

Editorial: The Keyword Believer

by Philip Harvey

There are times when we wonder if the Rules and Interpretations of book description are ever going to keep up with changes in mass production. Rules that were written for the monograph are now having to be applied to whatever information vehicle is next invented out of technological advance and human acquisitiveness. Some sceptics are reaching the conclusion that the changes are so multifarious and diverse that complete overhaul of descriptive Rules will not be enough to deal with what is happening. Others keep grumbling about the outdatedness of many existing Rules.

On the other hand, the innate conservationist nature of the Rules, and their idealist basis in good and useful description, are for many a last hope in the face of the invasion of undifferentiated information overload. This is well illustrated in our frequent encounters with the keyword believer.

The keyword believer has become a common visitor to our libraries, whether bodily through the door, or cannily via electric cables. He, though there's a fair amount of she also, has grown up in a world in which keyword searching is the single means to all knowledge. Keyword is the talisman to the codes of the other world, the means of unlocking the secrets to all known mythologies, the one clue to the unknown beyond the computer screen. If someone's sole education in term searching is the Google entry line, it is not to be expected that an advanced subject search using Boolean operators will mean anything in particular. If it's not there by keyword, then it's not there, right?

Of course, we know that searching is much more than keywords, but are we achieving anything with our Rules and Interpretations if our users do not know that? The keyword believer has had a sentimental education via the computer and is innocent of the actual potential of a library catalogue.

Another factor here is that none of us are walking thesauruses. The mind may be the most sophisticated catalogue that we consult every day, but associative memory can be strangely resistant to synonyms. If we want a book on Venice and don't find what we want using those six letters in that order, it can take a mental effort to come up with Veneto, Serenissima, Gondola, Contarini, Vivaldi or any of the other Venetian words that could lead us more effectively to our object. We're up a backwater without a paddle. Structured access, especially through the increasingly misunderstood subject search, is the solution to a keyword believer's frustration.

Librarians have the creative answer. We must promote keyword searches, obviously. Yet, at the same time, we are asked more and more to divert sole attention from the keyword to more exact and speedy means of finding the information. Indeed, disabusing the keyword believers of their favourite proclivity, i.e. depending on keyword search alone, has become one of the tasks of responsible information providers. It is a lesson we learn again for the first time, where the Rules are made for the needs of the user, where the user learns from the catalogue.