

Little Red Herrings — Stop the Presses!

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Last month a new study commissioned by the **British Library** and the **Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC)** issued one of those “Duh!” reports. The new study (available here <http://www.bl.uk/news/pdf/googlegen.pdf>) found that the “**Google Generation**,” or those brought up by computer wolves, is not very Web-literate. Stop the presses! News flash! For those in this profession once called librarianship (but fast becoming Cyberianship) this is hardly news. The study further found details that will likely amuse public services librarians in particular and any librarian working with the public but especially with children of “Hover Parents.” The “**Google Generation**” it seems, can be an impatient lot, though the jury is still out. They want both the search itself, and the navigation to pages to arrive in nanoseconds — and they want it now. They become petulant when the first five hits (I’m being generous) are unusable. In short, they have “zero tolerance” for anything that smacks of study. Okay, I’m editorializing now, but surely you get the drift.

The study is quick to point that these traits are now emerging across all age groups. I don’t doubt it. We elect presidents on a whim, decide important questions on **YouTube**, and solve our medical needs at the end of a point and a click. It’s hardly surprising that when surrounded by such harried behavior, even those old enough to know better now tend on that downward “snatch and grab” spiral. The implications of the study, especially with respect to the older age groups, aren’t the best of news as one might think. If the older generation is becoming more like the younger one, libraries will become the palimpsest on a computer screen, but more on that later.

On the face of it this study seems good news for information literacy proponents, the new catchphrase many of us are using to convince our administrations that we cannot, should not, in our growing girths, be replaced by the micro-thin **Apple notebook**. But the report goes quickly from sanguine to lugubrious. While libraries are charged with coming to terms that “the future is now,” libraries are also charged to make interfaces more user-friendly, more “standard and easier to use.” In other words, more like **Google**, which you’ll recall has created generation of Web-illiterate users. Okay, now I get it.

Now I don’t mean for readers to infer that I’m opposed to the idea of making our catalogs more user-friendly, or that I do not seek to make interfaces easier to use, or that I think making our exorbitant information in databases that rival the cost of bungalows on Cape Cod is inherently a bad thing. On the contrary I greatly favor the idea, though I believe some of the new products are much ado about nothing. (For example, what I may “digg” this year may not necessarily be something I’ll “digg” three years from now). In other words, some of the new technology seems purposefully dated for built-in obsolescence in about that same time frame that the new version will appear, but I digress). It is unquestionably true that we must make very expensive information more widely known and easier to search.

But what troubles me about this report is the underlying assumption that making users more intelligent searchers is next to impossible so we must make things more **Google-like**. That’s good news for **Google**, of course, not so good news for the rest of us. Embedded in the report, too, is the fundamental assumption that one can’t change users so we must change libraries. If libraries are to be useful in the future they must shuffle off all their intellectual pretensions and ape the “snatch and grab” mentality of the Web in order to be successful. In other words, live with the idea that their million-dollar enterprises may well be “pass on” weigh stations. It’s a high price to pay for pointing others in the right direction. This logic is similar to the shoe salesman who had only a size 9 for his size 11 customer so he just chopped off his customer’s toes. The shoe fit, you see, even if the customer did walk funny ever thereafter.

Other parts of the report will also raise eyebrows. For example, over the next ten years it predicts a unified Web culture. While it doesn’t make entirely clear what this will be — will it be **Google**, will it be tiered (so that those look-

ing for serious information can bypass all the spam and vibrator ads) or will it be something else — immediately it is clear that libraries in most of their forms will diminish as they fade. The report also calls for a rise in eBook sales. We’ve been hearing this for the last twenty-five years with no significant change in those sales. This could well be the eBook decade but I reserve the right to doubt one more year. Occasionally the report resorts to bizarre language. Consider the following:

“Users are promiscuous, diverse and volatile and it is clear that these behaviours [sic] represent serious challenges for traditional information providers, nurtured in a hardcopy paradigm and, in many respects, still tied to it. Libraries must move away from bean counting dubious download statistics, and get much closer to monitoring the actual information seeking behaviour of their users.”

If you can diagram either of those sentences, please send them to me. I don’t know about you but if we have promiscuous, volatile users in our building, I’m calling security. Sure, I understand the idea, I’m just not sure I buy into fully. Yes, such users probably are the wave of the future, but it’s a wave I’d rather not surf just yet.

On balance this is a report every librarian should read. Its unquestioned acceptance that libraries as we all know them are not only a thing of the past or dying dinosaurs at best, but by golly it’s about time and are we ever glad! It will rattle but maybe it’s what we need to hear to wake us from our reverie. Not the prognosis I wanted to read from a putative library-friendly entity, mind you, but what we may need to hear regularly. And in any event, what exactly is anyone — i.e., you and me — doing about it? I mean, really.

ALA rushes to embrace any new technology and almost — almost mind you — dismisses anything that reeks of real reading (unless of course you count those inane **READ** posters featuring **Brittney Spears** reading an upside-down book). I wish we could mount some truly engaging campaign about libraries, one that distinguishes mere information, data, from what we all want it to grow up to be.

Knowledge, and yes, in some cases, even wisdom. 🍷

