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The End of Expertise ?

The controversy around the extent to which new communication media – blogs and wikis in particular – are changing the notion of expertise, and of the relative value of the contributions of Expert and Everyman to debates on all manner of topics, will be familiar to all *JDoc* readers. Whether considering the wisdom or the madness of crowds, the value of ‘amateur’ contributions, or the adequacy of an ‘Google-shaped’ approach to information access, this is becoming a major issue of the times (see, for example, Brabazon 2007 and Keen 2007 for trenchant argument of the issue).

Richard Morrison, a columnist on the London *Times* whose usual area is the arts and cultural matters, has written an article on these topics, couched in clear and provocative terms, which raises interesting questions for journals such as this one. This is perhaps surprising, as Morrison’s opening point is the controversy over a televised dancing competition, in which an amateur competitor annoyed the professional judges and serious competitors by winning the majority vote of viewers, against all ‘serious judgements’. But such seemingly trivial incidents illuminate issues with wide ramifications.

“ ‘Give the majority what it wants’ “, Morrison fumes, “is now the over-riding mantra in all the arts, especially on TV. It far outweighs notions of excellence, innovation or adventure. Experts are ridiculed as elitist or “out of touch”. Teenage bloggers get as much attention and respect as learned scholars. Quality is counted only in ratings or box-office takings.’

At a time when academics agonise about whether to allow students to cite Wikipedia in essays, we can see that these concerns go way beyond the arts. When we reflect that the American Society for Information Science and Technology is, at the time of writing, planning a textbook of information science to be produced partly by wiki-methodology, albeit by contributors with some status in the field, we can see that they are coming very close to home.

“Far more than 9/11, or the financial melt-down, or the rise and rise of China,” Morrison alleges, “the decline and fall of the expert in public esteem strikes me as the most significant aspect in which the 21st century thus far differs from the 20th. This might be thought to reflect the insecurities of the ‘official’ newspaper columnist, surely the species most threatened by the blogger. But perhaps there is more to it than that. Perhaps this is indeed a major phenomenon.

“The internet has been the prime driving force, spreading the pathetic illusion that all knowledge (and therefore all wisdom) is accessible to everyone. But it’s not the only one. Almost as strong is the new belief that everyone’s opinion, on every subject, is equally valid – whether that opinion is well informed or crassly ignorant. Deference to authority is dead, even where that authority is based on a lifetime of experience.” Is Morrison rather over-hyping this point ? If so, he is far from alone. The malign influence of the internet has been identified by many in promoting the idea that information is easily found and just as easily assimilated, with a minimum of preparation, prior study, or

even focused thought at the time. It lies behind the fears about the skimming and bouncing behaviours of many, perhaps most, internet users as they power-browse the web, never pausing for reflection or deep study. It underlies concerns about the search for 'shallow novelty', in which the Google generation are supposed to engage, and about the lack of the digital literacy which would enable people to decide between the validity of different perspectives, media and forms of information.

For an academic journal such as *JDoc*, all this raises some worrying questions. The whole *raison d'être* for such a journal is the communication of expert opinion, and of the results of expert research and study. If expertise is lost, or devalued, then a journal such as this has no purpose and no future. If such a dark vision is set aside, as I would wish to do, then there remains the question of how far publications such as this can go to open up communication beyond the 'validated expertise' model. Should we abandon peer review, or at least reduce its rigour? Should we permit, or even encourage, comments on published papers, and if so should there be any 'quality check' on who may comment? Should we, in the best emerging Web 2.0 style, 'embed' our quality assured content within the wider, and un-moderated, context of a wiki? Such issues will have to be addressed by many learned journals, perhaps sooner rather than later.

Fortunately, *Journal of Documentation*, can claim to have been in the advance of such debates, at least in a small way. Our long-established *Speculations in Documentation* series allows for personal viewpoints, and speculative pieces, published with minimal refereeing, and we are always pleased to receive more contributions in this vein. Perhaps, in a modest way, *JDoc* has been ahead of the game in this aspect, as in others.

David Bawden

References

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