COUNTER POINT ◀

The Network and the Book

by Kevin Cherry

I am not now, nor have I ever been, a card-carrying member of the Flat Earth Society. And, although computers have inspired me on several occasions to wield a hammer in a threatening manner, I don't really consider myself a Luddite. I'm simply not a fad follower nor am I into trends, but the World Wide Web is definitely more than a fad and a trend. It's the way of the future, or at least that's what everything I read tells me, and I suppose there's truth to it. After all, how many people knew where the slash key was on the keyboard last year this time, and how many people had ever used it? What for? Still, while the Web has great promise, I don't think libraries should start surplusing their shelving any time soon.

The Internet's greatest strength is also its greatest weakness: mutability. Its ability to update and distribute information to the world quickly and at a relatively low cost is definitely a benefit that paper-based information can't provide, and the electronic world's amplification of the interaction between creator and user is an advantage that any form of communication should envy. Sometimes, however, information must remain static; it must become a record. For this to occur, there must be an institutional commitment to archiving some types of information on the Internet. And problems dealing with the identification of the original creation (as opposed to any of the number of versions that might be downloaded only to reappear at a server on the other side of the world) must be confronted, as well as proper citations to the various forms of interaction the record might generate. In other words, there must be a clear definition made between the record itself and the interaction it sparks.

Particularly troublesome for those of us who maintain information because of its historical value is the fact that the Internet lacks a mechanism by which information is given an historic perspective. When the Web's information grows outdated, it is simply replaced. For example, a library might publish its services on a Web page and, as these services change, so does the page advertising them. This works well for someone who wants to know when a public library's summer reading program begins, but woe be unto the researcher twenty years hence who might be writing the history of that library's children's services. Sometimes information is valuable *because* it is outdated, the dust factor, fine wine and aging, attic riches, and all that. We history types hope that somebody, somewhere, is archiving those printed sources: the posters, minutes, newsletters, etc. We honor and esteem the pack rat. There are no pack rats on the Internet. David Letterman reads his "top ten" at midnight and, a few hours later, office workers across America are downloading those numbered quips during their coffee break. A page goes up. A page goes down.

We all shout, "access over ownership," and I agree — most of the time; but there are several good sides to ownership that shouldn't be overlooked. To specify just two: 1) When there's more than one copy floating around, the likelihood that the information will survive is greatly increased. 2) Different individuals use information in different ways. When everyone just views the same URL, where's the evidence for a future historian of who knew what, when, and what supports the historian's guesstimates about why? For example, the fact that a mill owner's papers contain labor union handouts, probably means quite a different thing from the fact that these same materials turn up amongst the old love letters of a one-time bobbin doffer.

The standard gripes and complaints about electronic information aren't too convincing. I'm not worried about the flood of material that needs to be sorted through, the mounds of contradictory, inconsistent, and just plain wrong information that is floating about in the tangle of wires and circuits. The disorder of it all doesn't bother me. I'm not even concerned that — no matter the amount of drizzle on a Saturday afternoon, or warmth of familiar quilt — CPUs still lack the all-important snuggle factor. Librarians evaluate information. If it's hooey on paper, we say so; we'll do the same when more of it is digitized. And as for the tangle, haze, and disorganization of it all, it's our job to arrange information and provide access to it, no matter its format. And we are good at it. As for snuggle-ability, someday humans may evolve to find the blue flicker of a computer screen to be a welcome companion on a slow, rainy day. But librarians should champion the archiving of information. They should fight those trends that make nearly all the evidence of our activity ephemeral. I suppose they should lobby for larger and larger and larger hard drives.

Paper, anyone? Chisel and stone?

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