February 2010

Acquisitions Archaeology -- Managing Resources (Vol. 2 No. 1, February 1990)

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I am revisiting the same issue that I looked at last time[1] for two reasons. The first is that one ad, in particular, caught my attention when I read through this issue the first time. The second is that I want to provide a demonstration of how one may excavate multiple coherent *discursive formations* from the same "provisional, visible grouping" of statements[2] — a grouping that may be thought of archaeologically as a *stratum*. Indeed, within the February 1990 issue of *ATG*, there are many things being discussed within our professional discourse many different ways. One such discursive formation that I discussed previously emerged from the anxiety about how the value of journal publications could be evaluated and communicated within the library community. At the same time, another discursive formation was developing around the possibilities and promise of technology.

In the short time that I have been working on my archaeological investigations here, I have found (given the relatively recent time period I'm working with, archaeologically speaking) that change can be measured effectively on at least two scales: music and technology. In February 1990, for example, **Midnight Oil's** *Blue Sky Mining* was released, which helps put things in personal, if not geologic, perspective. (I wore out my *Blue Sky Mining* cassette long ago.) Looking at changes in technology over the past twenty years is also instructive; change has been so rapid over the past two decades that investigating a discursive formation about technology allows us to situate a given set of circumstances — and related statements about the technolgy and circumstances — in a fairly specific context.

One technology in particular helps determine the discursive framework for how technology in libraries was being discussed at the beginning of 1990. What started my thinking in this direction was an ad from **Readmore** that ran on page 24.[3] Unfortunately, our present-day copyright labyrinth confounds the reproduction of the ad within the context of this article,[4] but I will try to convey the visual gestalt that hit me when I first saw this ad. The ad is for a **Readmore** product called "**Remo**" (whose etymology should be obvious), and the top half of the ad is space deadicated to the bold promise to: "REDUCE YOUR SERI-ALS MANAGEMENT PROBLEMS." Such a promise remains compelling even to my twenty-first century eyes, and it is precisely that ability to relate to such a statement at the present time that makes the rest of the ad all the more interesting.

Just under this large declaration, off to the side of the page, is a small hand-drawn image of a floppy disk. As we have all become aware, technology is most captivating when it's small. My **iPod Shuffle** — the size of a money clip — still impresses me every time I look at it. "Wow," I think, "so much technology in such a small space." **Readmore** was onto the same idea: the big sell for the **Remo** product is a powerful but understated technology. Indeed, the text of the ad suggests that you will be solving your serials management problems with just "a few square inches of counter space."

And how?

With "the first microcomputer-based software package" that "handles the full range of serials management functions."

You could even use **Remo** in a "network configuration." Wow — so much technology in such a small space!

And yet, I find that I am unconsciously reading "electronic journals" for "serials." It is strange to think about the dawn of computer-based journals management and the promise that such a giant leap seemed to hold. **Readmore** is presenting a still-novel solution for managing print serials, and are — by their own claim — the first to do it by way of desktop computing. And if you happened to be worried about using the technology, don't worry — "in the event of questions, an answer is only a phone call away on our toll-free hotline."

What?! More than anything, the reassurance of the advertised toll-free hotline instead of the now-ubiquitous URL jars me out of the present.

Flash forward almost twenty years to November 2009. An ad was run by **Swets** for the **eSource Manager**. (As an aside, **Swets** is the company that may or may not hold the copyright — by way of the **Blackwell** Periodicals Division — to the **Remo** ad that I am *not* reproducing in this article.) The **Swets** ad is (either by design or by coincidence) strikingly similar to the **Remo** ad structurally, though it is not at all the same.[5]

The header of the **Swets** ad reads: "Master your electronic resources." Clearly this statement is similar to **Readmore's** statement. In **Swets'** case, though, it is the promise (and problem) that is understated. The graphic here — now in color! — gets full prominence: a stylized Rubik's cube that conveys, above all else, multidimentionality. So instead of a two dimensional disk showing the smallness of technology, an image of a large 3-D puzzle suggests ordered complexity, as well as the growing importance of images.

The text for the **eSource Manager** ad is, like the **Readmore** ad, focused and concise. However, this is where the true difference lies: **Remo** was about tracking physical pieces to ensure access. The four bullet points of the **Swets** ad are all about licensing, including tracking "license conditions" while providing an "overview of all digital rights." And licensing, more often than not, implies *limits* on access. Leaving aside the larger and certainly more controvertial issue of whether the restrictions set forth in licenses need be either as explicit or complex as they frequently are, we can observe a shift not in structure but in *function* of managing resources. The shift is three-fold. First, it is a shift in information environment, where we can say that more information is potentially accessible today than in February 1990. It is also a shift in information technology, where electronically-disseminated resources are perhaps more vulnerable to unacceptable (or at least unexpected) uses. Finally, it is a shift in information stragegy. Not a shift

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component, science and engineering, in favor of eBook packages bought directly from a large publisher.

The approval plan blast furnace has already begun to cool, and it's time for libraries, and vendors themselves too, to acknowledge that few libraries are going to need us to keep on acting like **U.S. Steel** turning out the ingots. Instead, we need to be like mini-mills, companies more flexible, efficient, and innovative than the big steelmakers they put out of business. Unfortunately, book vendors have means that resemble those of the mini-mills, while the **U.S. Steels** of our world, in terms of means, are companies like **Amazon**, or like the eBook publishers big enough to sell direct to libraries in a big way. And of course

the **U.S. Steel** comparison hardly does justice to **Google**. Who knows what **Google** will be permitted to do and will choose to do in the way of bookselling? In case that's not enough uncertainty, let's add that book vendors will need to re-tool under library budget conditions more unstable than ever.

We all have assumptions based on what's worked in the past. So did the steel industry.

What's needed now are companies who know enough about libraries to help them build local environments — comprised of customized services, databases, interfaces — where eBooks and print books both get their due, as do old books and new books, where the titles most likely to be used can be acquired with little effort, sometimes automatically and sometimes not, and where selectors might be anyone in the campus community.

Does that sound like a job for **U.S. Steel**? 🌳

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tive of supplying any publication a library might choose to order. On the part of those joining the band, it took an appetite for creating a new thing and for wagering all the risks inherent therein.

As my readers know, the buyers of serious and scholarly books are widely scattered and very thin on the ground. In those days, however, these buyers were in the forefront of the development of computer applications. Apart from sectors devoted to mathematics and science, the academic and research libraries sought and successfully achieved a worthy place on the leading edge of such developments. Any firm genuinely committed to serving this highly specialized and unique profession in its natural lair was well advised to associate itself with the new and novel developments being put into place by the pacemakers in developing these applications. Therefore, this band of Argonauts shouldered yet another new and substantial risk in order to serve the knowledge needs of the institutions and individuals it had identified as those with which it wished to work.

In developing our bibliographic control operational software, we pioneered several new approaches to the problems inherent in using devices originally designed to deal with numbers rather than sophisticated alphabetical text. The fundamental key to these innovations was to reprogram the software to ignore the usually fixed and predefined number of characters assigned to a record field, which had been a quite satisfactory gambit for dealing with fields filled with numbers only. To solve the problem of dealing with alphabetically-based fields of varying lengths, we insisted from the beginning that delimiters define the beginning and end of each field in the record. The IT staff initially resisted, as they were comfortable with fixed, predefined field lengths, but soon they appreciated the wisdom of using field delimiters. One reason for this resistance was the amount of code required to format records this way. We appropriated the dollar sign ($) to indicate a field followed by an alpha character to define the content of that field, and we maintained a strict order of the sequence of delimited fields in the record format. To the best of my knowledge, we were the first to develop this code, and it became a common method in bibliographic record formatting within a short time of our use and the subsequent circulation of our records to libraries. Such a flexible field record led, in turn, to a much more flexible method of database searching. The ability to search our bibliographic databases quickly and efficiently in terms of machine time and cost-effective logical operations was of paramount importance in the development of our bibliographic control software. And this became increasingly important when we undertook the construction of utilizable catalog collections in academic libraries.

Building these systems and writing the code took terrifying lengths of time to accomplish in contrast to the relatively short period it had taken to write the code needed to run the **Flexowriters**. It takes many years to develop systems of any sophistication and, unhappily, bibliographic control systems of any great utility demand substantial sophistication. To build a searchable, bibliographic database based on the code driving the **Flexowriters** took several programmers months of time. This was an extended, nail-biting affair. The payroll continued to mount but produced no revenue for months. Some of the bookselling staff routinely questioned the wisdom of such an undertaking, and it took a strong control of management impatience to endure the lengthy intervals required in systems development.

A major element in expediting such development work was the need for an accurate and clear set of instructions to the IT staff on the required outputs. Absent such elaborate instructions, the programmers built in all manner of options, as they were unsure of all the outcomes needed and took the frequently ruinous and counterproductive precautionary principle to include unnecessary or deferrable outcomes, much like most off-the-shelf software. I quickly learned that it was desirable to design a flowchart of the new systems we needed and thus supply a clear picture of the desired outcomes.

Some readers may wonder why this installment of the history of the firm is almost exclusively devoted to the internal development of corporate bibliographic control systems. This was a conscious decision, for I opine that most of my readers are using one of the off-the-shelf bibliographic systems that have long been in existence. So, they are not familiar with the thought, the sometimes futile efforts, the wild array of difficulties, and the sheer exercise of will implicit in the first assays in the development of systems that use primitive devices not originally designed for such applications. Today, it looks like a piece of cake, but it was a harrowing experience for those of us connected with the first few organizations that endeavored to bring these stupid devices to heel and to provide the kind of inestimable service that is now widely available in bibliographic control systems. I apologize to all who think this is "more about penguins than they ever wished to know." 🐾

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from one definite, finite strategy to another, obviously, but a shift that creates possibilities in November 2009 that are multiple, multidimensional, and far more uncertain. **Remo** is all about *what* (items) we manage — **eSource Manager** and similar systems are all about *how* we manage whatever (content) we need to.

And, of course, the ad for **eSource Manager** doesn't direct you to a toll-free hotline. It gives you a URL. 🐾

Endnotes

1. **Jesse Holden**. "Acquisitions Archaeology: Valuing Anxiety" *Against the Grain*, v.21#6 (Dec. 2009-Jan. 2010), p. 77.
2. **Michel Foucault**. 1972, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*. Trans. by **A. M. Sheridan Smith**. New York: Pantheon Books, p 31.
3. **Readmore**. "Reduce Your Serials Management Problems." *Against the Grain*, v.2#1 (Feb. 1990), p. 24.
4. My thanks to **Bruce Strauch** and **Laura Gasaway**, for their expert opinions on copyright.
5. **Swets**. "Master Your Electronic Resources." *Against the Grain*, v.21#5 (Nov. 2009), p. 34.