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The Doomsday of Documentation ?

Summary

Reflects on the major changes affecting information provision, and their meaning for the information sciences. Suggests that the enabling of understanding may be the main future purpose.

In the mid-1980s, Dennis Lewis, then director of Aslib, the British professional association for information management (and for many years the publishers of *Journal of Documentation*), gained the nickname of 'Doomsday Den', of which he was quite proud. This was as a result of his enthusiasm for writing papers and giving talks with title such as 'There will not be an information profession by the year 2000', in which he outlined his 'Doomsday Scenario'. This, in essence, focused on the increasing availability of digital information sources, and the increasing trend for those who needed the information to find it for themselves, a phenomenon then termed 'end user searching'. This, argued Lewis, would lead to the end of the 'intermediary' role, by which an information scientist carried out searches on behalf of those who needed the information, using their searching skills to deal with the 'difficult' online information resources of the time. With this role gone, there would be no place left for the information specialist, and the profession would disappear, leaving only a rump of librarians and archivists, carrying out custodian functions. Heaven knows what Lewis would have said if he could have imagined the web and Google.

Lewis's Doomsday Scenario never came to pass, and the information profession is still very much alive twenty years on, though much changed for its condition in the 1980s. Doomsday thoughts are still very much with us, and perhaps with more cause, as we reflect on another clutch of much more fundamental changes and potential changes than those which Lewis had to consider. These are based in technical, social and economic changes, and - in no particular order - include, but are not limited to:

- the increasing significance of Google and Google-like search entities, to the point where their use is viewed as synonymous with finding information
- the potential arrival (at last) of a truly usable e-book technology, which could begin to make rapid inroads into the use of printed books, with all the implications that would have for libraries
- the major digitisation projects of Google and Microsoft, which seem to bring a print-less world within reach
- the increasing belief that metadata is something that you use if you don't have a good enough search engine
- the rise and rise of folksonomy as a viable alternative to taxonomy
- the belief in the 'wisdom of crowds', rather than the wisdom of experts, in guiding the use of information and knowledge
- the end of the belief in 'library space' as an area of isolated quality information, as library catalogues open themselves to search engines, and simultaneously bring in web material
- the enthusiasm for 'social computing' and the social construction of information environments, whether through blogs and wikis, or through MySpace and Utube
- the introduction of mass-participation virtual reality information environments, with increasingly blurring of the boundaries between the real and the virtual (Reuters has an 'office' in Second Life)
- the possible collapse in the current understanding of intellectual property, as the internet makes possible the free sharing of virtually all products of creative thought
- the increasing prevalence of mobile and ubiquitous information provision
- the supplanting of academic libraries by information provision through e-learning environments and from the web
- the new role of the public library as a community centre, with books and information provision an increasingly marginalised aspect

Not all of these trends will come to fruition, at least not as we might expect; and those that do will certainly not be all Bad Things. But they are likely to have an impact on the information environment, and on those of us who regard ourselves as information specialists or professionals, which it might not be hyperbole to call a doomsday.

What should a professional response be to this, from the viewpoint of specialists practitioners and academics in the information sciences, who may feel they have things to offer which may be swept away by a tide which neither cares nor understands ? One recourse - a fairly usual one - is to deny that these things will happen, or that if they do their effect will not be as great as might be imagined. This would not be entirely unreasonable. Revolutions are rarely complete, and are often compensated by unexpected side-effects.

But I feel that a better response would be to act in analogous way to that which Karl Popper recommended in debating with an opponent, whom one suspects to have good arguments and evidence on their side. Rather than trying to gainsay the opponents arguments, Popper advocated, accept them ; make out the best case for the opponent that can be made, and then try to refute that. Only in that way is one arguing truly rationally, and - pragmatically - protecting oneself from surprises.

The analogous process here is to take all of these possible developments at face value, allow them to continue as far as seems feasible, and then assess the resulting situation, asking what place this offers for the information specialist.

I do not know the answer to this, and it would take a good deal of imaginative analysis to produce a convincing one. But I suspect that it would have a good deal to do with enabling understanding. In a world where information is ubiquitous, and knowledge is ever-available, though often divorced from context, then understanding - of the world and of and of oneself - will be both increasingly necessary and increasingly difficult to obtain. And that may be the next purpose of the information sciences.

David Bawden

usual recourse is to deny that these will happen - but better may be to accept them and say so what (popperian style of argument - make best case for opponent and argue against it

what future for lis - don't know - but doomsday predictions have not come true - though in some cases, demise of spcial libraries they have
promoting understanding
hib
domain analysis
knowledge structuring and representation