

Reading between the Headlines

“The Answer to the Great Question . . . of Life, the Universe and Everything . . . is . . . forty-two . . .”

“I checked it very thoroughly,” said the computer, “and that quite definitely is the answer. I think the problem, to be quite honest with you, is that you’ve never actually known what the question is.”

—From Douglas Adams,
The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy

Poor Loonquawl—his head filled with the answer to the ultimate question, but not knowing what to do with that information because he didn’t know what the question was. The dilemma today is much the same when we try to figure out the future of e-content. Perhaps some chaos management will help us decide whether we are looking in the wrong place or whether we are simply not connecting the dots properly. If we open up (or log on to) just about any newspaper or news service and scan the headlines, we see many stories that seem, at first blush, to be disconnected and that present contradictory conclusions. In addition, most headlines do not seem to have any immediate relevance to e-content—unless we look a bit further.

For example, consider these headlines that appeared within one month in the summer of 2004:

- Wi-Fi Service Expands Its Reach¹
- Wi-Fi Meets the Wireless Phone²
- Motorola Unveils New Phone Combining GSM and Wi-Fi³
- Cellphones, Say Hello to iTunes⁴
- Battle Brews over [Regulatory] Rules for Phones on Internet⁵

- Search Engines Are Attacked by Latest Virus⁶
- Internet Phone Service Has a Nice Ring; New Technology May Spark Telecom Revolution⁷
- AT&T Won’t Seek New Residential Customers⁸
- A Dollar Here, a Dollar There . . . Adds Up to Real Money, and That’s Why Online Companies Still See a Future in Micropayments⁹
- Putting a Cap on Tuition Expenses: Some Colleges Freeze Costs until Students Graduate, Ending Steep Yearly Hikes¹⁰
- Survey Finds Drop in Reading Rates; Arts Group Reports 10% Fewer Americans Read for Fun in 2002¹¹
- Fewer Grants Force Younger Scientists to Leave Academia¹²
- Web Diarists [Bloggers] Are Now Official Members of [Democratic National] Convention Press Corps¹³

What connects these headlines—and the articles? What can they possibly say about the future of e-content? It may make things clearer if we add some headlines from outside of mainstream or popular news publications:

- Pressure Mounts on Reed to Open Access to Science Work¹⁴
- MPs [British Members of Parliament] Call for Biennial Review of Profits from Science Journals¹⁵
- Publishing: Reed Defies MPs’ Plea on Prices¹⁶
- House Committee Tells NIH to Post Research Results Online and Make Them Free¹⁷
- Open Access Jeopardises Academic

Publishers, Reed Chief Warns¹⁸

- Reed Elsevier’s Acquisition Trail Takes It down Risky Paths¹⁹

Still confused? Let’s connect the headlines using the footnote numbers:

- 1–6 reflect important changes in communications technologies.
- 7–9 reflect significant changes in the business of communication.
- 10–13 demonstrate potentially radical changes in higher education and in the world of scholarly communication.
- 14–19 show the profound shifts underway in the development of commercial scholarly publishing and the business practices surrounding those publications.

To connect the dots: higher education and scholarly inquiry sit at the nexus of four important factors: (1) communications technology; (2) the communications business; (3) content development; and (4) the business (or sale) of content. To plan the future of e-content in the academic world, we can no longer limit the scope of the inquiry solely to what is happening in scholarly publishing. Rather, we must look at a broader context and recognize that the biggest challenges are interrelated.

At the center of the storm lies the changing nature of academe. The nature of the academic institution is changing in two key ways: (1) what it does, and (2) the financial resources to support it. As to the former, an article in the *Wall Street Journal* noted that some of the best, brightest, and youngest scientific researchers are leaving academe to pursue easier and more

lucrative careers in the business world.²⁰ A key cause of the migration is that grants from sources such as the National Institutes of Health are more competitive and less available. Once these researchers leave, they are not likely to return, resulting in a significant potential threat that the United States will produce less research. Should this become a long-term trend, there will be a commensurate reduction in the amount of research information available for publication in the future. Though one might cynically argue that this would be an ideal result for librarians (who have long bemoaned the

recent recession or stock market fluctuations. Things will not “return to normal” as the country emerges from its recession—for at least two reasons. First, there is ample economic proof that after every recession since the early 1970s, higher education institution budgets increased somewhat but did not increase to a level equivalent to where they had been before the recession began. Second, and what should be of even greater concern, is that the priorities will likely be different. What Michael Bérubé, a professor at Pennsylvania State University, said in 2002 is likely still to be true today: “[If]

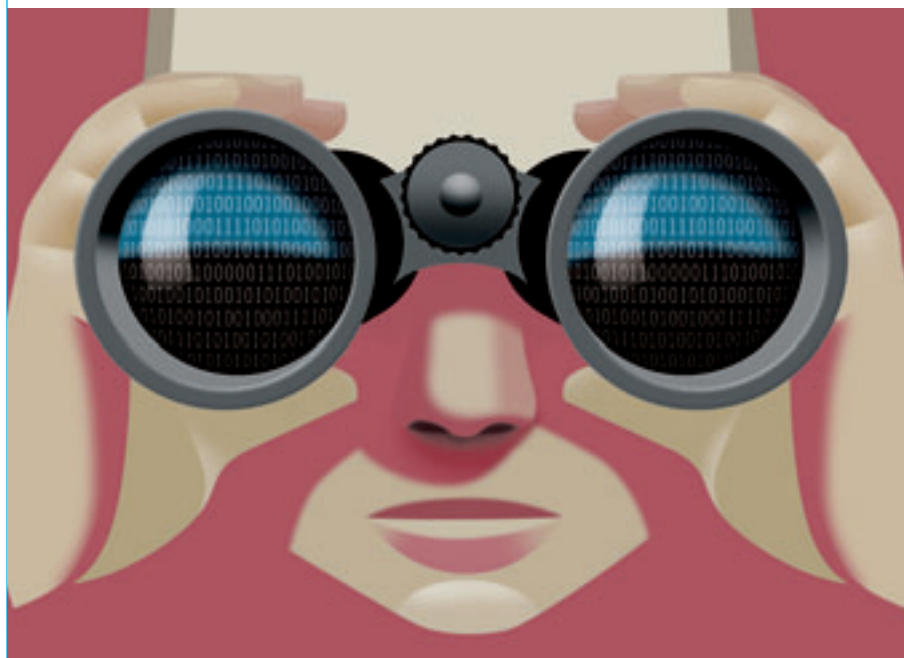


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massive growth of the number of journals and articles published in the scientific, technical, and medical scholarly literature), it cannot be denied that the inevitable decrease in the amount and quality of the research would be destructive to the scholarly enterprise.

A related cause for concern in higher education is how institutions are responding to political demands to control the rising cost of higher education. The decisions that institutions make will have an important trickle-down effect on their ability to produce e-content. As institutions start to cap tuition, or increase the size of scholarships to ensure affordability, they will have less money to spend for information and for technology. Furthermore, this reduction in the economic capacity of higher education is not just a temporary economic blip caused by the

flush times return in 2006 . . . [no] state legislator will be saying, ‘OK, now let’s pour money back into the library.’ That’s not going to happen.”²¹ With fewer financial resources available, higher education institutions will be seeking out new and better ways to squeeze more value out of their e-content expenditures, not to raise substantially the pool of funds available.

The changes in communications technology, in the communications business, in content development, and in the business of content present immense challenges to everyone in the e-content environment. But by reading between the headlines and by working together to share their respective knowledge, librarians and information technologists can ensure the availability of the resources necessary for scholarly inquiry to meet these challenges.

A more detailed discussion of the changes in the four factors relating to higher education e-content, and of ways to prepare for the future, will be presented in a feature article in the January/February 2005 issue of EDUCAUSE Review.

Notes

1. Jane L. Levere, “Wi-Fi Service Expands Its Reach,” *New York Times*, July 27, 2004.
2. Arik Hesseldahl, “Wi-Fi Meets the Wireless Phone,” *Fortune*, July 26, 2004.
3. Jesse Drucker, “Motorola Unveils New Phone Combining GSM and Wi-Fi,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 27, 2004, D3.
4. “Cellphones, Say Hello to iTunes,” *New York Times*, July 27, 2004.
5. Stephen Labaton and Matt Richtel, “Battle Brews over Rules for Phones on Internet,” *New York Times*, July 28, 2004.
6. David Bank, “Search Engines Are Attacked by Latest Virus,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 27, 2004, D5.
7. John Cook, “Internet Phone Service Has a Nice Ring; New Technology May Spark Telecom Revolution,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, July 23, 2004, A1.
8. “AT&T Won’t Seek New Residential Customers,” *New York Times*, July 23, 2004, A1.
9. Daniel Nasaw, “A Dollar Here, a Dollar There . . . Adds Up to Real Money, and That’s Why Online Companies Still See a Future in Micropayments,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 24, 2004, R6.
10. Jane J. Kim, “Putting a Cap on Tuition Expenses: Some Colleges Freeze Costs until Students Graduate, Ending Steep Yearly Hikes,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 27, 2004, D2.
11. David Mehegan, “Survey Finds Drop in Reading Rates; Arts Group Reports 10% Fewer Americans Read for Fun in 2002,” *Boston Globe*, July 9, 2004, A3.
12. Bernard Wysocki Jr., “Fewer Grants Force Younger Scientists to Leave Academia,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 27, 2004, B1, B4.
13. Jennifer Lee, “Web Diarists [Bloggers] Are Now Official Members of [Democratic National] Convention Press Corps,” *New York Times*, July 26, 2004.
14. Saeed Shah, “Pressure Mounts on Reed to Open Access to Science Work,” *The Independent*, July 7, 2004, 36.
15. Rachel Stevenson, “MPs Call for Biennial Review of Profits from Science Journals,” *The Independent*, July 20, 2004.
16. Richard Wray, “Publishing: Reed Defies MPs’ Plea on Prices,” *Guardian* (London), July 21, 2004.
17. Andrea L. Foster, “House Committee Tells NIH to Post Research Results Online and Make Them Free,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 19, 2004.
18. Richard Wray, “Open Access Jeopardises Academic Publishers, Reed Chief Warns,” *Guardian* (London), June 30, 2004, 16.
19. Angela Jameson, “Reed Elsevier’s Acquisition Trail Takes It down Risky Paths,” *Times* (London), July 15, 2004, 26.
20. Wysocki, “Fewer Grants Force Younger Scientists to Leave Academia.”
21. Quoted in Scott Smallwood, “The Crumbling Intellectual Foundation,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 20, 2002.



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