The dark side of documentation ?

Summary: The tendency of information users to rely on abstracts, summaries, and other out-of-context 'snippets' is considered. The response to this, which may include an emphasis on meaning-in-context and on understanding, will determine the immediate future of the information disciplines.

In a recent issue of *Portal: Libraries and the Academy*, Emily Walshe (2007), a librarian from Long island University, laments what she describes as 'the dark side of digitization'. She identifies this as the tendency of the 'millennial generation' of students to be satisfied with abstracts of journal articles, rather than reading the original. (It was the repeated requests for advice on how to cite abstracts in student assignments which first brought the issue to mind.) Ironically, this tendency seems to have increased at the same as the prevalence of the electronic journal makes it trivially easy to move from abstract to full text. What Walshe identifies is something more fundamental than simply sloppy library practices; rather it is the increasing preference of a generation for the surrogate for the actual, the snippet or thumbnail for the totality. Other examples which she quotes are the single from iTunes against the music CD ('why suffer through an entire album for the sake of one or two good songs?'), the viewing of a seminal scene from a whole movie on DVD, and even the extraction of a musical theme as a mobile phone ring tone. On reading this, I was reminded of a current debate in UK educational policy: to what extent a high school qualification in English should be available to those pupils unable to face the challenge of reading a whole book.

Walshe argues that this is a serious matter. Reliance on abstracts, snippets, summaries, sound bites and highlights will cause a loss of context, of meaning and of understanding. To counter this is certainly the business of the library, and intriguingly she turns to some of Ranganathan's principles for a way forward. 'Books are for use' implies that whole books are read, not merely reduced to passages and sections to retrieved in an atomised fashion. 'A library is a growing organism' implies that the organism must show the interconnections of its parts, not present disconnected chunks. And so on.

A journal issue is one of the bibliographical entities most readily split into atomised units: individual papers, and their abstracts and other sub-units. Indeed, with the current enthusiasm for individual article retrieval from e-journal bundles, the validity of the idea of an 'issue' or even of a journal, is not the given that it was in the days of print-on-paper. It was pleasing therefore to see an example of the contextualised information access, albeit serendipitous, of which I am sure Emily Walshe would approve in this issue of *Portal*. The preceding article (Nichols and Mellinger 2007), reporting a study of information behaviour of undergraduate students ('millenials' again) notes how this study, and others cited, showed that students repeated search strategies which had been successful in the past (even when they failed on this new occasion), avoided unfamiliar resources and different techniques, and generally relied on 'trusted sources', where trusted simply means used before.

To understand this, and Walshe's points, we must rely on Zipf's principle of least effort, arguably the only generic underlying 'law' of the information sciences. Information sources, and information retrieval and manipulation methods, will be used when they are familiar and have been used before successfully; this, of course, requiring the least mental effort. Similarly, to those brought up on entertainment, and to an increasing degree education, provided in out-of-context snippets, it will be natural and 'easy' to rely on the same kind of 'snippetted' material from a literature search.

The appropriate response of the information specialist is, perhaps, not as obvious as might be thought. Should we simply accept that this is what the new generation of users require, and provide it as best we may, for fear that they will simply give up on the library altogether, and the Amazoogle will have won the war ? Or should we argue, and provide evidence, for the necessity of meaning-in-context and of understanding, and show that these are provided

best, and most easily, by the selective context of the library collection, and that this may sometimes mean reading a whole book ?

Which of these is taken as the purposes of the information disciplines and professions for the early twenty first century – and I think that it will have to be one or the other – will determine what these disciplines and professions will look like for the rest of the century, and what kind of value they can hope to have for their users, and for society.

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References

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