
Editorial

Let's start with miscellaneous quotes:

A student was asked to explain why, in his dissertation draft, there were so many www references and hardly any print sources named. Well, he said, I know there are some relevant books and journals – but, if I leave the terminal to go and get them, that means I lose my terminal and have to start queuing all over again, so it's half an hour or longer before I can get back to work!

Bill Gates is developing "software to put books on the screen" and expects to see "bestselling books downloaded from the Web within four years" – on to some sort of electronic paper. (*The Week*, 30 October 1999, page 13)

Alyn Jones - contributor in this number of LIRN - has had his research results published on his (QME) website for over a year, so what would have been the point in duplicating them here?

"We need to keep conventional library and book statistics, among other things, to see if the www explosion results in increased or decreased use: the hypothesis of substitution may prove false." (*unnamed statistical expert*)

"These difficulties in presentation will surely be solved, partly by improved design, partly by improved technology, but mostly by change in reading habits to meet the new conditions. Possibly improved subject and citation based alerting will replace scanning for all users, not just those who now prefer it. As the librarian of a library about to receive a number of important titles in electronic format only, I expect the change to require much work with both the users and the systems."

(*David Goodman, Co-Chair Electronic Journals Task Force, Princeton University Library - liblicense-1@lists.yale.edu, 23 October 1999*)

"WHAT'S THE GREAT IDEA? Like most ideas, it's really very simple. The plan is to create a series of bright, new buildings in local shopping areas – combining life-long learning and cultural attractions with all the services normally associated with libraries, from classic books to the latest computer games. . . . A revolutionary delivery approach developed with the council's Adult Education Service . . . to boost educational, training and job opportunities in Tower Hamlets." (*Tower Hamlets IDEA Store, 1999*)

Whatever else, this is no time for standing still. Some changes are fundamental – with consequences that no one can yet fathom; some changes are presentational, but the presentation may make the difference between funding in thousands of pounds or in millions. The Follett Review of academic libraries resulted in millions of pounds spent on IT and network development and more millions on library buildings. The same, optimistically, may happen now for public libraries.

But neither is this a time for things to get simpler. While cottage teleworking may be the rage for some, the queues in libraries get longer – both to use terminals and to borrow books. Keeping track of this is an important task for research – essentially in two dimensions.

First, there is the analysis of problems and opportunities. Paradoxically the great debates on the future of the book and on electronic journals result in a deeper realisation of the nature of these conventional publications. Functional differences between books, full text journals, reference sources, and Abstract & Indexing databases become much better understood when they are threatened with extinction or transformation! Never mind if Bill Gates' prophecy on book format comes to pass or not, the essential of a 'book' will remain – a coherent, well ordered collection of thoughts and experience to be available for reference or to be read from cover to cover. What if Alyn Jones' piece is on the web – how will the rest of the world get to know of its existence? Bibliographic tools are essentially marketing and publicity instruments. The functional requirements of the review and of citation by other authors will not go away – though they may take new forms.

The second dimension is keeping track of Solutions being tried and of Innovations: analysing them and publicising results. Arguably, at the stage we have reached, this is more vital than deepening our understanding of underlying problems. It is probably more difficult; it certainly calls for speed and agility – qualities not usually associated with LIS research! But to be positive our approach now must focus on new solutions and the potential of new technology – requiring, in David Goodman's words, "much work with both the users and the systems". This has to include the messy but vital area of Costs and Numbers.

Let the barriers tumble between researcher and journalist. And remember the most vital audience for research results is not the LIS community but the world at large – politicians and funders in particular. (*More on this next time.*)

As it happens, the main contributions to this number all focus on what I have termed the 'great debate' in the academic library field: how to overcome the impossible logistics and costs of traditional academic learning provision. My own review article and Frances Boyle's research aim firmly at Document Delivery opportunities and research. Susan Copeland's article on Electronic Theses deals admirably with technical and 'constitutional' opportunities; but, underlying this is the thought – elaborated by David Spiller – that much valuable research work needs exposure. And there is evidence once again of further advances in the USA than here.

The significance of Alyn Jones' contribution has already been hinted at. If the web can be exploited in this way, then the function of journals such as this may change to describing the scope and significant results of research rather than to publish the full text research report.

Finally, there is an unusually varied selection of Book Reviews – representing, I believe, an increasingly important function of this *Newsletter*.

Readers may be surprised at no mention of the new MLAC – Museums, Libraries and Archives Commission. This is purely a question of timing. A consultant's report is due in a few weeks' time, so the picture should be clearer by the time the next Editorial comes to be written. We have had years of research mapping and evaluation exercises to accompany reductions in funding overall. Let us hope that people in the new Commission do at least read and digest the research evaluations of recent years before specifying more of the same!

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