it does not appear to enjoy the widespread use in academic libraries that is true for CD-ROM versions of printed indexes.” This is not some attempt at deadpan understatement, of course, since it was not entirely obvious at this time that CD-ROMs would never *ever* enjoy the widespread use on the scale that people assumed they would. Or should. Rather, people recognized that multimedia had great potential while struggling with technical hardware *and* software complications needed to realize even the smallest amount of that potential.

The goal is starting to become clear, though, even if the solution at this point remains out of

grasp. In describing the **Microsoft Bookshelf**, **Luther** comments on “the power of being able to search across several references sources at the same time.” While this may seem completely obvious, keep in mind that in fall of 1993 “each program requires an expensive hardware configuration and operates with different software requiring some user support.” The intensive investment of time, equipment, and software (not to mention money) is still at the resource level.

At the same time, the Internet is still there in the background. If what is wanted at this time is a kind of universal or “meta” platform for the creation, delivery, and access of multimedia, why has the “Net not yet emerged as the platform of choice? A little illumination may be gleaned from **Eleanor Cook’s** “Drinking from the Firehose” column in which she poses the question “Why are Internet Informational Tools Labeled with Silly Names?”⁴ In defining various online tools available at the time (**VERONICA**, **GOPHER**, etc.), **Cook** ends her list of definitions with the following entry:

WORLD-WIDE-WEB (W-W-W): This was developed in Europe, at CERN, the European Particle Physics Laboratory, Geneva, Switzerland. It utilizes hypertext methodology (which provides expansion of various concepts), and utilizes WAIS technology much of the time. I’ll leave it at that.

This concise description of the Web hardly suggests a transformative technology that will change our *creation of and interaction with* information forever. And the idea of a



“platform,” a delivery and access mechanism that will be commonly understood in libraries in just a few years, still seems remote. **Cook** poses the question, “Why can’t we call things what they are? Why <**Infotrac**> and <**ProQuest**> instead of <*Reader’s Guide to Periodical Literature*?> [sic.]?”

The rhetorical question of “what they are” shows that a fundamental ontological shift has yet to happen. Each discrete resource is considered unique unto itself. In 1993, the Internet is still about different technologies specific to certain resources, as **Cook’s** article shows — just like CD-ROMs. The notion of content thought of separately from format with *platforms* being the “thing” (rather than the content itself) is still a ways off.

From what I can tell, the potential of the Internet generally (and the Web in particular) is obscured by bringing the paradigm of resource-level technology already common in the world of CD-ROMS and applying that the Internet. What is not yet obvious in 1993 is the Web’s potential to be a “meta” platform for all kinds of information resources, a potential that simplifies both the hardware and software contingencies inherent in “multimedia” resources.

So it is not that CD-ROMs were merely a distraction from the developing Internet but that they conditioned a kind of thinking about multimedia resources that may have limited, in turn, how Internet resources were thought about and subsequently developed.

So we have the *aporia*: CD-ROMs were not able to live up to the very possibilities — followed soon by expectations — which they created.

And we have the *crisis*: Proprietary software and specific hardware configurations resulted in unique content-technology objects at the resource level which were not sustainable in any sense (time, equipment, support, etc.) — despite both the possibilities and expectations multimedia resources created. 🌱

From the University Presses from page 71

An example at my home press would be *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York*, by **Kathy Peiss**, a revised dissertation that went on to become the bestselling book in the history of **Temple University Press**. Even if publishers could predict which titles would enjoy widespread adoption (and we can’t), withholding them from our eBook collection offerings would dilute the appeal of the collection as a whole. But offering them with no DRM could risk financial ruin. Remember, library sales are only twenty to twenty-five percent of a scholarly publisher’s revenue; student adoptions are closer to fifty percent. Risking the loss of that student market could be suicidal and university presses are understandably reluctant to do so. Some modeling within the eBook initiatives has taken account of this

risk, but concerns remain. On this subject, too, librarians and publishers will need to work together with the shared understanding that our success must be mutual. As in most things, good eBook deals will be those in which each party perhaps gives up a “maximum” win to ensure both sides win.

This is all to the good. As the recently published **Association of American University Presses** white paper, *Sustaining Scholarly Publishing: New Business Models for University Presses* (http://aaupnet.org/resources/reports/business_models/index.html) shows, libraries and presses working together are creating solutions that benefit the entire academic community. And so the most exciting aspect of all the current and about-to-launch eBook initiatives is this: two members of the academic community can together increase dissemination and usage of scholarly books to the benefit of the entire academic community. Let us make it so! 🌱

Endnotes

1. **Jesse Holden**. “Acquisitions Archaeology: Paradigm Shift” *Against The Grain*, v.22#6 (February 2011), p. 70
2. **Linda F. Crismond**. “Media Minder.” *Against the Grain* v.5#5 (November 1993), p. 12.
3. **Judy Luther**. “Innovations Affecting Us: Multimedia.” *Against the Grain*, v.5#4 (September 1993), p. 29.
4. **Eleanor I. Cook**. “Drinking from the Firehose: Furry Little Animals and Comic Creatures: Why Are Internet Informational Tools Labeled with Silly Names?” *Against the Grain*, v.5#4 (September 1993), p. 51.