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

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A
t 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. Jour-
nals 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 fac-
simile. 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 de-
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 individu-
als like me, living in a rural community where
bandwidth is still constrained by the capacity of
the telephone copper wires for the last mile, ac-
cessibility is more mixed — the speed of the In-
ternet 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 partic-
ipate. The Internet
was an exclusive ac-
ademic preserve.

The consumer market proved
them wrong. And we will
return to this
culture of aca-
demic exclu-
sivity 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
want 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 Philo-
sophical Transactions — however their data-
base 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. Devel-

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<http://www.elsevier.com/locate/col>

opments such as Portico and CLOCKSS/
LOCKSS put the archive into the hands of
trusted not-for-profit organizations indepen-
dent of publishers, with a measure of control
in librarians’ hands. It always struck me as absurd
that publishers were expected to become archi-
vists, 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 fore-
seeable 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. Univer-
sities 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 continu-
ing evidence of that culture.

But things have changed. The university
system has become massive. University educa-
tion 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
continued on page 69

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Worries by Solving Old Concerns

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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 gave 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. 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. The final stamp is a 1-cent Margaret Mitchell, designed by Texan Ron Adair and issued June 30, 1986. 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 conveniently) 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 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.

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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.