

Regarding the Google interview

Comments by Paul Catherall

- > 1. "The library is a growing organism"
- > (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Five_laws_of_library_science).
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- > Is Ranganathan's fifth law of library science still valid? Or, is the
- > library being superseded by the internet?
- > Alternatively, is the growth and spread of the internet just new
- > evidence to prove the validity of Ranganathan's law?
- > What is a library, except, perhaps, being a growing organism? Will
- > Google Books become a library?

On the first general point about the library being superseded by the Internet, I think the 'definition' of library is central to this question, a library is universally regarded as a collection or place where books are present, however modern information usage practices have also expanded beyond the formalized, establishment-derived medium of the book as a source of information. Google is both an interface to the growing body of formal and informal materials generated from a wide range of sources (the WWW), including establishment or cannon sources and democratic or popular sources. In this regard, we can see the Internet and search engines like Google representing a popularisation of information generally, involving widening access beyond traditional educational divisions of class background, national borders, language and age. This is epitomized by the explosion of individually edited Web sites created by amateur Web developers since the beginning of the WWW in the mid 90s and more recently by the participation of citizens in social networking sites through activities like Blogging.

Furthermore, the Internet also represents an expansion into less formal forms of information beyond the traditional book format, also authored by

individuals both within and outside traditional canon sources of information, this is seen in the proliferation of Wikis such as Wikipedia which represents the publication of knowledge by both establishment and non-establishment contributors.

The development of commercial computing solutions for the mass market and resultant usability has resulted in the Internet morphing from a technology in the domain of IT experts to one that now approaches the usability of traditional user communication technologies such as radio and TV, this transformation has invariably led to the growth of user-generated content and the rise of alternative democratic channels for publishing, importantly the non-tariff nature of cross-server communication also allows this content to be seen by any other networked user, allowing private individuals to publish their content for a world-wide audience, these issues may seem obvious, but these factors are allowing for an increasingly enfranchised world community of private authors and publishers in competition with traditional media such as books.

Google Books appears to be slowing in the original aim of creating a freely accessible world-wide library of digital resources, most obviously due to legal pressures, particularly from the US and EU, which have historical traditions and deeply embedded legal codes related to copyright, patents and intellectual property. To some extent Google has achieved its aims, but it remains to be seen how long or to what extent this service can remain online due to legal challenges.

Ranganathan's law appears to be true in the case of the growing internet, since this facility is constantly adapting and evidencing new innovations to deal with growing user base and user demands; whereas the conventional library might expand its floor space or browsing facilities, the online library will expand in increasing digitization and expanding new tools and Web facilities to access diversifying sources of media. Whilst the conventional library has evolved its design, moving away from austere approaches to comfort and attractiveness in an effort to attract and retain users, the online library will continue to develop more usable interfaces to information and more innovative personalized services for users.

- > 2. The rise of "the Second Superpower"
- > (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_Superpower).
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- > The growth and spread of the Net inspire hope for a greater intellectual
- > freedom in the world and the formation of an informed global public
- > opinion, which is independent from the interests of the nation-states.
- > Hence a fundamental question of information ethics: what can we do to
- > make "the Second Superpower" prevail? ("We", here, refers to you, to me,
- > to Google, and to the library profession.)

Google appears to be engaged in the debate on freedom of expression for countries experiencing online censorship, as seen in the decision by Google to host its services in Asia in Hong Kong instead of mainland China, this represents a reaction to a growing feeling across the world that the Internet represents a sacred communications facility which should allow for the free exchange of ideas and communications between individuals and nations.

Whilst some of the technologies seen in the early Internet had their origins in a military fail-safe communications solution, the Internet was developed within education and research communities as an educational medium to facilitate the exchange of ideas across university campuses, to this extent, systems and protocols such as email and Gopher were designed to operate across disparate networked servers without restriction. These basic concepts seen in the early Internet have resulted in the growth of the World Wide Web and other Internet technologies as a world-wide medium for popular publishing and communication.

However, the current open model for the Internet is under threat from commercial agendas and government control as seen in the Patriot Act in the USA. Individuals and organizations should therefore campaign to oppose the transformation of the open internet into a tariff-based commercialized system or oppose further legislation to place restrictions on ordinary everyday use of the Internet as an open communications medium.