

Information: culture or capital?

A popular computing magazine recently counterpoised two potential internet futures. The first suggested that unequal access would polarize society in the next century, as Marx predicted polarization as a result of the capitalist mode of production in the last. The second saw the internet as little more than the CB radio of the late twentieth century, an un-commodifiable dustbin for valueless chatter. Between these futures two questions might be: What are the social relations of technology through which the internet will be mediated? And what will be the internet's effect on the production, ownership and distribution of information and knowledge? Here I focus on higher education and the new possibilities for sharing bibliographic databases.

Sharing library catalogues on line has already taken place. The development of 'Metropolitan Area Networks', linking colleges by 'SuperJANET', will enable far greater access to learning resources. Yet, while involving an explosion of communication, this transformation is mediated by economic pressures toward the commodification of intellectual activities and resources. Cooperative relations between neighbouring institutions over resource-sharing are increasingly being replaced by formal and contractual relations. Colleges are under intense financial pressure. While it is attractive to imagine institutions sharing resources in a grand virtual library, the likelihood is that there will be a charge for access. Smaller, newer colleges, unable to compete with old university libraries' established 'capital stock', will be forced into dependent exchange relations with more powerful institutions.

Increased student-to-resource ratios create pressures to close access to outside users. While on-line catalogue searching can locate a book or journal, this is no guarantee of seeing it. Virtual proximity does not ensure real access. In fact, unlimited catalogue accessibility is used to justify 'smart' library cards, not only allowing you to take books out but also enabling entry in the first place, in institutions until now unworried about their students being somehow deprived by hordes of alien researchers, fresh from scouring the internet for accessible resources to plunder. The virtual user as scapegoat for funding cuts!

Journals: paper or pixels?

Average academic journal costs in Britain have risen by 300 per cent since 1985 as part of a vicious circle of decreasing subscriptions and higher prices. Smaller, less prestigious college libraries are hit hardest. Access to services like BIDS (Bath Information Data Services) and use of CD-Roms has only increased pressure on such smaller institutions to rely on Inter-Library Loan (ILL) services, as access to information on existing materials increasingly falls out of step with in-house stocks. For low research institutions, ILLs may be more cost-effective than expensive journal subscriptions, but locking into external service provision means libraries are prohibited from building up resources, perpetuating low research scope.

The government's Joint Funding Council's Library Review Group recommends that academics travel more and that institutions collaborate in sharing costs through regional consortia. However, London's 'M25 Consortium' gives little comfort. While the Consortium's Web site (<http://www.m25lib.ac.uk/m25/>) allows subject searches of the best field-specific collections within 110 London academic libraries, increasingly these very libraries are barring entry to students other than their own, unless an inter-library financial agreement has been formed or the individual pays. BIDS' annual subscription service gives access to numerous on-line services without additional per-session cost. However, BIDS' own data on cost per session show that, while large research universities pay as little as a few pence each, low research institutions are paying anything up to £13 per session. The subscription system, for all its potential benefits, maps existing institutional disparities. Smaller institutions face great difficulties justifying subscriptions on the basis of present research activities, while dropping out offers permanent relegation to the academic slow lane.

There is a forthcoming 'Alienation and the Internet' on-line CyberConference and follow-up seminar. Contact <http://construct.haifa.ac.il/~dkalekin/home.htm>; e-mail: dkalekin@construct.haifa.ac.il

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