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Acquisitions Archaeology -- The Tipping Point

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Here in September 1994 I find that headline that I knew all along was inevitable: "Acquisitions and the Internet: A Look into the Future." This is the headline that leads off the whole issue, in fact.

In his column, **Jack G. Montgomery** brings "this new and very important element of our work lives" out into the spotlight.[1] Since I started tracing the rise of the CD-ROM, I have been waiting for that moment where someone put "Internet" and "future" into some kind of speculative statement. To be sure, I have that statement here, but it is not exactly what I expected. As **Montgomery** reports on the 87th annual meeting of the **American Association of Law Libraries (AALL)** held earlier that year in Seattle, two things are certain: the Internet is here for good, and it is still thought of as a tool (rather than a medium). While someone has finally thought (outloud) that our future (that is, for we who acquire, publish, vend, etc.) is tied up with the Internet, the real watershed moment — the one where someone suddenly grasps the potential for content — is not quite here. But we have reached a tipping point: the Internet only gets bigger from here. And so I will tentatively place the beginning-of-the-end of the CD-ROM here in the fall of 1994. Those CDs linger, of course, but their reign is both brief and fraught.

Other evidence can be seen throughout this issue that we have started to look more seriously at the Internet. **Eleanor Cook** describes the tasks associated with running the *ACQNET* email list.[2] This includes advice on transitioning from *BITNET*, employing a signature block in email messages, the vulnerability of phone lines, and the incompatibility of various systems. For the first time (not that my search has been exhaustive), I come across the word "platform." In this case the word is used for the various email list applications. (More on that below.) Also, **Sandra K. Paul** discusses the increasing importance of electronic resources in all kinds of libraries.[3] According to **Paul**, many libraries indicate plans to increase their "portable databases and online services this year." (A "portable database" is just a CD-ROM by another name, right?) The Internet in this case is already the clear winner: CD-ROMs are not explicitly mentioned at all in **Paul's** column. ("Electronic" does not imply "Internet" yet, but we are getting very close indeed.)

Which is not to imply that the CD-ROM was gone. They are still sharing center stage, at least somewhat. **Linda F. Crismond** reports that sales totaling 5.4 million CD-ROM drives in1993 will roughly double by the end of 1994, with a projected total of 10.5 million.[4] The Data Disc division of **Nedbook** (in the Netherlands) advertises that they are "your gateway for all CD-ROMs from the European continent."[5] In fact, the Data Disc division offers "U.S. customers detailed information about European CD-ROMs." Having worked with **Nedbook** in the past, I thought I would check to see how they were doing and was surprised to find that, according to a very succinct announcement on their Web page, that they had been acquired on April 11 by **Ingressus BV**. (While I am not familiar **Ingressus**, a quick Web search indicates they do offer a number of library-related services. But not much in the way of CD-ROMs from what I can tell.)

Now back to platforms.

Something struck me in this issue about Internet use circa 1994 following my previous discussion about platforms.[6] With the Web not yet a dominating factor (not yet *the* dominating factor, I should probably say), the "platforms" described by **Cook** for handling email lists are not quite platforms as we think of them today. If a platform in the Web-centric paradigm of the Internet is a mechanism (which is Web-based, of course) for aggregating and interacting with content (like for e-journals or eBooks), then that term means something slightly different in 1994 than it does today. Like Gopher and other Internet tools, for example, the "platforms" for email seem more like what we might now call *applications*, or "apps." The Internet at this point promised wider accessibility than any previous format while offering the broadest possible compatibility, but not yet the *interconnectivity* that would dominate future interaction with the Web.

Still very much in the mix in the early 1990s are CD-ROMs — apps, really, that are self-contained in a small physical format but that have extremely limited accessibility. CD-ROMs represented discrete and portable information packages that replicated, for the most part, books or sets of books. These products were convenient in that the packages themselves were small. However, like their print counterparts, CD-ROMs were physical items, expensive, fragile, and potentially difficult to replace. And the hardware required to access the information on the discs was anything but portable.[7] The Internet, on the other hand, was a big step forward but has inherent limitations of its own — for starters, it demands constant connectivity.

Though the Web has dominated the Internet, the idea of "platform" and "application" has started to shift. While the Web has provided a degree of portability unthinkable in the paradigm dominated by CD-ROMs — especially since the introduction of laptops and WiFi, portability has become key aspect of the current information environment. The idea of the "app" for mobile devices is gaining momentum. At the same time, the idea of "platform" is becoming muddled. (The **Kindle** is an eBook device, but **Kindle** is also e-reader software that can run on non-**Kindle** devices.) The idea of the discrete, self-contained information package has returned, but under circumstances unimaginable during the reign of the CD-ROM. One major difference, of course, is that apps are intangible and can shopped, previewed, and downloaded from virtually anywhere. Apps have even been freed from the limitations of modems and hot spots. But the major difference is not so much that the apps have an ethereal existence; it's that the mode of access has been transformed. Instead of elaborate hardware configurations for CD-ROMs that demand a dedicated, localized space (not to mention support), we have mobile devices. The Web, which unified information behind a single Internet platform, relies on constant connectivity. It serves its purpose when such a connection is possible. But we are swiftly returning to a world where information packages are once again singular and distributed. However, accessibility — to the apps themselves and the devices that run them — is becoming so widespread in our environment as to be almost ubiquitous.

At one point, we could simply assume that the Web was the future of a networked information universe. But now that information universe is diversifying. When looking into the future, it is no longer a question of putting information on the Web in a way that ensures that it works and is accessible. The Web will be around for a while, of course, but networked space is changing for all of us — anyone who is a part of the information environment. The question is: are apps for mobile devices the new CD-ROMs or are they the next Worldwide Web?

Are apps the next tipping point…? 🐟

Endnotes

1. **Montgomery, Jack G.** (1994). "Acquisitions and the Internet: A Look Into the Future." *ATG* v.6#4, p. 1, 6, 8.

2. **Cook, Eleanor I.** (1994). "Adventures of a List Owner: Becoming Editor of ACQNET." Drinking from the Firehose. *ATG* v.6#4, p. 67-68.

3. **Paul, Sandra K.** (1994). "What Electronic Products Do Librarians Want? Results of an AAP Survey." Chaos. *ATG* v.6#4, p. 82.

4. **Crismond, Linda F.** (1994). "The Electronic Challenge." Media Minder. *ATG* v.6#4, p. 16.

5. **Nedbook**. (1994). "All you ever wanted to know about CD-ROMs from YURP…but were afraid to ask?" *ATG* v.6#4, p. 69.

6. In my previous column, I looked at the idea of the platform. In the early 1990s, it seems that information was being approached from the resource rather than network level. For the complete discussion, see: "It's the Platform." Acquisitions Archaeology. *ATG* v.23#2, p. 72.

7. See discussion in "Paradigm Shift." Acquisitions Archaeology. *ATG* v.23#1, p. 70.