February 2003

IMHBCO (In My Humble But Correct Opinion) -- Aid Workers or Bass Pros? Struggling with the Fundamentals of Librarianship

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Recommended Citation

Anderson, Rick (2003) "IMHBCO (In My Humble But Correct Opinion) -- Aid Workers or Bass Pros? Struggling with the Fundamentals of Librarianship," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 15: Iss. 1, Article 30.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.4264>

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Code Hill

by **Sandra Beehler** (Lewis & Clark College)

This article addresses the issue of preservation of computer code. When computer startup companies go bankrupt, what happens to the thousands of lines of code produced by their programmers? Early on, the idea of reusing code was popular, but in fact it did not prove cost-effective, partly because the code without the people who wrote it is not very useful. Thus only a small portion of it is ever rescued and reborn. Among the small portion saved was voice recognition software marketed as **NaturallySpeaking**, developed by a small company called **Dragon Systems** and sold to the Belgian company **Lernout & Hauspie** just months before that company went flaming into bankruptcy court. **NaturallySpeaking** was the world's first continuous-speech dictation software and a prime example of irreproducible "deep" code. Luckily its value was recognized and it was quickly bought by another company and put back on the market.

See — "Immortal Code" by **Martha Baer**, *Wired* 11.02, February 2003, p. 84.

All of Them Happy Some of the Time

by **Sandra Beehler** (Lewis & Clark College)

This is a fascinating article on the ethical problems faced by one of the world's most popular search engines, **Google.com**. The internet behemoth has faced challenges from companies unhappy with their ranking in search results, from Scientology advocates seeking to eliminate opposition pages, and from a Chinese government desirous of blocking access to certain forbidden subjects like "falun gong." **Google's** response to these challenges is determined by President **Sergey Brin**, who has the unenviable job of steering a path through the legal minefield while at the same time holding the company's own against fierce competition. **Google** has so far managed on the simple rule of "do no evil." But the reality of competition and growth may force **Brin** to make more difficult ethical choices in the future, especially if stockholders come into the picture after an IPO.

See — "Google Sells Its Soul," *Wired* 11.01 (January 2003)

Publish or Profit?

by **Pamela M. Rose** (University at Buffalo)

A group of prominent scientists led by **Dr. Harold Varmus** have announced a new publishing venture, **Public Library of Science**, as a challenge to the established academic publishers who are more concerned with profits than freedom of scientific information. **PLS** will begin with two peer-reviewed online journals on biology and medicine with the goal of cornering the best scientific papers and immediately depositing them in the public domain, a move which the founders hope will ultimately transform science itself. Success will "depend largely on whether leading scholars are willing to forsake the certain status of publishing in the established journals to support the principle of science as a public resource. In a profession where publishing in a top journal is often crucial to success and grant money, that may be a difficult task."

See — "New Premise in Science: Get the Word Out Quickly, Online" by **Amy Harmon**, www.nytimes.com/2002/12/17/science/17JOUR.html.

We've Come a Long Way Since Alidades

by **Pamela M. Rose** (University at Buffalo)

Online, continuously updated, instantly accessible. That's the goal of an ambitious project being undertaken by the **U.S. Geological Survey (USGS)** which has launched eight pilot projects in its **National Map Program** to develop a real-time online digital national map with high-quality topographical data. Such a map would replace sorely outdated topographical maps which have long suffered from lack of funds to maintain a robust revision program. Some question the ability to maintain such a vast store of knowledge, but **USGS** hopes to partner with federal, state and local agencies. Pilot projects, such as the one in Lake Tahoe, expected to have a ready core of data from local communities who maintain current **Geographic Information Systems (GIS)**, but are finding a mixed bag of either poor **GIS** measures or complicated software that needs to be standardized and integrated. However, some regional digital maps are already providing useful information.

See — "Mapping the Future" by **Kathryn Brown**, in *Science*, Dec. 6, 2002, pp.1874-5.

IMHBCO (In My Humble But Correct Opinion)

Aid Workers or Bass Pros? Struggling with the Fundamentals of Librarianship

by **Rick Anderson** (Director of Resource Acquisition, The University Libraries, University of Nevada, Reno, 1664 No. Virginia Street, Reno, NV 89557; Phone: 775-784-6500 x.273; Fax: 775-784-1328) <rickand@unr.edu>

For some reason, I find that as I get older I lose patience more and more quickly with people who brag about not having any answers. You know the ones I mean: they usually have warm, intelligent eyes and quiet, sensitive smiles and they stand in front of large groups of people (often at considerable expense) and say, in a deep, thoughtful voice, "I bring no

open-mindedness, and the best that can be expected of us in this crazy old world is that we all remain open to a constant questioning.

The problem is that while asking questions may require great courage, an unwillingness to take the next step — that of arriving at conclusions and taking the steps that logically follow from them — is often an expression of just the opposite trait. Open-mindedness is good and praiseworthy, but surely the ultimate value of asking questions is that in doing so we can eventually arrive at, you know... answers. As a librarian, I don't feel like I have a lot of time to spend sitting around reserving judgment and congratulating myself on my open-mindedness. I need to be getting things done.

I offer the above as sort of an apology for what is going to come next, because this month I bring no answers, only a vexing question. But I do want to arrive at a good answer to it, and I

hope some readers will respond to me with their thoughts so that we can revisit it later and maybe come to some conclusions. The question is, I believe, an urgent one — one on which the future of our profession may hang, and believe me, if I thought I had the answer to it I wouldn't hesitate to say so. But I'm genuinely conflicted on this issue and hope others will speak up and help me work through it.

Here's the question: **As librarians, is it our fundamental function to distribute information to people, or to teach people how to find information for themselves?** I find myself struggling, in my mind, between two competing models of library service. On the one hand, we can be sort of like foreign-aid workers: we're here to serve people who may or may not know how to help themselves very well, and we stand on the back of the information truck as they mill

continued on page 83

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IMHBCO from page 82

around and we hand them bags of content that they can take home and consume. On the other hand, we can be sort of like the bass-fishing pros you see on late-night cable TV shows in the South: people pay us to teach them how to fish for information. They come to us and we take them out in the boat, showing them which lures to use and how to read the water and where to cast, and then they go off and do most of the actual fishing on their own.

Each of these two models has its moral, economic and practical attractions. The Aid Worker model is, frankly, easier and less frustrating for librarians than the Bass-Pro model. Anyone who has worked a reference desk knows how much less work it would be to simply do the research for the patron rather than try to explain the vagaries of **Boolean** logic or demonstrate how the **Wilson** interface works. It's also satisfying to simply give people what they want; you see the results of your labor immediately, and the patrons tend to be grateful. I still get a warm glow inside when I remember the patron who came to the reference desk a few months ago after he'd spent a couple of fruitless hours searching our print collection for the text of a short poem. I entered the poem's title in **Google**, and within 45 seconds had printed out the full text and sent him on his way. He was overjoyed. He thought I was wonderful. I felt great. And the next time he

has a similar need, he's going to have to come back and ask, because I didn't really show him how to do what I did. That's the downside of the Aid-Worker model, of course: we're giving away fish instead of teaching to fish, which means that when the patron gets hungry again he has to come back and ask for more fish.

The Bass Pro model is more work, for both the librarian and the patron. Unsurprisingly, it also offers more long-term benefit. According to this model, when a patron comes in looking for journal articles or discrete bits of ready-reference-type information, the librarian resists the temptation to quickly find the desired content and hand it to him; instead, she sits down with him and demonstrates how he can do it for himself. In this case, the goal is to make the patron independent and equip him for a lifetime of research, rather than merely meeting his immediate information need. There's a downside to this model too, of course. For one thing, it's time-consuming and can be frustrating for both librarian and patron. For another thing, we simply have no hope of providing this type of service to more than a tiny fraction of our patron population. No public or academic library, no matter how well-staffed and no matter how late it stays open, can offer lengthy personalized service to all of its constituents.

Now, the easy response to my question is that we don't choose between those two models; we do both, depending on the situation. But for the purposes of this discussion I'm not that interested in what we actually do; I'm ask-

ing which of these roles is (or should be) the one that we consider fundamental. The obvious response to *that* is that they're two sides of the same coin, but I'm not sure that's true. I tend to think that they are fundamentally different functions, and that librarians who consider themselves mainly Aid Workers will think about their work and carry it out in fundamentally different ways from those who primarily think of themselves as Bass Pros.

Based on the conversations I've had with colleagues, and other conversations on which I've eavesdropped, I think most librarians subscribe more to the Bass Pro model than the Aid Worker model. We tend to see ourselves as educators, and we consider "information literacy" — teaching people how to find, evaluate and use information well — a major part of our mission.

So why is our profession organized in such a way as to make that model untenable? The simple fact is that we have no hope of educating our patrons. For one thing, as I mentioned above, we can only reach a very few of them in even the best situations. For another thing, they don't want to be educated. With very rare exceptions, our patrons are convinced that they already know how to find the information they need — and with good reason, since most of them do, in fact, find information they need every day without giving a thought to consulting with a librarian.

Okay, so the Bass Pro model doesn't

continued on page 85

Bibliotheca Alexandrina from page 84

UNESCO and used for preserving documents and for help in establishing the **Bibliotheca's** library school; furniture and experts in Internet communications from Norway; and support from Germany for the purchase of a book transportation system.

Many private organizations and individuals have also stepped forward and contributed books and other materials. Friends groups, for example, have sprung up not just in the U.S. but also Bulgaria, Australia, Greece, Czech Republic, the United Kingdom, among other countries.

Egypt has given 40,000 square meters in land and about \$180 million towards the building's construction, while making a commitment to provide an annual budget for the library's operation, including staff salaries and administrative costs. "Egypt has a limited budget and lots of national and international responsibilities, but it still has managed to provide resources," explained **Dr. Hassan M.E. Azzazy**, an Assistant Professor at the **University of Maryland School of Medicine** in Baltimore and a member of the **Baltimore Friends of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina**. "But the driving force behind the project has been the strong belief in the international community that education, knowledge and libraries are the main tools for progress and prosperity."⁷

Organized in 1998, the **Baltimore Friends** sponsored two fund raising events in 1998 and 1999, which were attended by more than 400 people, produced brochures and other materials for the library, and launched a book drive that so far has collected more than 1000 books in various subjects. "In the Fall of 1999, we began contacting major publishers and other organizations and asking them for book donations," **Azzazy** revealed. "They are eager to participate, so we expect the number of donated books to increase exponentially."⁸

These donations, no doubt, will go a long way towards helping what is certainly one of the most ambitious and potentially significant cultural projects ever undertaken in the developing world. The library is expected to function as a public research library that will primarily serve the countries of the African, Mediterranean and Middle East regions, but it will have global cultural implications as well. "The **Bibliotheca** will serve the social and economic development needs of the region, while being a resource for scholars worldwide that will help them produce quality research work," **Azzazy** explained. "It will also be a valuable resource of information to support decision making and to broaden future horizons for cultural, economic and social development."⁹

Zahran added, "The collections will be significant because the **Bibliotheca** is bringing together under one roof many sources of information hitherto essentially unavailable to researchers. That material will include documents,

library facts

- Total site area: 40,000 sq. meters
- 13 Floors / 3500 Seats
- 100,000 manuscripts
- 200,000 disk/tapes
- Total floor area: 69,000 sq. meters
- 4-8 million volumes
- 50,000 maps
- 50,000 disks/videos

Website: <http://www.unesco.org/webworld/alex/alex.htm>

books, rare manuscripts and other material from the region, covering ancient times to the modern period."¹⁰

The **Bibliotheca** currently has about 350,000 volumes (including 10,000 rare books) on various topics related to Egypt and the Mediterranean region, and that figure has been projected to grow to 4 million volumes and perhaps double that figure. "I've been impressed with the library's acquisitions rate," **Amer** said. "From my visits to the library, I can see that it is buying wonderful materials from all over the world for its reference and research collections. The library should reach 400,000 volumes by early 2000."¹¹

In addition to the research and reference library, the **Bibliotheca** will also contain a multimedia library, a planetarium, an International School for Information Science, a science museum, a calligraphy museum, and a conference center. In 1996 UNESCO proposed and the Egyptian government approved an allocation for the creation of an electronic library for the blind, which will include the latest equipment and software for converting Arabic into Braille on computers. "These many programs and facilities will collectively contribute to the establishment of a new center of excellence for the region and the world," **Azzazy** said.¹²

On April 24, **Mrs. Mubarak**, who has made the **Bibliotheca** her pet cultural project, held a 45-minute luncheon for selected friends and officials. It ran in a brisk assem-

continued on page 86

IMHBCO from page 83

work. How about the Aid Worker model? Well, the problem with that is that it runs counter to our desire to help people in a deeper way than just handing them the things they need in the moment. (And let's be honest: it also offends our sense of importance and professionalism to be "reduced" to simply handing out books and articles to our patrons.) It also may lead us to undermine

the educational aims of teachers in our colleges or public schools. If a teacher sends his students to the library so they can learn to do research, and the librarians do the research for them, that's a problem.

Obviously, in reality we're going to have to settle for a mixture of these models. Sometimes you have to just give the patron what she needs, and sometimes you'll be able to give some knowledge along with the information. But even though our day-to-day reality will always

be something of a smudge between those two absolutes, I still think we need to decide which of these should be the fundamental model for our profession. Or, of course, come up with a third option, which may be even better. I'm going to keep thinking about this, and I hope those with ideas they'd like to share will contact me so that we can revisit this question in a future column. In the meantime, I'm afraid I bring no answers today. I offer you only questions.