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Drinking from the Firehose: The Bloom is Off the Rose

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Drinking From The Firehose The Bloom is Off the Rose

Pondering — Where the Internet has been and where it might be going

by Eleanor Cook <COOKEI@conrad.appstate.edu>

Those of us who use the Internet every day have grown weary of all the hype. I don't know when Internet 2 is going to be ready, but I am ready for it. The Internet is everywhere now — it is no longer a quiet corner where academics can chat. Each time I write this column a new level of consumer is getting wired. In the June 1993, issue of *ATG* I suggested that "perhaps in the future we'll see public terminals in shopping malls, post offices and public libraries." The future is here. In April 1994, I said, "Before you know it, there will be advertisements for Campbell's Soup and McDonalds on the Internet." See www.campbellsoup.com and www.mcdonalds.com for these companies' Web sites.

When I talked about my dad getting email access in June 1996, it was very exciting to me. In fall 1997 my best friend and her family hooked up to the Internet. I was pleased, sure, but now it is totally expected. Even though these friends of mine loathe computers and are suspicious of them, they realize their kids need it for school work, though now they are wondering what their kids are doing with this thing. It's gone way beyond video games.

The Internet has become more commercial. An acquaintance has been a computer consultant for years. In an effort to cast about for new ways to use his skills, he is now involved in two multi-level marketing companies; one sells long distance service and the other sells Web-based advertising. Move over, Amway and Mary Kay.

Consumer interest in the Internet has given rise to some disturbing assumptions and trends. This summer we witnessed the **Kurt Vonnegut** commencement speech hoax. The story goes that Vonnegut gave a clever and touching commencement speech for the graduation at MIT. The text of this speech was forwarded over the Internet, moving from person to person as each read it and thought, "How cute!" and passed it on. This is how I saw a copy of it. It starts out, "Wear sunscreen." The true author is a columnist from the *Chicago Tribune*, **Mary Schmich**. The real commencement speech at MIT was given by Kofi Annan, Secretary General of the United Nations. ¹ I talked about the ease of such misattribution in an *ATG* column in April 1993. This example of misattribution, while not particularly harmful, must have been annoying and probably embarrassing for the authors involved. Furthermore, no one seems to know why or how Kurt Vonnegut received the inaccurate credit!

So, you can imagine how mis-attribution could be used in more destructive ways.

Pornography on the Internet continues to make the headlines. I thought I was finished with that assignment in June 1997, when I wrote about it for *ATG*. I guess one of those "cookies" I zapped from my Netscape file must have slipped through before I deleted them, because I received an unsolicited email from "Lisa" advertising her hot new video. Lisa was kind enough to give instructions on how to request removal from her mailing list. However, my request bounced back, indicating that the mail box was full (yeah, probably full of messages from people like me who did not want that message to begin with!). Since then I have not received any more salacious invitations, though I am beginning to get more irritating "junk" email. Apparently there are quite a few of us complaining about this. The last few months of *Internet World* include articles describing how to rid yourself of cyberjunk mail. Unfortunately, as an editor of an electronic list, I am going to have to suffer this I suppose, since I cannot hide very well.

There seems to be more misdirected email these days. I got a virtual flower bouquet a few months ago from someone named "Robert" who claimed that I "was an inspiration to us all." Thanks, Robert, whoever you are. The only Robert I know swears it wasn't him and I believe him, so either this bouquet was meant for someone else or I have a secret admirer.

Then there was the school teacher from the UK who was planning a trip to North Carolina to visit someone named Eleanor Cook who apparently lives in Concord, N.C. I received a cheery note from him, giving his arrival time at the Charlotte airport. I quickly responded, letting him know I was not the Eleanor Cook he was expecting! As a librarian of course, I offered to help him find his hostess, but I never heard from him again after our initial exchange so I hope he had a pleasant visit.

Some disturbing trends concern higher education. **William Hannay** talked at the **Charleston Conference** in November 1997 about term paper "mills" which have popped up on the Internet. ² These undermine the college learning experience and their presence on the Internet makes it easier than ever for students to be tempted to take shortcuts. Also, there is an assault on libraries coming from government officials, state legislators as well as our own faculty and students. This attack

is summed up in the innocent comment, "Why do we need libraries anymore when everything is (going to be) on the Internet?" I do not have to tell the readers of *ATG* what a foolish statement this is -- we are all hearing this and shaking our heads. The birth of the electronic journal, for instance, has been in labor for some time and it isn't over yet by a long shot. There are still many issues to resolve in order for scholarly information to be shared as readily as it can be now in printed form.

Librarians are an important part of the process of getting people to information, even when using the Internet. I love the analogy of the Internet being like a card catalog drawer being dumped on the floor. This idea that libraries are irrelevant has even created a log jam in plans to build a new library on my own campus; we have to justify our existence at every turn. It is critical that librarians explore, debate and challenge the beliefs that our constituents have about our role in the use of the Internet. My favorite retort is that they need to be concerned about distance education eliminating their jobs -- libraries will still be needed, but these professors can go! Of course, that assumption is probably riddled with flaws as well.

Etiquette on the Internet has evolved and so it also is evolving with the Web. For example, what is put on a Web site is not governed by anything very formal right now, but you could be sued if you put something there that belongs to someone else (copyright infringement), or if it suggests something negative about someone else. A couple of examples: **Anna Belle Leiserson** has found her AcqWeb cats on some clip art Web pages.

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Endnotes

¹ Articles about the Kurt Vonnegut hoax: Young, Jeffrey R. "Purported MIT Commencement Speech Turns Out to be Another Internet Hoax." *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Aug. 15, 1997, p.A20; Schmich, Mary. "Vonnegut? Schmich? Who Can Tell in Cyberspace?" *Chicago Tribune*, Aug. 3, 1997; see: <<http://chicago.tribune.com/columns/schmich/archives/97/803.htm>>.

² McCollum, Kelly. "Web Site Where Students Share Term Papers Has Professors Worried About Plagiarism." *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Aug. 2, 1996, p.A28.

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These are original illustrations Anna Belle created, they are NOT clip art. A colleague's institution has been threatened by legal action when a publisher discovered they were listed on the acquisitions department's Web page on the Library's "Caveat emptor" list. (Don't put such lists out publicly!)

It looks like chat lists and bulletin boards are being mounted on the Web these days. This makes me think it's time to abandon the comfortable but dull ASCII-formatted ACQNET issues for something colorful and Web-based. Also, Web sites now have sound and video clips in them. I looked at a university library Web site recently that showed their new library building being built in a series of pictures that flash across the scene continuously. That was pretty impressive.

So, where will we go next? I have no predictions today, but in my preparation for this column, I jotted down a few topics to devote to future columns. I invite readers of *ATG* who wish to do a guest column to consider these topics:

1. Collaborative software, "eyeball" cameras, videoconferencing
2. Internet banking and credit cards used on the Web
3. PDA's like Apple's Newton, which apparently is the latest electronic toy -- even our library director has one!
4. Gambling on the Web
5. Web TV -- is it going to happen?
6. Anything else that comes along you think librarians need to know about, especially those working in acquisitions and collection development. Please contact me if you would like to prognosticate.

Finally, I guess Windows '98 will be out soon so we can see how that works out. Have a Happy New Year!

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which they normally teach; the need for Internet training so that students can successfully carry out research assignments (it isn't enough to simply point them in the direction of an Internet browser); and the purchase and licensing of electronic content that was previously purchased for a geographically landlocked student body.

So the answer to the first question, is distance education in our future, is "yes" but not necessarily tomorrow. The answer to the second question, what will we do when the future settles down around us, is more difficult but I imagine that we will begin to hear more and more as time goes on. Perhaps we can arrange for a distance education and libraries panel at the next **Charleston Conference**.

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the course of the year we asked you about these topics.

- Online Acquisitions
- Book Vendors and Services to Libraries
- Outsourcing
- Paper versus Electronic Access, and
- The Role of Book Reviews in Collection Development.

As it happens, Paper versus Electronic Access was the most popular concern, but only slightly ahead of the role of Book Reviews in Collection Development. We surveyed *Against the Grain* readers early in 1997 to assess how librarians use book reviews and if they were used, which reviews were the most used and/or highly respected.

Maybe it was the season of the year, the temperature, the time for budget reviews, holidays, or the rise and fall of the stock market, but whatever it was, librarians were more apt to respond to surveys conducted in the months between February and July rather than between September and January. I refer to these months because we got more participation during the second semester of the school year than in the first semester.

We have to complete our surveys several weeks before the report is published in *Against the Grain*, and if 1997 is any indicator, more librarians are apt to let us know how they feel during the first half of the year, rather than the second. Is it something in the water?

Of course, subject matter has to enter into it too, as well as the workload participants face when we ask for input. The ques-

tion is, what will be the top issues for 1998 and will we be asking the right questions? Here's where readers can help. Let us know what is bugging you, as an individual, an academic institution staff member, and/or a professional librarian. And ... what are the concerns for the institution itself during the coming year? You can reach me at sefennessy@worldnet.att.net.

Before you know it we can have a report on how your colleagues feel about the issues concerning the library community. Do you want to know how other librarians are handling certain issues? We can develop appropriate questions if we know your interests.

In summary, you folks have responded best in terms of numbers of survey participants for the April, June, and September issues. The number of responding librarians tails off for the November and December/January issues and picks up again for the April issue. Perhaps it's a combination of subject matter, holidays, and the weather?

Whatever it is, when you receive a call from one of us, **Anne Jennings, Linda Albright, Kathy Miraglia**, or yours truly, **Eamon Fennessy**, we do not bite, are really pleasant; we do wait for the light to turn green before going through traffic intersections, and we do want to let your fellow librarians know how you feel on the issues.

Thanks for answering our surveys so that other colleagues can know how you feel. We look forward to your continued cooperation and to more pertinent and better surveys in the future. We cannot do it without you.

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