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We're all information gatherers now

Features - February 03, 2008

Jeremy Wagstaff

When we talk about the future of newspapers, education, media and learning, we tend to ignore one of the most important aspects. We tend to focus on information delivery and not on the nature of information seeking.

Journalists seem to think the media needs to provide the same kind of information to people, only in a different way. The bigger shift, however, is how the Internet has changed the kinds of information we search for and how we go about finding it. In short, we are getting much more information, only we're getting it in short sharp bursts --

The question is: Is this a good thing?

A recent British Library report on the future of libraries hits the nail on the head.

It observed that, "Library users demand 24/7 access, instant gratification at a click, and are increasingly looking for 'the answer' rather than for a particular format: a research monograph or a journal article for instance. So they scan, flick and 'power browse' their way through digital content, developing new forms of online reading in ways that we do not yet fully understand (or, in many cases, even recognize)."

On the following page, the report concludes that, "In general terms, this new form of information seeking behavior can be characterized as being horizontal, bouncing, checking and viewing in nature.

"Users are promiscuous, diverse and volatile and it is clear that these behaviors represent a serious challenge for traditional information providers, nurtured in a hard copy paradigm and, in many respects, still tied to it.

John Naughton at *The Observer* helped to put this in context when he wrote that "What Marshall McLuhan called 'the Gutenberg galaxy' -- that universe of linear exposition, quiet contemplation, disciplined reading and study -- is imploding, and we don't know if what will replace it will be better or worse".

This is true, of course, not just of libraries and academia. It's true of newspapers and pretty much any medium that delivers information. The Internet has encouraged and forced us to develop scanning techniques way beyond the simple quick-reading skills of old.

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If I'm looking for information in the Gutenberg Galaxy I can do so quickly on Wikipedia simply by selecting the words on the page, right-clicking and selecting **Search Google for...** in the pop-up menu. Time taken: two seconds.

This ability to secure, and appetite for, quick access to snippets information (what I guess we used to call "gobbets") is part and parcel of the web and the lives of those who spend any time on it. Why hunt for a dictionary when you can look it up on your cellphone/laptop/fridge display?

What is less well understood is the impact of all this. If we satisfy our curiosity so easily, does our curiosity grow in all directions, both in breadth and depth, or does it flit from flower to flower like a bumblebee in summer?

The British Library research seems to suggest the latter. Using words like *horizontal*, *bouncing*, *checking*, *viewing*, *promiscuous*, *diverse* and *volatile* seems to suggest we're entering a world where people are fickle and their attention spans short.

Once the initial curiosity is satisfied ("What the hell is a gobbet?") the reader moves on, following the Serendipity of the Hyperlink.

On the other hand, it seems to suggest readers have built-in safeguards against misinformation and inaccuracy. Our scanning skills are honed beyond merely being able to take in a page of information quickly. We are able to judge the source of information too, based on the layout, design and style of a web page and its contents.

This latter skill may be more important in the long run. Perhaps the shift is more about our understanding of what we need to know, and the time we can dedicate to finding it out, than to any shift in our attention span or ability to absorb deep columns of information.

The Gutenberg Galaxy, in fact, was bound to come to an end at some stage. We simply have too much information to digest nowadays to be able, most of us, to take a leisurely stroll through literature. And, frankly, in academic terms, much of the literature could be better and more tightly written.

If there wasn't much information out there, and not much access to it, I would probably be quite happy dedicating my time to knowing more about Chaucer or the sex life of the fruit fly, and not much else.

But the Internet has taught us a valuable lesson that we, as a race, seem to have forgotten -- That there is so much stuff to learn out there, that we should be in a mad race to learn as much as we can about it before we're run over by a Sat Nav-dependent truck.

Perhaps our generation will be the last to be stupid enough to think we know enough as individuals to be smart (or conversely, happy to

wallow in our specialist expertise and general ignorance). Future generations may look back at us and ask why we were so incurious about all the things in front of us that we didn't know anything about.

Right now, I'd settle for knowing why the sky is blue, how many Grand Slam tournaments there are, what a grommet is and why there seem to be so many different types of plug to go on the end of a coaxial cable.

Thank God we're at last beginning to learn the skills necessary to find that stuff out before breakfast.

-- Jeremy Wagstaff writes for The Wall Street Journal Asia and the BBC World Service. His guide to technology, "Loose Wire", is available in book shops or on Amazon. He can be found online at jeremywagstaff.com or via email at jeremy@loose-wire.com

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