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Editorial

Naming of parts (and things)

To-day we have naming of parts. Yesterday,
We had daily cleaning. And to-morrow morning,
We shall have what to do after firing. But to-day.
To-day we have naming of parts. Japonica
Glistens like coral in all of the neighbouring gardens,
And to-day we have naming of parts.
(Henry Read, 1942)

During 2008 and 2009, the British Library ran a series of evening discussions under the heading TalkScience; as the name implies, these were informal lecture / discussion / networking events devoted to scientific topics. As one might expect from the venue, they were all associated with scientific information in some way; publication, communication, taxonomy, bioinformatics, etc.

The session on 22 July 2009 (which I attended) featured John Wilbanks from Science Commons talking about 'Scientific findings in a digital world: what is the genuine article?'. Its main theme was the survival, or otherwise, of the article in a scientific journal as the main way of communicating new scientific information. The talk, and discussion, touched on many issues: open access; intellectual property; what does peer review really do; can 'common knowledge' wikis replace introductions and literature reviews in articles; how to handle multimedia information within an 'article' framework; the need to decide which data to throw away; the likelihood that in a world of 'open science' funders will support only work which is replicable and falsifiable (as a good Popperian I warmed to this last); and so on. Much food for thought for everyone, including journal editors, and for those involved in the information sciences since the role of libraries was a recurring theme, perhaps not surprisingly considering the venue.

I was particularly struck by one point, which did not attract very much in the way of comment at the time, perhaps because everyone considered it self-evidently true. In his presentation of the need for annotation of digital reporting of scientific findings, Wilbanks commented simply that we need to call the same thing by the same name; this makes possible the semantic linking of information and data, the creation of ontologies, and so on, without which it will not be possible to share information across disciplinary and sub-disciplinary silos. He exemplified this by examples by simple – the various names for coffee in different languages – and complex – the variant terminology used in hundreds of datasets relating to polar climate change and to genomics.

There was another aspect to this point. What we call an information item in the digital world – DOIs and all the rest – is also fundamental; if we do not call these digital objects the same thing, we will have great difficulty in finding them.

Which all led me to think. Is this not one of the central themes of the information sciences being replayed. Given consistent names to information resources, through rules for cataloguing and resource description, and to the content of such resources, through indexing and classifying, have been a major activity of information practitioners for as long as these disciplines have existed, and – though regarded now as a little old-fashioned – have formed the focus for much information research. True, in the context in which the British Library presentation was given, they generally appear dressed in the semantic web clothes of RDF (Resource Description Framework) and OWL (Web Ontology Language), but the principles are surely the same.

Should we be pleased that 'our' concerns seem again to be at centre stage? Or distraught that we still have no accepted solutions to problems that have been around for so long? At all events, we can perhaps be quietly (or grimly) confident that these issues will continue to feature in *Journal of Documentation*, and in the rest of the information sciences literature, for the foreseeable future.

David Bawden