

The 'Googlezonisation' of Information Provision: the End of the Road for Libraries?

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In 2004, the Museum of Media History in Florida released a video on the web that presented a speculative 'history' of the next ten years, looking back from the year 2014, and predicted that a merger of the giant internet companies Google and Amazon would result in the traditional news media being replaced by 'Googlezon'. The merged company would deliver customised news to millions of online readers, based on their preferences as expressed through the information they routinely provided to internet companies about their interests and consumer preferences. In their predicted scenario, Googlezon would trump Microsoft and defeat The New York Times in a legal case that would leave it unchallenged as the news provider of choice around the globe. The danger, warned the video, is that what users would get as a result would be a mass of trivial information, most of it sensational, and much of it untrue.

Is this prediction relevant to libraries? Does 'Googlezon' threaten the value of the information services we provide as well? A few years ago, Herbert Van de Sompel of the Los Alamos National Laboratory, creator of several important digital library technologies in recent years, delivered a challenging address at Cornell University in which he prophesied the end of libraries in their current form. He called his talk 'The roof is on fire'. The fire in his analogy is the power of digital networks. Libraries were built for and are designed around non-digital objects. Libraries are not necessarily redundant in the age of digital networks, but they are fast becoming irrelevant.

Our resources arrive in a jumble of different formats. As well as printed or microform, we have a variety of digital formats to cope with, and even more unstandardised metadata schemas. We have a huge processing job to do on ingest. We also have to cope with the fact that many of our offerings are not within our immediate control – we only have a licence for their use. But that fact is not understood by, and anyway of no interest to, our library users. Van de Sompel declared 'It has become increasingly difficult for libraries to fulfil their fundamental role of safeguarding equity of access'. But how can access be equal when we don't control the gateways? We control our own front doors, and we have control over the virtual doorways to some of our resources, via Athens, for example. But the data providers have their own doorways to be negotiated, and often

will not give us proxy control. For users, this presents a seemingly arbitrary inequality in access, which leads them to distrust the environment they are in, and to become frustrated with their librarians who have not resolved the challenge of equal access which is, as Van de Sompel says, fundamental to our reason for existing.

Back in 1996, Ross Atkinson of Cornell University urged academic libraries to create a 'control zone' – effectively to become the publishers of the research data which is being grabbed by commercial publishers and sold back to us at ruinous cost. Not only is the cost exorbitant, but the packaging of the content we have to buy has removed our ability to select and therefore control what we make available. We must not abandon selection because publishers can push content onto us. We are at present being bullied by 'big deal' content.

Van de Sompel expressed the same point a different way. 'At the core of the problems that libraries are facing is the total dependency on information held upstream in the information chain'. Libraries have become little more than aggregators of already available aggregations. Our role as aggregators of content ought to be a bold and necessary one, as selectors of the most relevant content for our user communities – not as weakly branded providers of content pushed on to us by the most powerful publishers.

But we should not despair yet. Libraries are close to authors, and in a good position to obtain and manage the product of the academy. It may not yet be too late to create a 'control zone'. If we seize the moment, we can occupy a space that should be a new library role in the digital world. We can learn from Googlezon, to provide content in quantity, with a spare and usable interface, and fast responsiveness. We can build on the 'community of recommendations' which already exists in the academic world through citation, to provide a service based on the demonstrated academic value of papers – not, as with Google, on the popularity of sites as measured by the number of inbound links to them, with one eye always on the wishes of advertisers.

If we act collectively we have the chance to create a digital library environment that we control, and which will suit our users much better than the one which Googlezon threatens to provide. We can give our learning and research communities much better tools and much stronger content than Googlezon will ever manage, since it can ultimately only be a toy of consumer markets. We have a mission which runs deeper, with values based upon the activity of research – and learning led by research – that is not dependent upon the state of the stock market nor led by the entertainment industry. We have the content; let's not give it away.

Society has a sufficient need of research that our alternative to Googlezon has at least a chance of realisation. But let us credit Googlezon with displaying the boldness and vision to think about a level of provision that libraries have instinctively shied away from, believing it unattainable, ourselves too much the poor relations of the content world. If we continue to shy away, we may have to face the end of the road for libraries – or see the roof fire eventually consume the whole edifice.

A Joint Venture to provide an International Resource: 'The Information Literacy Website'

Debbi Boden

The CILIP CSG Information Literacy Group has been in existence for just over a year and half. The aim of the group is to provide a forum across all sectors of the profession, which encourages debate and allows the exchange of knowledge in all aspects of Information Literacy (IL). Over the last year the group has been involved in projects such as the creation of the CILIP Information Literacy definition and the organisation of a three-day international conference on IL (LILAC 2005). The group also worked with the editor of UPDATE to provide content for a bumper themed IL edition of UPDATE in January, providing fifteen articles on IL.

Next years plans are already in motion with LILAC 2006 taking place at Leeds University on 27th – 29th March 2006; keynote speakers will include Phil Candy and Jonathan Douglas. A 'horizon scanning' conference is also being planned that will bring together representatives from organisations such as the MLA, Ofcom and the DfES. The aim is to create a strategic planning process that will progress the national IL agenda, in a co-ordinated fashion, with a joined-up methodology. A programme is also being planned that will provide IL training and staff development on a regional level to informational professionals from all sectors.

At the top of the agenda, however, is the creation of an information literacy website. In July 2002 the Big Blue Report made the following recommendation:

'That a national forum should be established to promote information skills and to provide support and a consultancy service on all aspects of information skills to the library, academic and student communities. To assist this, the conversion of the Big Blue website, or the