
Public-Access Provocations: An Informal Column

Crawford, Walt. "(for)Getting It: Toward Small Solutions." The
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Convergence is a crock. The virtual library is a real impossibility. Grand solutions don't work. "In the future, every X will be Y" (every book will be multimedia, every communication will be digital, etc.) is typically a nonsense remark. [1]

Too many librarians and library school faculty "got it" in the 1970s; they got the grand dream of the digital future. A set of assumptions became common wisdom within the field, despite every evidence that the assumptions violated history, common sense, and economic reality. Until the last year or two, relatively few leaders spoke against the common wisdom--after all, that was negative, downbeat, and admitted that you didn't get it.

Abandoning the Dream

Time to forget it; "it" being the universal scholar's workstation or any other grand, all-encompassing solution. The existence of this column in an electronic journal demonstrates the truth of the matter: realists neither despise digital distribution nor embrace it as the only way.

Once you really do forget it, you can begin to deal with the wonderful, complex world of many small solutions. Intriguing local operations gain value as you see that they aren't "too small to bother with." If chaos theory suggests that a butterfly in Norway can cause a hurricane in Samoa, surely a panoply of small steps--in many different directions--can make libraries and their users more effective for real futures.

Moving On

Libraries have bright futures. Not as the only or primary places people go for facts; they never have served that role. But as places to grow, places to fill in the pieces, places to understand more about more things, places to expand the horizons of our imaginations--these and other roles will continue and expand into the future.

For those library professionals who care about knowledge, interpretation, perspective, and enlightenment, the real future will be far more interesting than any grand vision. For those library professionals who care about people, who understand that every person has different needs and that no library will meet all of those needs, the complex future has much more to offer than any convergence could. For those who despair because cyberspace-as-universe is slipping away, well, perhaps you belong in a different field. The future is for the rest of us, and it

is a future of many pieces, some digital and some distinctly otherwise.

Toward Small Solutions

The real future is one of many small solutions pointing in many different directions. [2] Some will expand, some will fail. Some will contradict one another, and those contradictions may never be resolved. Keeping up with the small solutions will be as frustrating (and ultimately impossible) as keeping up with today's technological changes. As with those changes, it will be more important to understand what to pay attention to than to try to keep up with everything: perspective and viewpoint will ultimately count for more than sheer facts.

The running title for this column has always been a bit misleading. It was never about public access in general; it was always about public access in libraries--and I've never deliberately tried to be provocative, except to provoke thought. As we move beyond the grand (if dystopian) dreams to real (if more modest) futures, the column title may be irrelevant (as, for that matter, may the columnist). Therefore, this will be the last "Public-Access Provocations" column. In all, there have been thirteen of these columns since the first issue of the PACS Review in 1990: a baker's dozen (or perhaps a dozen with parity?).

Next time, a new name and perhaps a wider range of topics. The new name: "Toward Small Solutions." What else?

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Notes

1. Tough statements? If you want more--or if you disagree--read: Walt Crawford and Michael Gorman, *Future Libraries: Dreams, Madness, and Reality* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1995); ISBN 0-8389-0647-8.

2. As I use the term, a "small solution" isn't necessarily small in the traditional sense. Eureka and FirstSearch are both small solutions--and so are Netscape and Z39.50. All four are important, and each one is used many thousands of times each day, but nonetheless they are "small" as compared to the grand solutions that won't solve anything in a complex world.

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