

CURL Members' Meeting 16 March 2005

The Googlezonization of Information Provision: End of the Road for Libraries? Or Virtual Fire and Flood

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(delivered by John MacColl)

The presentation was based around EPIC2014, a flash presentation produced by the Museum of Media History, located at <http://epic.makingithappen.co.uk/>

Developments in the digital environment are moving faster and in different ways than most people have predicted; for example, who would have thought of Google digitising Bodleian texts?

Herbert Van de Sompel stated that librarians are fast becoming irrelevant in a digital age — 'the roof is on fire' - libraries are designed for non-digital formats.

Is Google our saviour? How do we deal with the flood of information on our networks? Is Google the best we can hope for? Do we have to rely on it?

Libraries have a jumble of formats to deal with. Many of our offerings are now not in our control – we have only a licence to access them. Users don't care about these and other issues facing libraries and librarians – their expectations regarding access to and provision of information are high, and Google is successful.

In contrast, libraries can no longer safeguard equity of access – our locus of control has shrunk. Users perceive there is arbitrary inequality of access to information resources through libraries and a multiplicity of routes – we are letting them down.

We are middlemen, aggregating the work of others, but that is no longer needed in many areas. Our staff still try to capture all resources in a single portal, but this can't be done. If a publisher has a portal why does the library invent another? This is aggregating what's already been aggregated. We have total dependency on information held upstream in the chain but the chain is no longer simple: we can't control it.

Perhaps we should be rethinking ourselves and how information is provided. What about being more actively involved in scholarly communication? Should we become publishers ourselves?

The good news:

- libraries are close to authors: we are in a good position to obtain and archive institutional material
- we embrace new technology fast
- we are knowledgeable people
- we provide redundancy of services not required in the digital environment so can find capacity for change.

The bad news:

- organisationally we are slow and we work for slow organisations
- we are slow to recognise that new technology offers or requires new modes of operation
- the information chain runs on Internet time.

What can we learn from Google?

- Google is based on a community of recommendation – the most used Internet links are given a higher ranking in Google’s results display. This is very close to the system of citation ranking and impact factors that we use to steer users to resources, and for RAE support –we could build on it
- we must provide more content
- text mining should be *our* business – why are we not making it so? We need better discovery algorithms – Google’s technology works and our users use it.

Is it sensible for us to deal with Googlezon, or as Lorcan Dempsey put it, Amazoogole? There’s a danger that like the black widow spider it will eat its mate....

Is it then the end of the road for libraries? It could be if we:

- continue with handcrafted solutions for dealing with metadata
- don’t think boldly about what users want and expect from library portals
- don’t value our collective power as a major research content owner/provider
- continue to replicate effort in each organisation (why not centralise effort in dealing with metadata, etc.?)
- don’t pool resources to build a Googlezon - CURLzon? - of our own.

Points arising from discussion following the presentation:

- An issue for CURL is sectorisation. ‘Libraries’ are important as a whole – the national collection meeting the collective need
- Will Google be good for us? Why has Google addressed research libraries?
- Should we position ourselves in relation to the impact of universities on society – the relationship with the institution is the key to how we operate. However, Google’s success comes through a focuses on its actual audience whereas we think institutionally or in accordance with Government initiatives
- A way forward might be to concentrate and pool effort where savings can be made. Also to focus less on print concerns and more on the future. Jenny Campbell (CIO University of California) stated ‘The future may not depend on what higher education libraries think or do’.
- The future is about partnerships. We need to convince people of our role and value: Google is waiting for this
- From the RLN perspective
 - There is a need to think big. The UK problem is thinking small. With its huge resources Google just cuts through this
 - There must be a relentless focus on the end user. Google’s success is based on this and making sure it provides what users want
- We have ambition but there is no money in the public sector to support it. Have we spent to best effect even when resources have become available? For example, was NOF Digitise the best way to make that investment of expenditure and effort? Also, the current JISC digitisation programme has £10 million supporting six projects over three years – the scale and scope brings many difficulties. The scale of funding normally available for us to apply for is far too small to make a difference. As a result we think negatively, focusing on the problems. We lack the business model.