Op-Ed-Opinions and Editorials-What the Charleston Advisor Will Become

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Subscribers to Against the Grain and attendees at the Charleston Conference over the years, received an early copy of the preliminary issue of The Charleston Advisor (TCA). Because it was a preliminary issue, it was not a full scale version of what Katina Strauch, Becky Lenzini, George Machovec, and I, members of the Board, and the early reviewers who bravely provided copy for the first issue, hope it will become. The paper issue alone is but a glimpse of the capabilities we are building into TCA.

The paper issue is a part of the vision, but only a part. It is very much a part of Katina Strauch’s normal, “I see a problem and I want it solved” modus operandi, Becky’s Lenzini’s ability to organize, to bring resources together, George Machovec’s perspectives and experiences, and our hope that customers all over the world won’t have to reinvent the wheel for every product they look at. We expect the Website of TCA — http://www.charlestonneo.com — to become the primary means to communicate with the TCA community providing rapid posting of new reviews, reader and publisher responses, and information on current developments on Web resources for information professionals.

Changes in products, search engines, and coverage can also be signaled quickly and easily on the Web. One of the most consistent problems with Web resources is what I call “the here today, gone tomorrow” syndrome. Because vendors and publishers don’t really have a simple way to communicate changes, and often don’t even realize they need to communicate them, a URL that worked yesterday may be gone today — without notification. I hope we will see content creators and owners providing advance notice to TCA and its community, of changes to their products, whether the registration you so carefully did six months ago is now invalid, or the site is being taken down for redesign. And perhaps Web producers will read and understand how their products are really used and will incorporate reactions from the TCA community into future releases.

We want to raise industry-wide issues for discussion and debate. Deep linking, for instance, rarely surfaces in library literature, but if an academic publisher stops permitting direct access to their journal titles from unique URLs, then TCA readers should be ready to tell them how important the direct link is. The email response system and editorials we are planning should permit this to take place, should bring attention to issues the community cares about. Another example: Are you tracking the new ebook standards being developed by the industry? Another unique aspect of TCA is that we are paying for reviews. Paying professionals to review products they know is a relatively unique approach for literary literature. As a profession, we are used to “doing it for free.” But TCA’s approach is that if we pay for it, then we recognize the professional nature of what you are doing, and your ownership of the review, shared with us, means that we not only value it, but together, want it to be the best review possible.

TCA Board members will read for acceptance, but are also encouraged to respond from their own knowledge and often different perspectives about the products. It is more difficult to engage in a real dialog when the reviewer’s work is not valued highly. By paying, we demonstrate our commitment to value. We expect reviewers to take the responsibility for the overall quality of the publication. You will note that we occasionally disagree with reviewers and hope that in paying them for their work, they recognize that, in publishing the review and disagreeing, we are respecting their views. That doesn’t mean we won’t reject a review or request changes. But our first reaction will normally be to respond, rather than to reject.

We believe in a dialog, not only between our Editorial Board and reviewers, but also between our subscribers and the producers of the products we review, between people who use the products, who find things to like or dislike, praise or scorn. And a primary purpose for creating TCA is to encourage a dialog that is often simply not happening. In short, we expect to create a critical dialog space, prompted by reviews that are not afraid to state what the authors believe to be true. And we want subscribing communities to participate in that dialog.

We’ve been asked by several individuals: why are we charging so much? For the first year, TCA will carry at least 50 reviews of electronic products. At less than $6.00 US per review, just how much do you spend on reviewing a product in your library? How much as a publisher (who gets this for about $10.00 a review) would you spend on information-gathering about competitors or how to improve your product? How much do you pay for market research?

Add IP filtered access for the institutional subscriptions we are offering, reviews that can be conscientious and contentious if needed, a policy that up-front tells advertisers that they don’t get special handling just because they want (or don’t want) an ad, a commitment to fairness, more experienced folks running the operation, and you have TCA.

If anyone disagrees with us, tell us when you think we are wrong. Tell us what you like or think we need to do. Feedback is going to be as important as in any printed product. Hopefully more so. We want individuals to read and react and respond and contribute to reviews. A head start on the issues and capabilities, contacts and contract options, and a list of who to call that is using the product makes very good sense to us. We hope it does to you too.

The Charleston Advisor, Critical Reviews of Web Products for Information Professionals, has been created to provide signed, critical reviews. Continued on page 64

<http://www.against-the-grain.com>


Williamsburg: Decorating with Style. Clarkson Potter 1998 $30.00 Cloth 0609600494.

Clarke, Peter. Surviving Modern Medicine: How to Get the Best from Doctors, Family and Friends. Rutgers Univ Press 1998 $38.00 Cloth 0813525551.


Op Ed

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views of Web-based products and to assist those who need to make informed decisions about which products to license or even to examine. The Advisor is published in both print and online formats. The print edition will appear quarterly in July, October, January, and April. Subscribers to TCA will automatically receive access to the electronic edition and database, available at <www.charlestowne.com/>. We expect to review over fifty products annually and will also feature "in the field" reports and editorial commentary. The editorial above refers to Rebecca Lenzini (President, Publisher, and Editor-in-Chief, George Machovec (Managing Editor), and Katrina Strach (Chair of the Board), The Charleston Advisor. <http://www.against-the-grain.com>