Back Talk -- Under the White Nights of St. Petersburg

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is critical to this process, how will the eBook affect memory formation and cultural definition? I’m no scientist, but I can’t help but think that the new ways in which we will encounter and experience reading will certainly impact the functioning of memory.

The eBook implies new attitudes to navigating text, integration of other media such as video and audio formats, non-sequential reading, new forms of annotation, seamless collaboration, and standardized containers (e.g., iPads, Kindles, Kobos, etc.). The elephant in the room is our cognitive overload that plays havoc with memory — everyday at work I’m sure there are issues or tasks that I’m surely forgetting about, and I doubt that I’m alone! Our immersive digital communication technologies and lifestyle will affect reading and memory like nothing else since the printing revolution that Gutenberg brought about in the 15th century. I doubt that we will end up in the rabbit hole with Alice, where past, present, and future have no compass. For Alice’s sister this was nothing but “a curious dream.” However, for us the eBook will play a pivotal role in redefining our relationship with ideas and narratives expressed in long form, and thus in reshaping our understanding of our selves...and the intense memories of reading that help make us who we are. 😊

and development of electronic publishing in Poland, Russia, and China fascinating. While the growth in the former two countries has been slower than in some parts of the west, Russian publishing had suffered with the advent of Perestroika in the 1980s, its growth and development seem to be strengthening. For China, it was apparent to everyone that electronic publishing is very “hot” there. We also heard about exciting new efforts to resurrect the value of all of our libraries’ heritage microfilm collections by blending automated metadata systems with PDF views of what we already have on microfilm.

We heard a lot at the meeting of the need for everyone to pull together to meet the challenges of the digital world. Webscale is the new watchword, the movement to reduce the cost of individual transactions by taking advantage of the Web’s ability to do work on behalf of large numbers of customers or participants in a particular area, and through its use we might all make it out alive through this period of transition.

Fiesole was once again a great experience and I am looking forward to next year when the Fiesole Retreat returns to the golden hills of Florence, Italy. 😊

Endnotes
Back Talk — Under the White Nights of St. Petersburg

The 13th Fiesole Collection Development Retreat held under the White Nights of St. Petersburg was a wonderful experience both intellectually and culturally. Like Florence, in whose hills the lovely town of Fiesole and the namesake of this conference resides, St. Petersburg is a city that is almost a large museum itself. Florence allows one to see remnants of Medieval and Renaissance times, and St. Petersburg allows you to view the remnants of Czarist and Stalinist times. Our mixture of time spent in the National Library of Russia with its unbelievably rich old collections, including Voltaire’s library which legend has it was presented to sold to Catherine the Great to secure Russia’s neutrality in the American Revolutionary War; visits to magnificently-domed Russian Orthodox cathedrals; a boat tour of St. Petersburg’s many rivers and canals to view the architectural wonders of the city; time spent in the Hermitage and other cultural sites; and then meeting with old friends from previous Fiesole Retreats and new ones from the major libraries of central and northern Europe particularly, provided a sensory and intellectual delight.

I learned/relearned a great deal from the conference. For me, one of its major themes was that, like the Big Bang which brought an end to the age of dinosaurs, or the invention of moveable type printing by the Chinese and northern Europe particularly, provided a sensory and intellectual delight.

The Web therefore is like the apocryphal Arabian genie, or magic spirit, who when once allowed to escape its bottle, can never be stuffed back again. This doesn’t mean we won’t try to do just that, to stuff the genie back in. As librarians, we have grown used to the large budgets needed to support our acquisitions programs and to pay for the large number of employees needed to select, purchase, catalog, service, preserve, and then to help people find what they need in our ever-growing haystacks. We have not had the reputation of being the black holes of university budgeting for nothing (although I have always tried to make clear just how small our 2-5 percent of the overall budget we constitute). Consequently, budget-wise we will continue to ignore the fact that our historical collections continue to suck up resources even though there are 24/7 online free alternatives. Similarly, while we know from the OCLC report and the UK study discussed at this Fiesole Retreat that our students simply do not start with our library catalogs when they want information and instead use something like Google and even in the end ignore our expensive online resources, we will continue to argue for ever-larger acquisitions budgets.

Open Access, as already noted, is upsetting everything. Therefore I personally could not but wonder when I listened to a very informative presentation about the Copyright Clearance Center and its European arm, RightsDirect, whether or not these programs, which are smartly-designed to make it easy to legally reuse information resources, are not ignoring the inherent openness of the Web. The Web — has more pages than the number of people on our planet — pages which for the most part have been contributed by people who have no thought of being paid for the information they have contributed, is simply not conducive to systems which want money for things which can be freely clicked on. When the masses refuse to abide by the laws of any society, the laws have to change. So let me clarify my position: I am not saying that copyright will be completely discarded, but it will have to change to reflect the free and open nature of the Web world in which it exists. At the conference I heard the very interesting presentations from librarians from Sweden and the Netherlands about Open Access in their countries. In the case of the latter country we heard about the positive consequences of what can happen when a national library takes a proactive role in support of OA. Springer also reported on their experiments and experiences with OA (the University of Hong Kong is one such university which has emphasized the value of providing the world with both commercial and non-commercial access to their research findings).

While some of the above was a bit disquieting, I found the presentations about the growth continued on page 85