

Happiness is a Warm Librarian

Derek De Solla Price, Yale 1980

"In a way, the system of writing books wasn't aided by printing technologies replacing the manuscript tradition. A new system of writing books, which had not been planned, grew up to utilize the available technology. The books that came off the presses were essentially different books from those that had been produced in the eras of manuscript publication. The old technology was not just displaced by the new one doing a better job with the same thing: the new technology did a different job." (he was pointing out here that before the printing press there never were how-to books, illustrated books etc.; the printer went around to craftsman next door and tried to get him to write books that would use the capabilities of the press that had been invented.)

"Similarly, the scientific journals that erupted about 1660 were produced as artifacts of a new stage in the evolution of the press. Ephemeral publications had come into use with sermons and broadsheets, and this led to the newspaper. Again, the available technology was utilized in doing a job that had not been done before. (Of course there had been scholarly letter writing before, but the new form of communication, that came when a journal could be entrepreneured and sold, was something quite different. The scientific paper is not contained within the new technology; it was the new technology that gave birth to the journal)."

speaking of the Grande Encyclopedie - "It did start a fashion in encyclopedias that has lasted, but in a way it has been a failure, because the original object was that the encyclopedia would contain all knowledge, not just the sort of quintessence of that knowledge for ready reference in the home. It could not be used at the research front for it couldn't keep up with exponential growth. Ten years later half of all knowledge was not contained in it; it was too new."

"The syndrome that 'it will be a beautiful data system when we get it finished' will not answer. We're not going to have a finished system in our lifetime or for some time beyond. We are going to have a rapidly evolving, changing system in which everybody in the industry must necessarily be on the research front."

"That job of packing down current awareness into a permanent archive implies a very linear sequential, and therefore probably false, model of knowledge." (speaking of the eternal archive concept of journals etc.)

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"I suggest that perhaps we will see an extermination of the secondary literature because the job it used to do can probably be done better, once primary literature is managed in a computerized form. There will then be no reason to adopt this intermediate device to combine in an agonizing way the different jobs of current awareness and the creation and maintenance of an archive."

"There must be some other way and that is why old-style browsing was important. Linear sequential thought is perfectly good if we have all the necessary bibliographical information or if we want to find somebody's phone number."

"I want to insist, however, on the simple point that Babylonian-style thinking with combinations of linear sequential elements is not the way we customarily proceed (we work by Gestalt, like the Greeks, visual comprehenders). We have a patterned way of thinking. I can go back to books that I read thirty years ago or collections that I searched earlier than that, and know things about them that could not be found using any index. Half the time we use a stored memory item, we use it for reasons other than could be covered by any plausible descriptors."

"If however a person is in Copenhagen and wants to call his friend Hans Jensen, he must know that the friend is Architect Hans Jensen, because he is listed under 'architect.' It is weird how things like that mess up our system."

"Instead of a series of indexing terms all of which are linear sequential, one should use a pari of coordinates for the proper representation of knowledge. The representation of a sort of road map then generates itself rather than having order inflicted upon it. The proper representation of knowledge become a sort of atlas, or maybe even a globe, in which each item is placed relative to other ones with which it is associated."

"Knowledge is apparently organized in subdisciplines and subspecialities (atoms and molecules) and at no other level. If we think there is such a thing as physics or physiology or information science, we do so only because it provides a mode of social organization which permits us to have institutes, schools, students, and doctorates in a subject. It does not mean that all of the fields that we teach cohere."