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Subject: SCHOLARLY INFORMATION IN A DIGITAL AGE

SCHOLARLY INFORMATION IN A DIGITAL AGE

These are my own views and are pertinent primarily to my own and immediately related disciplines; they may not reflect the views of my colleagues and are not an expression of an official viewpoint by the School of Historical Studies. The short time between circulating the paper to colleagues and the deadline for responses, particularly when coupled with other pressures and commitments in the middle of the teaching semester, is such that I have received no replies. I hope that more time will be available to the relevant committees to consider this and other responses, to consider the consultation paper itself, and that provision will be made for interested parties to respond to any reports and recommendations that eventuate from the discussions of those committees.

It was a little difficult to digest the discussion paper. But on p. 5 it mentions that the number of books published continues to rise and that 'the scarce commodity is the time and skills to use [information] well'. That the current generation of student turns to Wikipedia and Google cannot be gainsaid, but this should not be encouraged. They must be taught to approach such things critically and weaned onto a broader diet of material, whatever the form it comes in. Thus, they might come to know what it is they are looking for, how to find and how to know that they have found it - disentangling the nuggets from the huge quantity of electronic dross, the objective from the tendentious, etc. In other words, critical thinking. Perhaps now more than ever the 'medium is the message', or at least too many people believe anything and everything that appears on a screen (the visual society mentioned in the paper), but we are here to educate (our students, our community, etc.). The electronic delusion appears to encourage the belief that, to be at the cutting edge, we must provide all our courses, all our reading, all our exams, possibly all our contact with students electronically and remotely: we pretend to teach you and you pretend to learn. Not even a successful recipe for 'knowledge transfer' within the university. Nothing is an adequate substitute for personal contact and interaction between real people, not the simulacra of the 'Net Generation'. The prophecies of 'extreme meritocracy based on published performance ratings' suggests that there is more merit in published performance ratings than is ever likely to be the case (just as with the obsession with citation indexing).

Thus, measuring borrowing is not an adequate measure of the use of some classes of material, particularly serials; and there is likely to be variation between ostensibly similar material in different disciplines. Although it is admitted, rather as an aside, that the Humanities are different, there seems to be the same mindset that cripples the ARC process - everything must be collaborative (a word found repeatedly throughout the paper) and team-based, whereas, in fact, research in the Humanities is based firmly on the individual relationship of mind and material.

Google book and the like are to be welcomed, but have you ever tried using an electronic book? The only satisfactory way seems to be to print it (at what cost? - albeit a cost likely to be transferred from the university to the user, who is thus paying twice). The Chicago point about the link between heavy users of electronic sources and heavy users of print is well made. Some of us use the electronic resources largely to track down the printed material we need. Anyway, for many of us, if faced with 'either or', then print always wins out, the electronic is just a (vastly or variably) a useful supplement. But, I hope, nobody is suggesting 'either or', just the balance in 'both', but the balance probably costs more.

What might set apart an institution claiming to be world class and internationally focused from those with no such pretensions? It is unlikely to be the quantity of electronic journals it purchases (or leases). (Some investigation needs to be made of the relative benefit of purchase versus lease/license/rent, with particular regard to the practices of comparable institutions internationally.) It is more likely to be in the wealth of obscure, rare and unique material (often in Special Collections) acquired in the past and continually refreshed in the present and future. And the obscurer material is the least likely to be available in any form other than print - indeed, it is the advances in technology that have brought many small, low-cost publishing enterprises into being and enabled them to thrive.

I am not convinced that LMS is of great benefit, or that various electronic linkages have eased the business of students signing up for courses; flexibility and subtlety are not obvious attributes of electronic systems. And SuperSearch seems to be more complicated than what went before, and becoming more complicated as time goes on (how many 'upgrades' are all-singing, all-dancing downgrades). Hence, one needs to move cautiously. It is no use saying that we will 'miss the bus' when we have no clear idea of the destination and/or whether we wish to go there (see the pertinent comment in the paper, attributed to Niels Bohr). I know of a university elsewhere whose archivists were keen on computerisation and are now on their third, distinct cataloguing package in twelve years, with all sorts of efforts made and now partly wasted and many problems of data migration. Just a small example of a larger potential problem.

We may, perhaps, assume that much of the space gobbled up from book storage by providing suites packed with computers will, ere long, be no longer required, if the electronic infrastructure be put in place, because we have wireless and laptop, will travel. Then we can have the return of printed materials to buildings constructed to carry great weights of them, indeed capable of carrying much more, and users can browse open access material serendipitously, as well as find things through a comprehensive and competent electronic catalogue.

To keep up with other institutions, in some respects to catch up with other institutions, requires money to be spent on unglamorous things such as existing library buildings and stores (both maintenance and modernisation), coupled with expansion and rationalisation. More books are published; we should be buying more. Compare the current and recent level of expenditure on information materials elsewhere. So, back to basics. No grand schemes: the aphorism that when you reorganise you bleed comes to mind in the light of the convulsions within the university, and particularly the Arts faculty, in recent years.

What is the life of a book? On the other hand, what is the life of any particular electronic format? Increasingly short. What expenditure is involved, amortised over time? How much has to be spent on forever upgrading? How much has to be written-off on electronic materials purchased versus 'rented'? How much has to be invested in hardware that becomes obsolescent almost the moment it leaves the factory gate and thus depreciates ever more rapidly? At any one time, more of the computers within the university are likely to be out of date than otherwise, unable in various degrees to make use of the latest things on offer. For example, with my second office machine in four years I find it quite impossible to do various hardly esoteric things with Filemaker and LMS, irrespective of the structure of these systems; and I cannot even get a reliable connection to the library catalogue. In archaeology, a picture may indeed be worth a thousand words, and the quality of images on a screen may be insufficient, or the quality of what can be downloaded/printed off may fail to compare with seeing the picture in the printed journal. Dealing with electronic matter from home, even with suitable machinery, involves costs of data usage as well as any printing - back to my point about the transfer of costs potentially onto fee-paying students.

At the same time, what printed material might usefully be removed into store? How, without piece by piece examination, can this be done effectively? Where should such stores be located, with what terms of access, what speed of return of book requests, in what ownership (books and buildings)?

There is a wonderful paradox of the urge for Open Access occurring simultaneously with an extension to the duration copyright. But this is just another instance of the juggling of incompatibles that it has become necessary to perform.

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