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Epistemology – Talking About People

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Epistemology — Talking About People

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What's a collective term for the people who work in publishing? No, I don't mean a phrase for a group of publishers, like "a murder of crows" or "a shuffle of bureaucrats." I mean a word that distinguishes the organization from the people, the way we talk about libraries and librarians.

All those people aren't "publishers," after all. "Publisher" is a specific job. In the organization there's editors of many different stripes and proofreaders and writers and marketers and salespeople. People to do layout and design and manage all the complex tasks involved in getting something into digital form with all of the appropriate metadata. Lawyers. Even the smallest library produced journal that puts out only a couple dozen decent articles a year has a bunch of people involved in publishing it, but I'll bet they don't often think of themselves as "publishers."

Just as there's a host of roles in libraries. Some are filled by people with library degrees, who are the people we call librarians. Many are performed by people without library degrees, who the general public also calls librarians. That distinction may be squishy, but we still easily identify the people — the librarians, et. al. — and the organizations or buildings — the libraries. It's not so clear when we talk about the people and the organizations involved in publishing. And it matters.

The language evolves in delightfully unpredictable ways, even over very short periods of time. Language shapes the way we think. I'm fascinated that we now refer generically to our little pocket computers as "phones" even though using them to communicate speech in real time is, for many if not most, the least used feature. "Podcast" became the default term for downloadable radio programs due to the ease of loading them onto **Apple's** iPods, devices that were revolutionary at the beginning of the millennium and obsolete fifteen years later. But "podcast" is now firmly entrenched and will likely have much greater longevity than the music players from which the name was derived. (I imagine someone just a few more years hence, when iPods are at best a dim memory, speculating on the derivation, "Well, it's like you take this little pod of information and cast it out onto the Internet...")

Linguists distinguish denotation — the specific thing that a word refers to, from connotation — the cloud of associations, some subtle and subconscious, that the word carries with it. We may think we agree on the denotation, but find that we resonate very differently to the connotations. To one person the timber wolf is an elegant, noble creature deserving protection while to another the name conjures a vicious, livestock killing marauder that we need to obliterate.

It's midsummer as I write and the U.S. is in the throes of the immigration crisis when

children are being separated from parents and the battles over what to call the people crossing the border are as fierce as the fights over policies. Does "migrants seeking refuge" or "asylum seekers and parents" make you think of a panicked woman begging to have her child returned to her? Does "adults who cross the border illegally" designate a faceless member of a rampaging horde threatening the safety and security of your loved ones at home?

In the case of publishing, the lack of terminology separating the people from the company makes it difficult for people to distinguish them. If "publisher" calls to mind rapacious capitalist monsters callously indifferent to the progress of science, you may be unwittingly applying those same connotations to the people who work there.

The confusion is further complicated by the basic norms that discourage people from publicly criticizing the organization they work for or openly discussing the disagreements that routinely occur within. Years ago, I was sitting in a little bar in Seoul listening to an **Elsevier** manager who had significant responsibilities for *Science Direct* expressing his frustration at his inability to make a product change that librarians were clamoring for. He agreed with the librarians, but even though the shift was nominally within his area of responsibility, other people in the company were able to prevent it from happening because it conflicted with what they perceived to be other over-riding priorities. Librarians were angry at him over this and he didn't feel he could tell them he was actually on their side.

Librarians see these sorts of battles in their libraries and the organizations they're a part of all the time, but often don't consider how common they are in the companies they do business with. I think of the many, many dinner conversations that **Lynn** and I had while she was an **EBSCO** Vice President, stories that she would never have considered repeating in the hearing of people she couldn't completely trust to keep them private. In much the same way, librarians at the conference hotel bar will regale their friends with tales of the terrible, idiotic things being done by administrators in their home institutions and then describe that home base in the most glowing terms when they're at the podium delivering their presentation the next day.

This tendency to conflate individuals with their organizations interferes with the listening that has to be at the core of any attempt to understand and work through differences. The assumptions we make about the positions someone must hold because of the organization they work for, or because of the professional cohort we've assigned them to, can deafen us.

In 2011 I delivered a lecture (subsequently published in the January 2012 issue of the

Journal of the Medical Library Association) in which I pointed out that all too often librarians abdicate agency to the institutions in which we work. Rather than saying that the librarians of **Midwestern College on the River** engaged in some fabulous research effort or learning experience with their students and faculty, we revert to talking about what the **MCR Library** did, blurring the faces and undermining the achievements of the women and men doing the hard work and deserving the accolades. In the years since, I've heard from the occasional library school professor



that the article is used with budding librarians to get them to think about their own agency and their own innovations and achievements — particularly important as we move into an era where more and more librarians are working outside of traditional libraries.

I wish that we could do something similar with people in publishing. Coming up with better collective language wouldn't solve the problem, of course, and it's not going to happen. But at least when we speak and write we should keep in mind that the world of publishing and the people who inhabit it and the goals and incentives and ideals that motivate them are just as varied as the world of libraries and librarians.

There was that time I was at a conference in South Africa and ended up having breakfast with a young woman who was the chief of staff to an exec from one of the Big Five publishers. You know the type — late twenties, wicked smart, fabulous attention to detail, able to juggle multiple projects and priorities and leap tall bureaucracies in a single bound. Savvy to the politics of the boss's situation, but still young enough not to have had their idealism crushed. That was a year of anti-publisher petitions and multiple @fakeXXXs on Twitter, blogs and social media walking the line between sarcasm and mean and too often falling over it. The woman I was talking with had gotten caught in the cross-fire and been a bit blind-sided by it. She could handle legitimate criticism of her company, but some of the chatter was personal and harsh. And it hurt to have her ethics and morals questioned. To be judged as lacking in humanity and of harming science, just because of who she worked for. She leaned forward, "They don't even know us." These days, when the anti-publisher rhetoric veers into the personal and mean, as it often does, I think of her. I think of the many other fascinating, intelligent, dedicated individuals working hard to advance scholarly communication. Some of them even work for **Elsevier**.

In 1965, **Dr. Estelle Brodman** opened the 64th annual meeting of the **Medical Library Association** with a presidential address titled, "Money Talks, but People Count."¹ It was a

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our clients and publishers to ensure continuity in client access. Service for online issues require immediate action and that's what **Prenax** offers client's now and will continue to.

ATG: *Some wonder about the viability of a subscription service in an increasingly digital world. Is that concern justified? Is the subscription part of your business experiencing satisfactory growth?*

NP: Our business is growing continuously as the industry transitions to digital.

ATG: *How do you see Prenax business model evolving to adapt to an ever-changing information industry? What market opportunities do you see in Prenax's future, both near and long term?*

NP: We stay close to all of our clients and continuously learn about the industry changes and challenges they face. **Prenax** either creates solutions or partners with companies that offer the services they need in this ever-changing information industry. We continue to see great opportunities serving libraries as well as on the corporate side.

ATG: *Nancy, we know that you stay incredibly busy with all that's on your plate. But everyone needs some down time. What do you do to relax? Are there fun activities that help you recharge and get ready for the next professional challenge?*

NP: I relax in several ways. I belong to our local gym and try to work out 2-3 times per week. On weekends in the summer, we head to Cape Cod and spend our days in and on the water in kayaks and on sailboats. I also read a fair amount and enjoy spending time seeing the latest movies.

ATG: *We really appreciate you taking time out of your schedule to talk with us. We enjoyed it and learned a lot.*

NP: Thank you for the opportunity to work with you on this interview! 🐾

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time when more money was flowing into libraries (although, as she points out, purchasing power wasn't dramatically increasing), but her concern was the challenge of enticing bright young minds to enter librarianship. She thought it was the best time since the late nineteenth century to be a librarian and she wanted to make sure that story got told. "We live today in an exciting world. We are fortunate to be working at a time when the milieu in which we operate is undergoing many changes—sometimes bewildering changes. These in turn force us to look around with a fresh viewpoint, and this necessity makes our jobs even more challenging and, therefore, more interesting..." She would've loved seeing what we're faced with now.

To "look around with a fresh viewpoint." It's the people that'll make the difference. When we focus on the organizations and lose sight of the people, we lose track of the ideas and the energy that are necessary to create the changes society needs in our scholarly communication systems. When we disregard the people because of where they work, we fall into the trap of thinking only we, and the people who think like us, are on the right side of history, only we know the path forward. But developing the systems that will best serve society requires the expertise and energy and insights of all of us. We certainly won't all agree. That's okay. I've learned that I don't always hold the truth in my hip pocket. The organizations we work in don't hold the keys. It's the people that count. 🐾

Endnotes

1. **Brodman, Estelle.** "Money Talks, but People Count." *Bulletin of the Medical Library Association*. 1965 Oct; 53(4): 567-572. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC198334/pdf/mlab00181-0073.pdf>