Against the Grain

Volume 22 | Issue 3 Article 36

June 2010

As I See It! -- Displacing Anxieties: Addressing New Worries by Solving Old Concerns

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As I See It! — Displacing Anxieties: Addressing New Worries by Solving Old Concerns

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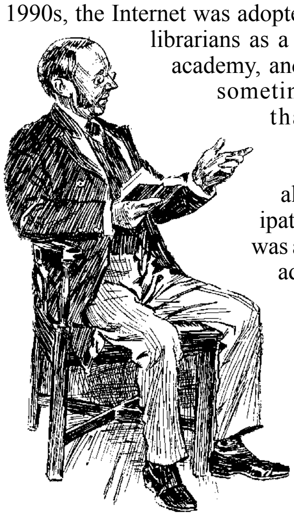
At the **Fiesole Retreat** in April the opening session was concerned with identifying old concerns that had been resolved or simply been displaced by new, more pressing worries for the scholarly information supply chain. That gives me the opportunity to review what I consider to be the issues and concerns to which we should devote ourselves.

But first, what issues appear to have been resolved, or at least been put into proper perspective?

PDF vs HTML. Publishers' production processes are now largely XML-based. Journals and books can be output in a range of different formats. PDF is still the commonly accepted vehicle for an online facsimile of the printed publication. It has more functionality now than it used to. But it is still just a facsimile. We have not yet made much progress in exploiting the power and flexibility of the technology to become an everyday component of the researcher's workflow. We can cite text, but we have no standards for citing datasets, for instance. So we have some way to go.

Telecommunications. The Internet works. Bandwidth is expanding all the time. The university community in the U.S. is privileged in having all the bandwidth that is required for transferring very large files, dwarfing book and journal files. Most universities in the developed world have similar access. However, community and further education colleges do not benefit from such bounty, and there are still real capacity constraints to the adoption of digital textbooks and other e-resources outside higher education. When it comes to individuals like me, living in a rural community where bandwidth is still constrained by the capacity of the telephone copper wires for the last mile, accessibility is more mixed — the speed of the Internet slows down as kids get home from school and download the latest movie! In the early 1990s, the Internet was adopted by academic librarians as a creature of the academy, and the view was sometimes expressed that the "common people" should not be allowed to participate. The Internet was an exclusive academic preserve. The consumer market proved them wrong. And we will return to this culture of academic exclusivity in a few minutes. So today it works — mostly. Online connectivity is merely a matter of maintenance.



Print is not going to go away. There is still considerable demand for print, even though the conventional wisdom says that researchers wants information at the desktop. Those who say it are librarians — academic, corporate, and government. And they are right, within the confines of the library's remit. But the demand for print cannot be denied, as it comes from learned society members and medical practitioners as well as those stick-in-the-muds in the humanities. This could be more of a concern to publishers than librarians, but salvation is at hand in the form of digital printing. Excellent quality four-colour printing on very short print runs is now available. This fuels print-on-demand and distributed printing, where a copy can be printed from a PDF at a local distributor or printer anywhere in the world, saving on stockholding and on distribution costs from a central warehouse. Not only does this meet the continuing demand for print, even as it may slowly reduce, but is a solution that is green.

Linking has been solved. **CrossRef** is ten years old. It includes metadata from more than 2,950 publishers, 20,000 journal titles, and 100,000 book titles. It has 40 million metadata records within their databases. Of these, 87% are from journals, about 5% are from scholarly books and reference works, and about 5% are from conference proceedings. The oldest **CrossRef** DOIs are assigned to articles from 1665 with issues of The Royal Society's *Philosophical Transactions* — however their database also contains more than 650,000 records from the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries.

Collecting and analysing usage data has matured. **COUNTER** provides a standard by which usage can be recorded, analysed, and compared on a standard basis. **SUSHI** provides an automated request and response model for the harvesting of electronic resource usage data using the Web, so that libraries can harvest the data they need from a multiplicity of publishers. Using usage as a metric in making selection decisions in the library is an obvious application. But I don't think that all journal publishers have yet woken up to the power of usage data as a selection — and cancellation — criterion. We are moving on, and the **UKSerials Group** and a group of UK, European, and U.S. publishers are exploring the feasibility of creating a Journal Usage Factor to sit alongside the Impact Factor as another metric. I have the privilege of working on testing different models of the JUF in order to demonstrate which particular formula will be the most appropriate.

And we seem to be much less exercised about archiving than we used to be. Developments such as **Portico** and **CLOCKSS/LOCKSS** put the archive into the hands of trusted not-for-profit organizations independent of publishers, with a measure of control in librarians' hands. It always struck me as absurd that publishers were expected to become archivists, but in the 1990s publishers came under a lot of pressure to do just that. But libraries were always the memory organizations in the mix, and it is good to see a measure of common sense return to the issue of preservation.

So what should we be worrying about? Our transitory concerns over library budgets or serials cancellations are much less important than the systemic challenge that the university community is facing. In short, it is faced with growing demands for accountability.

Universities have come through a decade of growth and benevolent funding. The banking crisis and the recession that quickly followed in 2008 have stopped that growth dead in its tracks. Public universities are going to operate under severe funding constraints for the foreseeable future. Private universities dependent on endowment and investment income are just as adversely affected as the returns from the equity markets remain low and volatile.

In the UK, universities have expanded at a rapid pace. Nevertheless, it is clear that public spending cuts will be severe and enduring, as the UK, in common with other governments, has to grapple with ballooning budget deficits. Universities will be badly affected.

However, universities seem to be barely accountable to society at large. The culture of the modern university has its beginnings in the late Middle Ages, when most of Europe's ancient universities were established. They were essentially ecclesiastical, run by monks and under the control of the Church and kings and princes. The culture continues to be one of monastic exclusivity. The idea of academic freedom is rooted in that exclusivity. Universities continue to expect the freedom for its scholars to research anything and everything, no matter how far removed from the needs of society. Those academics who popularize science and scholarship are treated with some suspicion by their peers. Survey after survey shows that researchers' publishing is directed at their peers, not at a wider audience. That the Internet was claimed by some in the academy as an exclusively academic preserve is continuing evidence of that culture.

But things have changed. The university system has become massive. University education is a consumer product. In the UK, when I went to university in the 1960s, 8% of the 18-year-old cohort attended university. It is now 35%. It consumes huge resources. What began as a mission in scholarship in the Middle

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Acquisitions Archaeology — The Inspiration of Unexpected Places (Vol. 3 No. 1, February 1991)

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I have the exciting task of uncovering discourse wherever it may be. The more unexpected a discovery, the better. On my recent run through ***ATG*** v.3#1, I found an unlikely point of discursive departure: the postage stamps on the back page.

This particular issue of ***ATG*** was, curiously enough, addressed and mailed as an individual issue; the usual Bulk Rate U.S. Postage Permit 1057 is covered with stamps. I am not sure how I came to possess this issue, since it was not (originally) mailed to me. But the stamps, mundane as they are, still give me some interesting historical insight. On April 3, 1991, it cost $1.21 to mail an individual issue of ***ATG***. (The cost of first-class postage had recently been increased to 29¢.) Three stamps were used to mail this issue. The first was a $1 **Johns Hopkins**, designed by **Bradbury Thompson** and issued on June 7, 1989.[1] The second stamp is a 20-cent "Flag Over Supreme Court," designed by **Dean Ellis** of New York City, and first issued on December 17, 1981.[2] The final stamp is a 1-cent **Margaret Mitchell**, designed by Texan **Ron Adair** and issued June 30, 1986.[3] At 4 and 5/8 oz., it would cost me $1.56 to mail this same issue today to mail it at the first-class rate and several dollars more than that if I needed to send it as a "priority." At first the increase doesn't seem to be that much, perhaps, but that additional 35¢ represents about 29% more than the 1991 postage cost.

While it is certainly intuitive that costs would go up over time, costs do not always go up over time. While I would expect to pay significantly more for postage today than in February 1991, I would expect to pay significantly less for music. In 1991, it would have been reasonable (if not necessarily convenient) to pay $16 or so for a CD. Today, paying more than $9.99 for a complete album seems outrageous — assuming, of course, that you are not buying the album one track at a time. In other words, I expect to pay something like 37% *less* for music.

And while I might write more letters than the average person, I still come out way ahead today over what my same combined music and stamp purchases would have cost me 19 years ago.

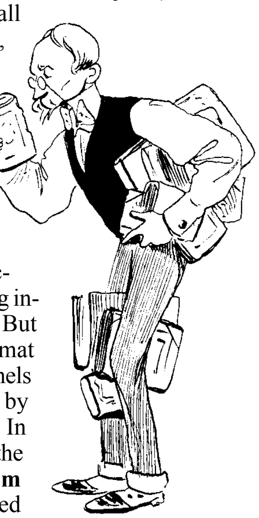
The facile conclusion from this rather brief investigation would be: "Physical things cost more than electronic things; therefore, electronic is cheaper and so it is better." My hope is that anyone reading this has, like me, gained enough empirical evidence through their own work so that I can skip right to the part where I say definitively that I am *not*, in fact, saying that *at all*.

What am I saying then?

First of all, let's assume that the relative value of my postal service and music collection has stayed constant through time. I get fewer things in the mail, but the important things that I get I still find valuable (and some of those things remain irreplaceable). I have more music and more variety of music than I did, but my interests change through time (limiting my selection at any given point), and I am still limited in the absolute quantity of whatever music I choose (like I have always been). I value both mail and music, and for different reasons. Why, then, would I be willing to pay more for postage if I feel it's still worth about the same that it was? And why, if my demand has remained relatively constant for music, would the music industry charge me less for the same amount of music?

The answer is not in the intrinsic worth of the content that is being considered but in its *distribution*. The post office must contend with increasing gas prices and decreasing demand for snail mail. The capitalists in the music industry are confronting piracy with laws and technology that simultaneously give just a few major online retailers incredible control over distribution for commercial music…and now, it seems, the exploding mass market for eBooks.

So my conclusion from all this stuff is that things change. When looking at the information marketplace, we're looking not just at what information is being produced in what quantity and format, but how that *information-in-a-format* (i.e., "content-object") is being distributed. Like all things in acquisitions, we have always been concerned with distribution to a degree. But now distribution of content-objects is driven by a proliferation of formats that must be accounted for in a shifting information landscape. But while options for format abound, delivery channels continue to diminish by way of consolidation. In the consumer market, the likes of **Amazon.com** and **iTunes** have locked down a great deal of retail media distribution in terms of both sales and delivery. The impact of such a movement expands convenience through the integration of products, services, and technology while decreasing competition.



The same thing is happening in the library vendor world. The number of vendors continues to diminish. At the same time, the options for distribution from any one vendor continue to grow. With the integration of new formats (such as eBooks) and distribution methods (patron-driven acquisition, print-on-demand services) with "traditional" formats and distribution, there are arguably more options than ever before. The question is really about value. The information in a content-object is (probably) the most important consideration. In some situations, other factors will prevail (such as the "artifactual value" of a rare book). But there is a second question: How is that content object going to be used? It may well be that convenience of distribution (i.e., timeliness and accessibility) is starting to rival the content itself in importance. And if it is the case that distribution is *also* king, then the shift in the marketplace should be no surprise at all.

Endnotes

1. "1-Dollar Hopkins." *Arago: People, Postage, and the Post*. National Postal Museum. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian. Accessed at: *http://arago.si.edu/*

2. "Flag Over Supreme Court Issue." *Arago: People, Postage, and the Post*. National Postal Museum. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian. Accessed at: *http://arago.si.edu/*

3. "1-cent Mitchell." *Arago: People, Postage, and the Post*. National Postal Museum. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian. Accessed at: *http://arago.si.edu/*

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Ages has become a monument. Its overriding preoccupation is self-preservation. It has a vested interest in the status quo. It is just like the Catholic Church before the Reformation. It cannot reform itself because too much is at stake economically and politically. But it held in low regard by the populace at large. That is very dangerous.

The university system is not accountable in the way that every other publicly supported institutional sector is. As a citizen, I expect all public institutions that are funded by taxes paid by me and my fellow citizens to be held to account for their efficiency — the way they operate and spend money — and their responsiveness to wider economic and societal concern, for instance over skills shortages in the wider economy. And it will not be enough to talk about academic freedom, important though that is. How we deal with the pressures on the idea of the university will define higher education for the next generation.