



Available at <http://pu.edu.pk/home/journal/8>

Pakistan Journal of Library & Information Science

ISSN 1680-4465



Guest Editorial

The digital table: A radical proposal for inclusivity

John V. Richardson Jr.

Department of Information Studies, University of California, Los Angeles, USA

Email: jrichard@ucla.edu

Throughout history, the idea of sitting down and sharing a meal together has been a common theme. In the Greco-Roman world, the tradition of the Symposium comes to mind. It was a social occasion for men to get together to debate or celebrate, certainly to enjoy each other's company. The most famous symposium, I suppose, would be that enshrined in western literature as the Socratic dialogues of Plato. Surely you can think of other famous examples. For example, if one mentions the "land of the pure," Mughal cooking comes to mind for many Westerners; and, notably, Pakistan's four regional specialties when it comes to great cuisine. Of course in a global environment, we all have different customs and traditions as well as different table manners; of course, food utensil etiquette varies, but arguably one can assert that the family that eats together stays together.

As I reflect on how our field of library and information science has changed since I entered it forty years ago, the role of information technology immediately comes to my mind. Access to the world's information is now so much easier, literally, at one's finger tips. In the mid-1990s, with the rise of the internet search engines (such as AltaVista, Ask Jeeves, or HotBot), one didn't even have to leave one's home, classroom or office to find an answer to one's question. Recently, we reached the tenth year anniversary of Google. In English, it initially entered our vocabulary as a noun; but, it is now a verb used in every day conversation as in: "Just Google It!"

Regardless of our varied cultures, many of us were brought up by our parents to share; in the United States, we sometimes refer to this idea by a vague phrase—family values. Indeed, with the rise of the internet and search engines, it is increasingly easy to share our thoughts and words (as texts and song lyrics) and images (e.g., photos and videos) on a global basis. Yet at the same time, the dominance of the English language means that some, if not many, ethno-linguistic groups may be left out. The latest statistics for 2010 show English language speakers are number one in internet usage; the Chinese second; Spanish speakers, third; Japanese, fourth; and Portuguese, fifth (See <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats7.htm>).

I would assert that the use of technology, however, is not neutral. A hammer is not just a hammer. The adoption of any technology brings along with it some changes—more of some things and less of some things.¹ If one really understands how Google works, you know that one of the pernicious features of its retrieval algorithm is that it privileges those web pages which have the most links. In other words, the most authoritative pages may not be retrieved at the top, rather only the most popular pages. Not surprisingly, an English language website is most likely the top page or even fills the first pages of the retrieval set. I suppose you could call that a kind of cultural imperialism.

¹ If you want to read more about the philosophy of technology, I would recommend Don Ihde's *Technics and Praxis: A Philosophy of Technology* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1979) as a good starting point.

Yet, our field of library and information science has the potential of helping these potentially dispossessed groups get their ideas and culture on the Web. We train our students, who as graduates will train their users about ICT (information and communications technology)—how to save text files into HTML formats and then learn to FTP these files to an internet server, so that this information is more widely accessible to the world. In this manner, indigenous cultures and local knowledge systems can be respected and maintained. Of course, I confess that I see another related issue which has to do with another digital divide along lines of the “haves and have nots”—i.e., the rich and the poor. Obviously, some people do not have ready access to computers and/or smartphones because of the expense. Likewise, one can observe gender differences as well. Women are widely recognized as keepers of culture (meaning, oral traditions and the way we do things) and their equal participation on the internet strikes me as important and worth encouraging. Again, it seems to me that a freely available public library plays an important role in what some call a social justice issue. When I look at what our field has done in some places, I think we can be proud of our accomplishments in providing access to data, information, and knowledge.

In summary, I believe our field—library and information science—is uniquely positioned to bridge the digital divide. I hope you will think about inviting some people to the table...