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Back Talk-Without a problem, there is blind groping in the dark

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be replaced by **Ariel Plus**, which really does cause transmitted files to self-destruct.

Traditional Publishing

I hazard a guess that few readers of *ATG* have actually read the (final) Supreme Court judgement in the *Tasini* case (June 25th 2001) but it is full of good arguments on both sides and is quite reasonable. The prose is certainly better than the equally interesting material available in the report of the (UK) Competition Commission on what they call the **Reed Elsevier** and **Harcourt General** "merger" – to be found at <http://www.competition-commission.gov.uk/reports/457reed.htm>. There was a minority opinion proposing that the promise by **Reed Elsevier** about price increases (being kept within bounds) should be constrained by "behavioural remedies" – a smack from the government? As well as some interesting evidence, particularly from Elsevier Science staff, and as well as some praiseworthy attempts at definition – what is an STM journal? – there are some statistical tables which raise the eyebrows. The **University of Birmingham Library**, for example, spends 40% of its STM journal budget on publications of **Elsevier Science** and **Harcourt**. Is this normal? It is possible that this saga will run and run to the edification of all if another branch of government, the Office of Fair Trading, decides to enquire into the special circumstances of the STM journal marketplace – as it is minded to do. Watch this space.

Alternative Publishing

I thought the silly season was in August but it seems to be extending into September. Last month saw the *Public Library of Science* proposing to start yet more journals and the mouthpiece of **BioMed.Com** instructing readers of a listserv that **Elsevier** does not own the company. The rumours are untrue: it was the previous Current Science company, which went that way. There are, however, some interesting and perhaps more solid developments going on in Europe that may interest *ATG* readers. The central site is **HtmlResAnchor** <http://www.signal-hill.org/>. Signal Hill is (and I quote) "A European partnership for academic publishing. The aim of the partnership is to create a community of practice for organisations engaged in electronic academic publishing to enable them to combine forces and share their experiences." Library controlled university presses are known in North America but how many of them attempt something different, which takes advantage of the digital opportunities that present themselves? The prime mover of this initiative is **Bas Savenije**, the librarian of the **University of Utrecht** in the Netherlands. His ideas have also been presented at a meeting in Florence the day before the last Charleston retreat and will eventually see the light of day through the **University of Firenze Press**, another digital organisation. It is clear that to enable scholarly communication of much specialist content in e-book form, some sort of cooperation and aggregation will be necessary and this sort of collegiality marks a way forward. 🍄

Back Talk — Without a problem, there is blind groping in the dark

Column Editor: **Anthony W. Ferguson** (Library Director, University of Hong Kong) <ferguson@hkucc.hku.hk>

I recently attended a forum celebrating the inauguration of the Hong Kong Center for Problem-based Learning. My purpose was to learn more about this trend in higher education and how my library could do a better job of supporting the students and teachers employing it. The keynote speaker from **Griffith University** in Australia, **Don Margetson**, used a phrase from **John Dewey** to sum up the reason for problem-based learning: "Without a problem, there is blind groping in the dark" (The Theory of Inquiry, New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1938).

This set me to thinking: what is the problem that librarianship should seek to solve? Is it the same one that my staff and I should be working on? My knee-jerk answer was "how can users get the information they need?"

I had taken a useful book by **Peter Brophy** to the forum on the chance that I might get bored and need something to read: **The Library in the Twenty-first Century, New Services for the Information Age** (London: Library Association Publishing, 2001). His first chapter is provocatively entitled "The End to Libraries?" He suggests that libraries might fail because they have lost their core business due to changes in technology allowing others to deliver needed information more easily. As I thought about this possibility, I returned to thoughts about Dewey's suggestion that unless you are trying to solve "a" question, you will be endlessly groping in the dark.

Brophy's summary of where we are now does cause one to wonder if our whole profession isn't doing just that: we are extremely busy groping about but not getting anywhere useful: at times we seem to be rearranging deck chairs on what many of our detractors perceive to be a sinking ship. In a 29-page summary of what Brophy calls "enabling technologies" he describes our use of technology over the past 30 years to meet the information needs of our users, and at the end of the book he provides a very useful glossary of the 200+ acronyms and terms used in his description of what we have been doing, e.g., ANSI, DLI, FTP, TeX, XML, and the ever-popular Z39.50. While I found his book thought provoking, the glossary also suggested that what we have been doing is barely comprehensible to ourselves, and certainly not to our funders. This was brought home to me more strongly last month when several of us from Europe, Australia, and the US were called upon by Chinese publishers and librarians at a conference in Shanxi province to explain what was going on in western librarianship.

While we are groping (actually group groping) about in the dark, many of our users have found the answer to the question about how do they find the information they need: they type a few words into a small box within their Internet browser and come up with useable information. Yes, I am fully capable of reciting the litany about

inaccurate information, incomplete information, and too much information. But, they do just type a few words in the little box and get instant gratification (by the way I just got 69,000+ hits on the phrase "instant gratification" using **Google** but was able to cut it down to 2,000+ by adding the word "libraries").

Being an old Cub Scout leader, I am always reminded of the KISMIF motto: "Keep it simple, make it fun." I think that is what we need a lot more of in our libraries. At any hour of the day our students physically or virtually enter our libraries/home pages and want something fairly simple: information. In our fascination with making order out of the chaos we have created MARC and a few hundred or thousand other enabling techniques to help them find the right book/article at the right time (**Yankee**, chapter 6 verse 2). Along the way we have lost a lot of the simple and fun in our libraries. In fact, our profession is maligned as the no fun "shushers" of all time. When I suggested the other day that we create a recreational reading room with soft chairs and music, I was informed that any use of recorded music would involve paying all sorts of copyright fees. Since we can't afford a live band,

I guess that idea is out – unless there is a librarian musician who would like a 16-hour a day job in Hong Kong.

Now, lest I get branded as a technophobe suggesting that what the world needs now is a room with a bunch of printed books and journals arranged by title, let me defend myself by saying that my library is busy at work adopting single-search, as well as my library interfaces in an attempt to make it easier and more friendly to use. But, I suggest that we all need to lighten up and keep our eye on the real bottom line, or in **Dewey's** words, the problem: users finding information. **Brophy**, in a discussion of the differences between essential and non-essential performance attributes, suggests that you ask the question "Can this aspect of service produce 'customer delight'?" (p. 81). If it can result in delight it isn't essential. Actually, I think we need to put more time in on the non essentials and in producing delight – if we are going to survive in style.

In the case of library support for problem-based learning, to produce delight it is apparent we need to provide small group study rooms and lots of them, face-to-face as well as phone and email reference help, scheduled classroom and at-the-point-of-need Web-accessible information management skills training, lots of full-text resources, and, if we still have time, we can attend a few dozen conferences on standards and things.

Brophy ends his book by cautioning us all that being able to say what needs to be done, and even identifying some models to emulate, "... does not mean that libraries will of necessity occupy a central place in future society. That place has to be earned. It is librarians who must earn it." (p. 184). I couldn't agree more. 🍄