Some Thoughts on Operating in a Global Environment

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The future is that strange land we are constantly entering but never at home in. This probably accounts for why we are both fascinated with it and yet so seldom anticipate it correctly. Even trying to identify key issues in the present requires anticipating the future and is often done at one’s peril. As a librarian I am made particularly cautious by recollection of Wilf Lancaster’s 1980 book “The Impact of a Paperless Society on the Research Library of the Future.” Nothing could have been more logical at the time nor so wrong for the present as to believe that computers would reduce the amount of paper in our lives.

And yet it is impossible to live without trying to understand where we are going and what the future holds in store for us. As an editor of a library journal (Journal of Academic Librarianship) I have a particular interest in trying to understand the broad currents and developments of scholarly communication. One of the most interesting of these currents is the globalization of scholarly dialog. For several hundred years modern scholarly discourse has been international in that it has involved countries in both Western Europe and North America. What seems clear is that this historically Western conversation is increasingly becoming global as Asian, Eastern and Central European, Mid-eastern, African and South American voices are more frequently heard.

Such a shift is the result of a confluence of many factors, including economic development, digital publishing, and even consortial mass purchase. Probably the key element, however, is the internet which has transformed global communication through radically reducing costs and message delivery times. The internet provides a workable mechanism where it is increasingly feasible for everyone on the planet to talk to everyone else. While there are indeed many abuses of this astonishing capability, the opportunities for expanding and deepening the quality of scholarly communication by vastly expanding both the audience and the participants via digital publications are tremendous. From my own experience at JAL and from conversation with fellow editors in the library field, the number of papers from non-Western authors has increased substantially in the last decade from almost nil to 10-20% of submissions. Whether cause or effect, readership patterns have similarly broadened. For example, approximately 18% of JAL’s subscriptions are held in non-Western countries.

But there is a serpent in the garden, and no, it’s not spam or computer viruses. It’s language. While the internet gives us the mechanism for global communication, it does not give us the mechanism for comprehending each other. If we each speak our own language the power of the internet creates a babble, not a conversation.
The historical solution scholars have used time and again, is a resort to a common, core language. For medieval Europe it was Latin, for much of the Muslim empire it was classical Arabic, for the Chinese it was Mandarin. Communication may have been painfully slow, but it was intelligible across region and country. The dilemma of such a solution, of course, made even more wrenching today with literacy and education so widespread in local languages, was that a scholar, in a sense, had to choose which audience to speak to – the local or the cosmopolitan.

In the digital world of 21st century publishing, it seems to me that we can add some significant bells and whistles to this ancient strategy and largely resolve the dilemma. In the print world of journals it is costly to print issues in multiple languages, especially when non-Roman alphabets are required. Even if the translation is already available, the printing and distribution of a polyglot article entails significant costs. This would seem not to be the case in a digital publication where production and distribution costs appear to be much less. In short, it seems possible that a digital publication could feasibly appear in both a common core language, such as English in today’s world, and in the local language of the author. It may no longer be necessary to make a choice between audiences. A rich local or regional dialog can be preserved without being necessarily isolated from a global dialog.

To this end, JAL has recently undertaken a pilot project to begin publishing articles by non-native English speaking authors in both an official English version and in a supplemental local language version. While the language of this global dialog, not just in the library world but in higher education generally, is English and for practical reasons will likely remain so for the indefinite future, it seems increasingly important that we begin to acknowledge the larger global context of 21st century librarianship. With the September, 2004 issue of JAL we have taken an important step in this direction. In the electronic version of this issue of JAL it is possible to see the article on the Turkish consortium ANKOS in both its official JAL version (English) and in a local language version (Turkish).

As we continue to work out the logistics of such bilingual publishing we hope that ultimately all articles accepted from non-native English speaking authors will have a native language version in the appropriate local language. Our expectation is that such supplementary texts may be of most use to librarians in the particular local country. Nevertheless, for those scholars with the necessary skills and desire, it will also provide a more direct, non-translated version of the article.

Of course, the key question for scholarship is less the economics of the publishing multi-language versions of articles, than how valuable it is to the scholarly community to be able to conduct such a dual dialog. It is entirely possible, I suppose, that the advantages of a completely homogeneous (linguistically speaking) dialog would outweigh the continuing engagement with the richness and complexity of local concerns and perspectives. But I will admit to a lingering prejudice against developing a too complete uniformity. American fast food has many practical advantages, but I would miss not having as well, Indian curries, Chinese hot and sour soup, Italian pizza and ice cream, German beer and French Cabernet Sauvignon. Hopefully complexity and richness can go hand in hand with a comprehensible global conversation.