Against the Grain

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Conclusions

More than 6 months have passed since we published the first version of this review which achieved gratifyingly wide circulation. Much has happened in the intervening period. The BICI has moved from being purely an acronym to a draft specification. The DOI has been demonstrated, conceptually at least, in Washington in February.

In our first edition of this paper last September we were unable to recommend a best buy; we are still unable to do so unequivocally. However, we are optimistic that the DOI may turn out to have the necessary attributes to provide many of the key requirements of a universal solution for the identification of digital expressions of content. Much will depend on the detail of developments during the rest of this year and the results of live studies with real applications. We are particularly concerned to see how current discussions on the syntax rules of the identifier progress.

However, we remain doubtful that even the DOI will be a solution which comprehensively meets all requirements for unique digital content identification. For the foreseeable future at least, publishers' systems will need to be able to handle multiple (and overlapping) identification of the same content. This is not perhaps as troubling as it may appear at first sight — publishers and their trade customers have for many years been familiar with identifying their products by both a number (the ISBN) and a brief description (author and title).

The concern which we had when we wrote the first edition of this paper was the apparent risk of unnecessary proliferation of identification standards. This problem appears to be receding as different groups meet to seek consensus and discover that the issues we have in common are much more significant than the issues which divide us. It remains extremely important that the issues involved in identification of digital content are discussed as widely as possible.

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ENDNOTES

[1]Familiar enough in the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*, but not exactly common in current usage!
[2]Whether these fragments are individual articles or chapters or some other, more arbitrary, division of content.
[3]The draft text of the revised SICI standard can be found on <http://sunsite.Berkeley.EDU/SICI/>.
[4]It should be noted that although SICI regards 'item' as a single issue, PII uses 'item' to mean a fragment of that issue.
[5]Draft available on <http://www.bic.org.uk/bic/bici>.
[6]Publisher Item Identifier as a means of document identification. 1995. <http://www elsevier.nl/info/epstand/pii.html>.
[7]PURL has its own home page on <http://purl.oclc.org>.
[8]The DOI home page is <http://www.doi.org>.

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that "deals" are made public and open to scrutiny. This runs contrary to much of what has been common practice between providers and consumers, especially as new products are rolled out and new markets explored.

What will be the result of all of this? Will the consortia get their way? Will the publisher/vendor community play along or will they seek to divide and rule? Based upon what I saw in St. Louis, and my own experience in a variety of new consortia, I think consortia are here to stay. I am not sure if the hopes of some to get the per-unit costs of information down to nearly nothing will occur, but I do think they will be able to guarantee to their members the right to the lowest possible price, to get access to new features without additional costs during the life of each license agreement, to get digital publishers to acknowledge the principle of "fair use," and to get publishers to take serious the need to provide ongoing access to their content independent of their own corporate survival. These are new days for new players in search of new solutions to new and old problems.

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Consortia Mania

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In early February I represented one of the several consortia of which Columbia is a part, the **New York Comprehensive Research Libraries Consortia** (NYCRL) at the Consortium of Consortia meeting held in St. Louis. Representatives of the largest library consortia in the United States, contracting for digital forms of information, and the publishers and vendors of such products came together for three days to exchange information. In general, vendors and publishers made presentations and library consortia representatives asked questions and made statements.

I was tempted to discuss the meeting in terms of gladiators, lions, and Christians because of the level of drama and blood-letting (warning: hyperbole!). But I decided this would be politically incorrect and the participants might not agree who played which role. What I will do in the space available is to share my impressions with you of the larger consortia issues discussed or later generated for discussion, without attempting to summarize each vendor's presentation. This is a shame in a way since their talks were very interesting and informative. Most of you, however, have heard what they had to say when you visited their exhibits at Midwinter ALA.

There was jostling for position. It seemed fairly clear to me what the library consortia crowd wanted. They want to be accorded special treatment because of the size of the business they represent. They wanted to be heard on licensing issues. They wanted cheaper prices for each unit of information purchased.

It was less clear what the publisher/vendor community wanted or how they were going to achieve their goals. They clearly wanted more business and understood that digital consortia can help them get it. They seemed to hope that consortia will streamline the license agreements, that consortia will help share in training costs and will serve as buffers when problems emerge, and perhaps even collect all the members' money and pay in one big check. But it was also clear they lacked a clear model of how to realize these objectives.

Prominent among the consortia were state-wide groups that epitomize the potential for new markets and new revenues. In New York, for example, we have a new coalition of state agency, public, K-12 school, special non-profit, community college, academic and research libraries emerging under the auspices of the New York Office of Government Services. This group was separately represented at the St. Louis meeting. As early as 1992-93 more than 35 million dollars was spent by New York's 9,717 libraries on database access services. We are not sure what this figure has grown to now, but we know that it is sky rocketing. New York's state-wide consortia and like groups expect attention and the publishers and vendors appeared willing to give it.

The focus of much of the meeting was how to price their products for consortia. While thorny pricing issues are not unique to consortia, because of their volume, the consequences of error on the part of consumers and providers are significant. While bonuses for batched business is the name of the game, the rules of how to figure these bonuses is unclear.

Based upon stated or estimated high volume levels, consortia want special fixed-fees for unlimited usage, for a large number of simultaneous log-on's or for a high volume of transactions. But it appears to be an inexact science in every case. At the present time we seem to have more questions than agreed upon answers:

* Should fixed fees for unlimited usage be based upon the total number of users, the size of existing library materials budgets, the number of sites, the number of terminals that will be used by the library's patrons, or as an add-on percentage for the cost of the printed products?

* Are all full-time-equivalent (FTE) users the same? Even if we agree that public library users and K-12 users shouldn't be charged the same as research library users, how should we factor in the relative availability of technology at each library location?

* How does a consortium figure out how many simultaneous log-on's it needs and what constitutes a simultaneous log-on? Are Web simultaneous log-on's the same as Telnet log-on's?

* Similarly, if the basis for charging is on the basis of a transaction, what is a transaction? Some say it should be the achievement of a desired outcome like a citation while others want to charge every time the return key is pressed.

These and other pricing issues are all tough to resolve. I think negotiating skills workshops will take the place of serials cutting workshops — however, they seem to be inextricably linked in a pernicious sort of way.

There are also a whole host of other non-price related issues that consortia and the publisher/vendor community have to solve:

* Government-based consortia have non-price, non-content political agendas that have to be contended with. In New York, for example, we have a law that requires all contractors to verify that if they do business in Northern Ireland they will not discriminate in their employment practices. In most states equal opportunity laws must be followed.

* Since consortia want to aggregate all of their buying power irrespective of the mode of delivery, they may want the provider to separate content and delivery costs so that they can work with publishers to get the best price.

* Requirements that the software be Year 2000 compliant. Consortia cannot risk being held liable by their members for overlooking the possibility that the provider's software will not be fully functional on January 1 in the year 2000.

* Security issues to insure that persons outside a consortium do not use the providers content without paying their fair share of the costs. The severity of security issues involving a single institution are magnified many times over when worked on in the context of 50 or 500 different libraries.

* Consortia cannot be cavalier in the monitoring of provider performance. They have to figure out what to ask for and vendors have to decide how to charge for it so that both sides feel satisfied.

* Because of "Freedom of Information" laws, public consortia must insist

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