Free Access, Quality and Translation

A report on the CINDOC Workshop *Las revistas científicas españolas ante los retos tecnológicos*

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Before the Internet, translators relied on expensive dictionaries and reference books for information. Now a decent Internet connection has become one of the most important tools of our trade. In the biomedical field for example, MEDLINE can be used to retrieve abstracts from hundreds of journals. And then of course there is Google, the omnipotent search engine that can dig out web pages on almost anything. Suppose a translator is uncertain whether to write "extrapyramidal adverse effects" or "adverse extrapyramidal effects." He or she consults Google and finds that "extrapyramidal adverse effects" gets ten times as many hits, so "extrapyramidal adverse effects" seems to be the preferred expression in this "Google democracy." The method is not perfect because Google counts web pages not web sites, so some "votes" could have been counted more than once and a web page published by a geeky 16-year-old will carry the same weight as a web page published by a Nobel laureate. This is the crux of the debate about the Internet as an information source: the Internet holds a vast store of information, but can we be sure of its reliability?

The seminar titled *Las revistas científicas españolas ante los retos tecnológicos* (Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, Madrid, November 11, 2003) held as part of the program of the III Semana de la Ciencia de Madrid, looked like it might have something to say on the matter. The "technological challenges" obviously refer to web publishing, and I regularly use online journals as an information source and also work for a couple of web-based publications.

The first speaker was **Javier López**, who had worked for ten years as a journalist with *El País* before moving to his current position at Ediciones Doyma, S. L. (a company whose main line of business is the publication of biomedical journals). Unlike the other speakers, he concentrated on medical communication to the general public. Different surveys suggest that the general public are very interested in health topics and would like more health coverage. Paradoxically though, the general public prefers to read about sports and gossip. This may be because most people only want health-care information when they need it—you might not be interested in reading about the causes of hypertension unless your doctor tells you that your blood pressure is too high. This is where the Internet comes in. If you type "hypertension" into Google, you get approximately 2.5 million hits. Unfortunately, there is no check on the reliability of this information on these pages. Indeed, surveys have shown that as many as 6 out of 10 health web pages carry false signatures.

Some new initiatives have aimed to improve reliability of health web sites. We were told for example of the code established by HON, a Swiss-based independent health portal. Among other things, the code requires that medical advice be given only by qualified persons, stresses that information on the web should in no way aim to replace the normal physician-patient relationship, and suggests that sponsorship should be clearly stated to allow conflicts of interest to be assessed (for full details, see <http://www.hon.ch/HONcode/Conduct.html>). Such initiatives are welcome, but their worth may be limited by their voluntary nature and the indiscriminate way that search engines such as Google find information. (Google currently allows "safe searching" which filters out pages with pornographic content. Presumably, a similar filter would be possible for health web sites that do not have a seal of approval.)

The next speaker was **Jesús González Barahona**, a lecturer at Universidad Rey Juan Carlos, Madrid, and a keen proponent of open access to scientific journals. He reviewed how traditional scientific publications have functioned over the last two centuries. Publishers are not usually charities, and in the traditional model, profit lies in pricey subscriptions paid by libraries. Peer review and editorial boards, a fundamental part of scientific publishing, have traditionally provided quality control, though this conservative system has sometimes led to groundbreaking work being rejected and can cause long delays in publication. The new models for scientific publication need to safeguard the quality of what is published and at the same time provide the digital publishers with ways to make money. Although distribution and reproduction costs for Internet publications are next to nothing, an administrative structure is still required particularly if the publication is peer reviewed. Many of the established journals that are available online only provide full access to fee-paying subscribers or charge for each article viewed in full, which moves away from the ideal of free access to everyone (we as taxpayers indirectly fund most university work, why should we have to pay to have access to it?). It remains to be seen whether new models can provide the desired free access while maintaining the quality of traditional peer-reviewed journals. Payment for access obviously falls short of the ideal of free access, but it might be preferable to access only via academic libraries. A person living in a small remote village would probably prefer a 6€ download from the Internet to a two hour trip to the nearest university library.

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The first step then is to have reliable accurate information available on the Internet. But information is useless unless you can find it. The remaining three talks were devoted to ways of indexing and finding this information. First, **Elena Fernández** (CINDOC) spoke about portals for specialized information. Portals, unlike Google, can provide a quality filter by only linking to web sites that have been audited by the publishers of the portal. CINDOC are in the process of setting up a Spanish science and technology portal (<www.tecnociencia.es>). Although such portals may be useful for job-searching or for providing information on topical scientific debates, I doubt they can ever take the place of search engines like Google as a way of finding information.

The last two speakers both talked about portals for indexing scientific journals edited in Spanish. This will be of particular interest to those who translate into Spanish given the current Anglo-Saxon hegemony of indexes such as Medline.

Latindex (<www.latindex.org>), discussed by **Adelaida Román** (CINDOC), was conceived in 1995 to bring scientists in Latin America and the Iberian peninsula closer together, and make them aware of each others work. The idea of this new index is to use the Internet as a gateway for communication among scientists. **Remedios Melero** (Instituto de Agroquímica y Tecnología de Alimentos, CSIC) spoke about a similar embryonic project for Spain known as Reditorial. The principles behind both indexes are similar. Both place emphasis on free access to all indexed journals, and both establish certain criteria for inclusion in the index. For example, the journals should have a history of at least several years' publication, they should have an editorial committee, they should have a table of contents, and the names and addresses for correspondence of authors should be clearly stated.

The format of the seminar allowed for some questions after almost four hours of talks. Although lunchtime was just around the corner, there was time for a small and interesting debate on how researchers decide which journal to send their work to. The choice may depend more on how it will look on the curriculum rather than on how many people will actually read the work. The biggest problem for new and innovative on-line open access journals may be to convince the relatively conservative academic community to break with two hundred years of tradition and start sending quality work to such publications. And as an afterthought, if researchers should ideally aim to publish their work so that it is as widely read as possible, does this also mean they should publish in English?