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One technology in particular helps determine the discursive framework for how technology in libraries was being discussed at the beginning of 1990. What started my thinking in this direction was an ad from Readmore that ran on page 24. Unfortunately, our present-day copyright labyrinth confines the reproduction of the ad within the context of this article, but I will try to convey the visual gestalt that hit me when I first saw this ad. The ad is for a Readmore product called “Remo” (whose etymology should be obvious), and the top half of the ad is space dedicated to the bold promise to: “REDUCE YOUR SERIALS MANAGEMENT PROBLEMS.” Such a promise remains compelling even to my twenty-first century eyes, and it is precisely that ability to relate to such a statement at the present time that makes the rest of the ad all the more interesting.

Just under this large declaration, off to the side of the page, is a small hand-drawn image of a floppy disk. As we have all become aware, technology is most captivating when it’s small. My iPod Shuffle — the size of a money clip — still impresses me every time I look at it. “Wow,” I think, “so much technology in such a small space.” Readmore was onto the same idea: the big sell for the Remo product is a powerful but understated technology. Indeed, the text of the ad suggests that you will be solving your serials management problems with just “a few square inches of counter space.”

And how?

With “the first microcomputer-based software package” that “handles the full range of serials management functions.”

You could even use Remo in a “network configuration.” Wow — so much technology in such a small space!

And yet, I find that I am unconsciously reading “electronic journals” for “serials.” It is strange to think about the dawn of computer-based journals management and the promise that such a giant leap seemed to hold. Readmore is presenting a still-novel solution for managing print serials, and are — by their own claim — the first to do it by way of desktop computing. And if you happened to be worried about using the technology, don’t worry — “in the event of questions, an answer is only a phone call away on our toll-free hotline.”

What?! More than anything, the reassurance of the advertised toll-free hotline instead of the now-ubiquitous URL jars me out of the present.

Flash forward almost twenty years to November 2009. An ad was run by Swets for the eSource Manager. (As an aside, Swets is the company that may or may not hold the copyright — by way of the Blackwell Periodicals Division — to the Remo ad that I am not reproducing in this article.) The Swets ad is (either by design or by coincidence) strikingly similar to the Remo ad structurally, though it is not at all the same.

The header of the Swets ad reads: “Master your electronic resources.” Clearly this statement is similar to Readmore’s statement. In Swets’ case, though, it is the promise (and problem) that is understated. The graphic here — now in color! — gets full prominence: a stylized Rubik’s cube that conveys, above all else, multidimensionality. So instead of a two-dimensional disk showing the smallness of technology, an image of a large 3-D puzzle suggests ordered complexity, as well as the growing importance of images.

The text for the eSource Manager ad is, like the Readmore ad, focused and concise. However, this is where the true difference lies: Remo was about tracking physical pieces to ensure access. The four bullet points of the Swets ad are all about licensing, including tracking “license conditions” while providing an “overview of all digital rights.” And licensing, more often than not, implies limits on access. Leaving aside the larger and certainly more controversial issue of whether the restrictions set forth in licenses need be either as explicit or complex as they frequently are, we can observe a shift not in structure but in function of managing resources. The shift is three-fold. First, it is a shift in information environment, where we can say that more information is potentially accessible today than in February 1990. It is also a shift in information technology, where electronically-disseminated resources are perhaps more vulnerable to unacceptable (or at least unexpected) uses. Finally, it is a shift in information strategy. Not a shift...
tive of supplying any publication a library might choose to order. On the part of those joining the band, it took an appetite for creating a new thing and for wagering all the risks inherent therein.

As my readers know, the buyers of serious and scholarly books are widely scattered and very thin on the ground. In those days, however, these buyers were in the forefront of the development of computer applications. Apart from sectors devoted to mathematics and science, the academic and research libraries sought and successfully achieved a worthy place on the leading edge of such developments. Any firm genuinely committed to serving this highly specialized and unique profession in its natural lair was well advised to associate itself with the new and novel developments being put into place by the pacesetters in developing these applications. Therefore, this band of Argonauts shouldered yet another new and substantial risk in order to serve the knowledge needs of the institutions and individuals it had identified as those with which it wished to work.

In developing our bibliographic control operational software, we pioneered several new approaches to the problems inherent in using devices originally designed to deal with numbers rather than sophisticated alphabetical text. The fundamental key to these innovations was to reprogram the software to ignore the usually fixed and predefined number of characters assigned to a record field, which had been a quite satisfactory gambit for dealing with fields filled with numbers only. To solve the problem of dealing with alphabetically-based fields of varying lengths, we insisted from the beginning that delimiters define the beginning and end of each field in the record. The IT staff initially resisted, as they were comfortable with fixed, predefined field lengths, but soon they appreciated the wisdom of using field delimiters. One reason for this resistance was the amount of code required to format records this way. We appropriated the dollar sign ($) to indicate a field followed by an alpha character to define the content of that field, and we maintained a strict order of the sequence of delimited fields in the record format.

To the best of my knowledge, we were the first to develop this code, and it became a common method in bibliographic record formatting within a short time of our use and the subsequent circulation of our records to libraries. Such a flexible field record led, in turn, to a much more flexible method of database searching. The ability to search our bibliographic databases quickly and efficiently in terms of machine time and cost-effective logical operations was of paramount importance in the development of our bibliographic control software. And this became increasingly important when we undertook the construction of utilizable catalog collections in academic libraries.

Building these systems and writing the code took terrifying lengths of time to accomplish in contrast to the relatively short period it had taken to write the code needed to run the Flexowriters. It takes many years to develop systems of any sophistication and, unhappily, bibliographic control systems of any great utility demand substantial sophistication. To build a searchable, bibliographic database based on the code driving the Flexowriters took several programmers months of time. This was an extended, nail-biting affair. The payroll continued to mount but produced no revenue for months. Some of the bookselling staff routinely questioned the wisdom of such an undertaking, and it took a strong control of management impatience to endure the lengthy intervals required in systems development.

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from one definite, finite strategy to another, obviously, but a shift that creates possibilities in November 2009 that are multiple, multidimensional, and far more uncertain. Remo is all about what (items) we manage — eSource Manager and similar systems are all about how we manage whatever (content) we need to.

And, of course, the ad for eSource Manager doesn’t direct you to a toll-free hotline. It gives you a URL. 🌐

Endnotes

4. My thanks to Bruce Strauch and Laura Gasaway, for their expert opinions on copyright.

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