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As I See It! -- Abstracting and Indexing Services -- The Ostriches of Information

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As I See It! — Abstracting and Indexing Services — The Ostriches of Information

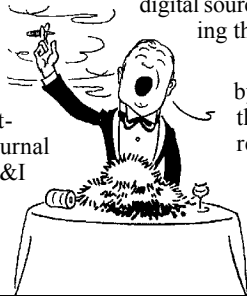
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Work as a consultant in scholarly communications follows many paths, and uncovers many perspectives. A recent assignment has prompted me to consider the longer term future of abstracting and indexing (A&I) services. My interest has been reinforced by the recent publication of two reports, one concerned with faculty use of the library as a portal, and the other on the routes by which readers navigate to scholarly content.

It seems to me that A&I services face a difficult and uncertain future. There are three reasons for this:

- ‘The **Google** effect’: the increasing use of **Google** or **Google Scholar**, and other general search engines;
- The discernible trend in scholars by-passing the library to find the information they require; and
- A&I services’ own business models, which are wholly focussed on the library market.

In a study published in September 2008, **Simon Inger** and **Tracy Gardner** reported on a survey of readers’ behavior in starting their research (**Inger S & Gardner T**, *How Readers Navigate to Scholarly Content*, www.sic.ox14.com/howreadersnavigatetoscholarlycontent.pdf, 2008). It revealed that usage of both generalist search engines and A & I services has increased, largely at the expense of library Web pages and OPACs. Where readers begin research with a literature survey, and search for journal articles on a specific subject, both A&I services and general search engines have become more popular than library or publisher Web pages.



A&I services provide a single stop for the key literature in any discipline, but no A&I service covers everything in the discipline. Most of them do not take the reader to interdisciplinary material that may well add insight to their research, while the generalist search engines may well do so.

Is this trend away from the OPAC and library Web pages significant? A report published by **Ithaka** in August 2008 pulled together two 2006 surveys, one of US faculty and the other of librarians (**Schonfeld R. & Housewright R.**, *Ithaka’s 2006 Studies of Key Stakeholders in the Digital Transformation in Higher Education*, www.ithaka.org/research/faculty-and-librarian-surveys, 2008). It reported that the profile and perceived relevance of the library have declined. There are considerable variations in faculty perception by discipline, but the general trend is that the perception of the library as the gateway to information has fallen, even though librarians still regard this role as very important. Faculty believe that their reliance on the library as the gateway will continue to fall. As a result, the library is becoming invisible. Libraries face a considerable challenge in marketing their relevance to their users. Researchers, especially in the sciences and in economics, look to other digital sources of information, and are by-passing the library.

If academic libraries are being by-passed by the very faculty that they serve, how are A&I services reacting? Well, most of them are doggedly adhering to the tried and tested mechanism of institutional pricing for academic libraries. They are not offer-

ing any alternative pricing schemes to reach markets outside the university and research library markets with which they are familiar. While they continue to pursue their core library markets, they ignore other users out there that might be prepared to pay for direct access if the price was right:

- There are professionals who operate outside universities who need access to published professional and research information. Many of them operate in small organizations — SMEs (Small and Medium-sized Enterprises) in Europe, SMBs in the United States. In the USA, there are 24.1 million firms employing fewer than ten people, of which 19.5 million have no employees other than the owners (www.census.gov/epcd/www/smallbus.html). In the UK, there are 4.4 million such firms, out of a total of 4.7 million firms of all sizes (www.berr.gov.uk); they include consultants like me. In both countries, it is the small firms that drive innovation and competition. If only a small fraction of these firms depend on their intellectual capital and specialist knowledge and expertise for their existence, they present a sizeable market for research information and for A&I navigation tools. Nevertheless, they are ignored by A&I services.
- There are also junior and community colleges (in the UK we call this sector ‘Further Education’). While these institutions are primarily involved in teaching vocational courses, some provide entry into the university sector, and many of their teaching staff might well have recourse to A&I services to locate relevant content in disciplines such as education, healthcare, basic engineering, business studies etc... But they cannot afford or justify high prices predicated on intensive usage in a university environment.

There are no pricing schemes for these ‘light users’. A&I vendors do not offer small institution rates, or ‘pay-per-session’, or short term access for less than a year. As a result, A&I vendors are ignoring — and losing — a range of customers that would find their products useful but only at a price that realistically represents value for money for them. Most vendors simply have not developed business models or mechanisms that would enable online purchase by individuals or small firms. Yet e-commerce systems and **PayPal** are commonplace. Access and authentication controls are highly developed. Book and journal publishers can sell any individual an eBook or a journal subscription at an individual (rather than an institutional) subscription price. Why not other information products?

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scriptions, elimination of claiming, and moving from Standing Orders to approvals.

On a personal note, attending the **8th Annual Mid-South E-Resource Symposium** at **Mississippi State University** was more than just a professional development opportunity for me; it was a homecoming. I was the Serials Librarian at **MSU** for two years, and I helped plan the 2nd and 3rd annual symposiums (which, back then, were called E-Resource Workshops).

Fresh out of graduate school, the Serials Librarian position at **MSU** was my first professional job, and it was there, under the tutelage of the Serials Coordinator, **Maria Collins**, that I first learned about the world of serials and electronic resources. (Yes, the same **Maria**

Collins that was one of the speakers at this year’s symposium. We had a nice reunion.) **MSU** is where I met my husband, **John**, who was the evening Circulation Supervisor at **Mitchell Memorial Library** at the time. Going back to Starkville for this year’s symposium was a little like going home, for both **John** and me. We were able to introduce all of our **MSU** friends and colleagues to our son, **Cullen**, and we were able to catch up with a lot of familiar and friendly faces.

I would personally like to thank all of the faculty and staff at the **Mississippi State University Libraries** who have had a hand in planning these symposiums over the years and who keep this program going year after year. They are doing good things down there in Mississippi, and I encourage *Against the Grain* readers to keep an eye on this highly worthwhile workshop in the coming years. 🐼

So what do we potential customers do? We default to **Google**, and **Google Scholar**.

Google is a starting point for much serious research. It is free of charge. And it is good enough for most initial searches, given that we are otherwise priced out of the market. We may also visit a nearby university library on occasions where a generalist search engine is simply not good enough. There, we might simply use **Web of Science** or **Scopus**.

Speaking personally, my search engine of choice is **Google/Google Scholar**. I am generally looking for survey research and other sources of data, together with literature on publishing, library processes and reader behavior. Although I am not engaged in scholarship, I am not entirely untypical. I know my field, and I can recognize what is useful and what is irrelevant. **Google** gives me information that I would otherwise be unaware of. It is effective, and it presents a real alternative to A&I services priced at a premium for institutional libraries. The value of the selective, quality controlled A&I product is outweighed by the money involved.

In the longer term, it is probably not the big discipline-based indexes that will suffer. Databases such as **BIOSIS**, **EconLit**, **PsychINFO**, **Sociological Abstracts** and **CINAHL** are “category killers.” Such category killers will survive because they are the databases that are demonstrated to freshmen undergraduates as the principal tool for navigating the particular discipline. They become part of the information furniture of the discipline. It is all those other indexes that are under threat. They are “secondary” databases, irrespective of their depth of coverage going back years, their value as highly specialized indexes or as interdisciplinary databases, or the range of content they cover — books, journals, government/IGO publications, grey literature etc...

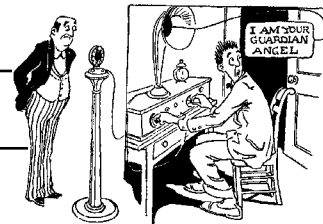
So A&I publishers are facing multi-directional challenges:

- Faculty and researchers are increasingly doubtful of the relevance of the library to their research activities, while A&I services continue to treat the library as the sole purchaser of their products;
- **Google** and other generalist search engines can provide a ‘good enough’ result, at least as the starting point of an inquiry;
- The opportunity to enfranchise users, like me and thousands of other small organizations and individuals, is being studiously ignored, because we are outside the cosy institutional framework that so obsesses them.

In summary, they need to convince users of both relevance and cost-effectiveness. They need to explore wider, albeit more difficult, markets than the academic and research library community in which they have felt so cosy. Otherwise their businesses will be eroded. Users disenfranchised by vendors’ current pricing policies are prepared to pay for good information tools and for the convenience of using them where they work. It is extraordinary that the opportunity to make more money continues to be ignored. Hiding their heads in the sand will not make the challenge — or the opportunity — go away. But it may hasten their demise. 🐘

Media Minder — Building a Video Game Collection: Resources to Help you Get Started

Column Editor: **Philip Hallman** (Ambassador Books and Media) <philip@absbook.com>



My interest in video games began, and subsequently ended, with the release of Pong. It was Christmas, 1975, and my eldest brother bought a system for all us kids as a family gift. We proceeded to open the box and placed the overlay on the television screen. Excitedly, we hooked up the cable connections at the back of the set. These were the days long before installing a VCR was an act similar to screwing in a new light bulb, so doing anything *behind* the set seemed foreign and a risky undertaking best left to a TV repair man. After a few minutes of tinkering, we were ready to play. Two rectangles about the size of a cigarette lighter appeared on the screen and the remote control allowed you to move the rectangles up or down in a straight line. A smaller ball of light went back and forth across the screen in a manner reminiscent to ping pong (hence the game’s name) and the object was to use the bigger rectangles as if they were paddles and hit the ball of light out of the reach of your opponent. When the “ball” was struck, an electronic noise, kind of like a thump sound, was generated. Like Peggy Lee, I asked myself “is that all there is?” The excitement I felt initially soon vanished and I probably played it no more than a half dozen times. Apparently, I wasn’t the only one to feel that way. While hundreds of thousands of units were sold that first Christmas, it didn’t generate the massive interest in home video games that its manufacturers had hoped for or intended and most Pong games were relegated to the basement and eventually the junk yard.

Fast forward three decades. Thanks to the world wide success of the home computer and vast improvements in technology, video game design has improved exponentially and the home video game market is so successful that it now rivals and often outsells movie ticket sales as the primary source of popular entertainment. In 2006, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that **Warner Bros.** film studio announced that they were undertaking a concerted effort to become a major video game publisher. According to the article, the film industry is feeling the heat from the new kid on the block. Lower box-office returns, revenues lost to piracy and slowing DVD sales have led the studios to begin developing their own video games in order to compete more effectively. Additionally, the concept of convergence is upon us. The relationship between movies and games will be greater than ever. Most will be marketed and promoted together and noted directors will be hired to help create the look of the game in addition to the film.

Responding to the frenzy, colleges and universities have joined the band wagon too. Many now offer courses that examine the cultural and sociological significance that game playing has had on our society. **Sheila Murphy**, Assistant Professor in the Department of Screen Arts & Cultures at the **University of Michigan**, has taught a course on video gaming for the past seven years. “When I first developed and taught the course in 2003,” **Murphy** says, “there were few academic sources available on video games and most video games were collected by avid fans, not libraries. But all of that has changed quite rapidly. Today there are peer-reviewed video and computer game journals (*Game Studies*), numerous academic programs in interactive media and game design (**USC**, etc.) and the emerging scholarly field of gaming studies. Courses on gaming are taught across the US and Europe and draw students from the arts, humanities and engineering, all eager to study video games as code, art and industry.”

Additionally, other academic institutions are teaching the skills needed to create, program and design video games. As **Murphy** mentions, one leading place is the University of Southern California and their Electronic Arts Interactive Entertainment Program and Game Innovation lab. On the more grassroots level, many community colleges are seeing a growing demand for game design courses and have responded by developing degrees for interested students. **Austin Community College** is just one example of an institution that now offers three associate degree plans — Game Design, Game Art and Game & Visualization Programming.

So where do libraries fit into this equation? They’ve joined in as well. Or, at least some have. Public libraries are accustomed to collecting what the general public demands, so many now have full out collection development and circulation policies for video games. Academic libraries are further behind, but not all. The **University of Michigan** and the **University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign**, two of the top ten largest library collections in the country, are going full speed ahead to collect and develop video game collections and archives to be used by their campus communities. According to its Website, the **University of Texas at Austin’s Center for American History** has already created a video game archive that will seek “to collect and provide access to materials that not only facilitate research in

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