

Editorial

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Evaluating Risk

Two articles in this issue explicitly address risk, Heather Brown's "The interconnected Web: A Paradigm for Managing Digital Preservation" and Eld Zierau and Ulla Bøgvad Kejser's "Cross-institutional Cooperation on a Shared Bit Repository". It is no accident that both articles discuss long-term digital preservation, where the goal is to reduce the risk that content will not be available in the future. While the other articles do not address risk directly, some judgement about risk is present in almost every aspect of digital libraries. When Margam Madhusudhan and Noushad Ahmed write about the "Evaluation of Indian Institutes of Management Library Websites in India", the risk is that the evaluation could discover problems that need correction. The article by Pradip Das on "Promoting Online Databases/electronic Resources: A Practical Experience" seems outwardly the least connected to issues of risk, and yet any time a resource needs promoting the implicit risk exists that it will be underutilized. The article by Anna Kaushik "Libraries Perception towards Cloud Computing: A Survey" addresses security issues as one of

the most cited barriers to cloud computing, and security has a clear risk component. Risk is everywhere.

In my ethnographic research, I have long had an interest in risk. One of my principal research areas has been copyright, where some form of risk analysis is inescapable any time people want to use protected materials. Unwary users also face the risk of 'honey pots' designed to entrap people into downloading protected materials in order to threaten them with legal action. The definition of risk is broad. According to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, there are four components to risk; it can be an 'unwanted event', the 'cause of an unwanted event', the 'probability of an unwanted event', or the 'statistical expectation value of an unwanted event'.¹ In more human terms, risk means that something unpleasant might happen, and that is something that librarians generally prefer to avoid.

Librarians tend as a group to be risk adverse. Nonetheless, librarians also have a history of embracing new technologies as a means of managing large amounts of information — in

¹ Sven Ove Hansson, "Risk", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2012 Edition), Edward N Zalta (ed.). Available at <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2012/entries/risk/>

effect, accepting the possibility of an unwanted outcome for a greater gain. Libraries automated their catalogues in the 1980s, at a time when many companies still depended heavily on paper, and cloud computing is only one example of how librarians have continued the tradition of taking calculated risks on new technological developments. Users may be more risk averse. Access restrictions offer only one of many examples where users ‘demonstrated risk-averse, satisficing behaviours that avoided potentially time-consuming exploration’.² Librarians often have to help users overcome their risk aversion to using new tools and access methods. Users seek the security of knowing that librarians have sanctioned contents and access rights, and that the library’s discovery tools guarantee finding everything of significance for their search.

Risk is inescapable, but not necessarily problematic. Evaluation practices are a necessary risk for websites in order to improve, and without experimenting with cloud computing,

libraries cannot find out whether this new form of storage will be a cost-effective alternative to the local form of storage that they already use. In digital archiving any action, however risky, is arguably better than doing nothing. The balance between selection risks, that is, which materials are most in danger of becoming lost over time, and technology risks, which materials may be unreadable because of bit rot damage or format or operating environment changes, shifts back and forth depending on current anxieties

The long term fact is that both risks are real. Works never archived will likely be lost, and works with bit rot damage may be unrecoverable. The change in emphasis toward organizational issues that Heather Brown discusses comes in part because the risk of format changes was previously overemphasized, and has largely been unrealized. This is indeed an important aspect of risk — overemphasizing the wrong risk is itself one of the real risks that librarians face.

² S Makri, A Blandford, J Gow, J Rimmer, C Warwick, and G Buchanan, 2007. “A Library or Just Another Information Resource? A Case Study of Users’ Mental Models of Traditional and Digital Libraries”, *J. Am. Soc. Inf. Sci.* 58: 433–445.