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Editorial

Google and the universe of knowledge

Summary

Reflects on the impact of Tara Brabazon's new book 'The University of Google', and considers whether the scope of information science should expand to cover the issues raised.

Keywords

University of Google; Brabazon; information science; education; Amazoogole

Gone are the days when news and opinion about information science issues appeared only in the professional press. We have become used to seeing search engine companies dominating the business pages: at the time of writing, it is Microsoft's attempt to buy Yahoo to form a serious competitor to Google, which is featuring. In political journalism, blogs and Facebook groups seem sometimes to be the main story in themselves. In crime reports, we were told recently that the evidence against a person accused of attempted murder had included their Google searches for the information on the best way of committing the crime. And intellectual trivia, such as the competitions between Wikipedia and Encyclopaedia Britannica for accuracy of information, have made small impacts on general news pages.

I cannot recall, however, anything to match the interest aroused by the publication of a book on the internet in education [Brabazon 2007], and an associated series of lectures and radio appearances. The author, who professor of media at Brighton University, has touched on numerous raw nerves, with her ascerbic views of the influence of the internet, and digital material generally, in universities. Journalists and radio presenters quickly took up the story that "Google is 'white bread for the mind' and the internet is producing a generation of students who survive on a diet of unreliable information" (Frean 2007).

Brabazon's general approach – easy access to information of very varying quality, loss of critical appreciation, flattening of expertise, lack of critical thinking, decline of library use, etc. – is not original, and each point has been voiced by others before. But her very readable and wide-ranging polemic has caught the attention of a much wider audience.

I found her book stimulating, funny, thought-provoking, and occasionally annoying. I would strongly recommend it to anyone interested at all in information provision, or in education, which presumably includes all of the readership of this journal. Much of it is about information and libraries, and how students can be persuaded to adopt a more nutritious information diet than can be provided by Google and Wikipedia: Brabazon does this by the straightforward expedient of forbidding her students to use them until they have gained familiarity with a wide range of information sources, and understood their relative merits. Much is about a critical literacy, which Brabazon fears we may be losing with a move to "accelerated smash and grab scholarship". There is a good deal on university education itself, and on the downsides of distance learning, flexible learning, and lifelong learning, all of which Brabazon regards with great suspicion, if not distaste.

So far, so enjoyable for old-fashioned academics like myself who believe, with Brabazon, that students need self-discipline and good time management as much as they need flexibility; who, like her, are concerned about the discouraged by the emphasis on generic skills at the expense of specific subject knowledge; and who are concerned by the ubiquity of the "Amazoogole" paradigm of information access.

But the question which the impact of this book raises, for the *Journal of Documentation* and similar journals, is a interesting one. The whole of the book, and the debate of which it is a part, is about the communication of knowledge, though only a relatively few of its pages make specific mention of libraries, search engines, and so on. These are the pages which address the issues typically covered in this journal.

To what extent should the academic information science community reach out to the wider issues of access to, and use of, knowledge, specifically in education, addressing the issues

which Brabazon so trenchantly discusses . So far, *pace* the promotion of the information literacy concept, we have not really done so. An opportunity being missed ? or a rancorous and largely pointless argument being successfully avoided ? It seems to me that, if we consider that the basis of information science is to be found in some kind of cognitive or socio-cognitive concept (and I think that most proponents would agree with the one or the other), then many of the concerns popularised by Brabazon's book are indeed within our remit. The old question of whether the task of the librarian or information specialist ends when the book, or list of references, is given to the user gains a new lease of life. And, perhaps, the scope of journals such as *JDoc* should be reconsidered.

David Bawden

References

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