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People Profile: Dennis Dillon

Editor

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RR: Today’s libraries are already adapting to the growing range of sources of content, utilizing Google, working directly with publishers, reframing existing library content, and turning to tools like federated search to deliver content to users. So, the recent Google Book Search settlement continues to accelerate these changes as the race to make digital content available and accessible grows increasingly urgent. All of these options have both advantages and shortfalls. Ultimately, consumer demand will help libraries determine how to best distribute content.

ATG: Many of the trends that are impacting our world are problematic for libraries and especially their budgets — at least the way we have always done business. I am talking about print-on-demand, pay-per-view, search-and-discover tools that allow user access to portions of digital content. How can/will libraries and library administrations cope/adapt?

DD: I suspect that we will all eventually realize that we can’t buy our way out of this problem. The world of networked information is simply too big, and in the age of Google, every faculty member and every student on campus knows all too well what resources are potentially available. Networks and bad economies have a history of being ruthless efficiency generators, and both tend to squeeze out excess and middlemen. Unfortunately, both consortia and libraries are in a sense middlemen, since they both sit in the supply chain between the publisher and the reader. Part of the challenge going forward will be — how can each of us add sufficient value to networked information to prevent being bypassed.

Part of the answer will lie in the series of different business models that we can expect to see over the next few years as the economy weakens and as publishers begin to adapt to a primarily digital distribution model. In the end however, I believe that a metering model based on the way we currently use electricity will increasingly win out. If the 80% of our information needs can be met with validated information that essentially comes out of a modernized Internet wall socket just like electricity, then we’ll happily pay our bills, comfortable with the knowledge that at least everything we are paying for is being used. For many libraries, selecting a few channels from the digital pay-as-you-go information wall socket (for example: “give me two STM journal aggregators and a million eBook history collection”) may be sufficient for most needs, while research libraries are likely to still need separate, highly specialized, efforts to capture the more esoteric material required to support their programs.

Of course, one of the critical issues with pay-per-view, print-on-demand and other flexible pay as you go models, is that a library can’t be confident of its eventual costs unless they have a realistic handle on campus information.

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