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Predicting the documentation future

In memoriam Arthur C Clarke (1917-2008)

News of the death of Sir Arthur C Clarke on March 19th 2008 saddened not only the many enthusiasts of his science fiction writings, and of the film versions of his *Odyssey* series, but also those who were equally inspired by his factual writings. The latter included many scientists, engineers, astronauts, and perhaps even some information scientists.

Information handling, and its future, did not feature particularly strongly in Clarke's generally positive view of the future, based on scientific rationality tinged with mysticism. Computers played a major part in his later fictions, with his conception of HAL, the disobedient intelligent computer of *2001: a Space Odyssey*, having a particularly strong influence (Stork 1997). In his factual writings he introduced the idea of the geostationary communications satellite (and apparently always regretted never having patented the idea) and foresaw the ubiquitous mobile telephone. He did not, ahead of their time, conceive of the personal computer nor the Internet (though he did, in the early 1960s, predict a 'global library' by 2000), but nor did anyone else. As Niels Bohr is alleged to have said, prediction is very difficult, especially about the future.

As well as being a prophet himself, Clarke discussed the nature of prophecy and its intrinsic difficulties. He distinguished the *failure of imagination*, the simple inability to conceive what is to come, and the *failure of nerve*, the inability to accept the implications of what is known (Clarke 1999). These failures are as well established in the prediction of the future of recorded information and of documentation as in any other domain (Bawden 1997). Predictions of the information future have often been spectacularly wrong, perhaps most notably when based upon careful and authoritative extrapolation of current trends. (In his 'First Law', Clarke reminded us that when a distinguished expert suggests that something is possible, they are almost certainly right; if such an expert suggests that something is impossible, they are almost certainly wrong.) In many respects, speculative fiction has been a better guide to the future of our discipline and profession, at least as a source of possibilities, and has been taken up by writers on a long time period; see, for instance, Griffen (1987), Eshed (2001) and Gunn (1995). It is notable that Arthur C Clarke's science fiction contains more insights into the future of information and computing than does his science fact.

While the *Journal of Documentation* does not publish science fiction, we do encourage contributions to our occasional *Speculations in Documentation* article series; who knows what be thought of them in 3001.

David Bawden

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