

# "When I'm Alone I'm in Bad Company"

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John Lubans

## Defining the User Experience

**U**ser experience, as applied here, has a broader meaning than library managers might usually associate with the term. It serves as an umbrella for our expertise in information use and for direct feedback from library users. Library-user study only partly describes what appears to me to be a new way of looking at how we develop and track programs and seek constructive feedback. The user experience I refer to is driven by the frenzied competition and congested proximity of the Internet, but it is not limited to the Internet. It has always had wide organizational application in libraries.

The dynamic juxtapositions on the Web now make our user relationships that much more interactive and therefore of greater interest to managers for improved feedback for carrying out the library's mission. User experience is relevant to issues of policy and planning, including facility arrangements, not to mention what we can bring to our incipient partnerships with Internet information providers. I came upon the term while looking at the best ways to design a Web site for maximum exposure on the Internet. When I saw the term and its use, it crystallized what I'd been sensing about changes in our work.

This column will try to define user experience—to touch on the librarian's role in it, how we can get more of it, and how we can apply it. I hope to make clear how different this is now and to explore why the notion of user experience offers some help in improving decision making by library managers.

I've often been bemused about the low regard the profession has for traditional library-user studies. While hardly robust, and often makeshift and amateurish, the humble user study still is a sincere effort to get useful feedback for better understanding of how a library is working. In that aspect, it is vastly superior to our assumption that we know what is happening, wrapping ourselves in the immutable cloak of the expert.

Let me be the first to admit that most often our disinterest in user studies is a matter of not enough available time or energy to think differently from what has been. Nor do we have spare energy to ask the questions, mount the study, read the comments, and figure the percentages to see what they tell us. Listening is an active art. Seeking to understand the user is an active process. Little wonder that corporations professing customer service as "Job One," have little substance to offer beyond the slogan as downsizing shrinks the work force for

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attending to anything but the basics, the bottom line.

There are other reasons for our apparent reluctance to ask the user. We often do know what needs doing, what best practice ought to be—it is not just the user who knows. But each of us has a share of unrealized dreams that make us reluctant to ask. We may well receive confirmation that our idea is a good one but limited resources prohibit follow-through. A frequent rationale I've heard against doing user studies in which we ask for input on desired new services is that we implicitly must follow through on the suggestions. Then too we might discover that the user wants something different from what we are doing!

We do not consult our users often enough nor do we make enough use of user advisory boards, focus groups, and suggestions systems. There is little comfort in the fact that we are far from alone. Keeping us company are many corporations in this era of much vaunted but unrealized customer service.

The market place may provide excuses for a corporation, but there really is a contradictory aspect to what libraries say and do. For example, it is not rare for librarians to cite Ranganathan's *Laws of Library Science*, which were published in 1931.<sup>1</sup> His "Save the time of the user" is for me the elemental distillation of the principle under which I do my work (if I had an escutcheon, that is what would be inscribed on its field). How widely accepted this "fundamental principle" may be is open to interpretation. I am not the first to wonder how libraries with magnificently complex processing rules and regulations, large backlogs, slow turnaround times, and other drags on services can claim to be operating under this same principle, but they do. Some fifty years after Ranganathan, in 1979, Maurice Line issued his mordant *Laws for Academic Libraries*. Wasting the time of the reader tops Mr. Line's list of how we have subverted Ranganathan's intentions (and our own).

The Internet gives us many opportunities to reconnect with Ranganathan's fundamental values. It is up to us to decide on how to respond to the users of the "digital library." My surveys of Internet use confirm that these users want our aid and are looking to us to throw them lifelines as they drift in

cyberspace. Do we jeer at their efforts to dog paddle in the information soup, tsk tsk-ing them for failing, or do we help them?

From Antonio Pannizi onward we have assumed, sometimes rightly, sometimes wrongly, that we know what the user wants. Ranganathan is doubly relevant today in his identification of the user and his or her use as paramount in providing direction for what we do to help them.

It is the gained efficiencies in time and space that make user experience different in cyber space.<sup>2</sup> We have much more access to the user. This access can supplement our own considerable understanding of the users needs and wants. Feedback can now be immediate and, at times, overwhelming. Consider receiving, digesting, and analyzing the use statistics for hundreds of online journals.

What are the component parts and the relationships implicit in the user experience? Here are my initial thoughts on what should be part of an imaginary "grid" depicting user experience and our role in it (see figure 1). Bear in mind that these pieces are linked—the connecting lines would be double-tipped arrows—and that they are fluid, not static, with information flowing among the pieces. This is not a linear process.

At the center is the information provider (in this example, an Internet site), which resides simultaneously at the point-of-use desktops and at the information provider's server. Close by on the grid is the concept or good idea that prompted the creation of the site and its content. Feedback users will influence the concept's evolution. Also included on the grid are design and development, where the benefits and value of the content is decided upon and developed. Access strategy is a function and process drawing on the user experience for setting meta-tags, devising tactics for search engines, and targeting web directories. The process helps find other avenues for maximizing the number of "eyeballs" (i.e., users) reached.

The awareness or broadcast aspect of the grid includes the user tests and gives feedback in a real-time way. Its purpose is to promote maximum use of the content, trimming away the unnecessary design elements. This step can be as simple as identifying what is not working or

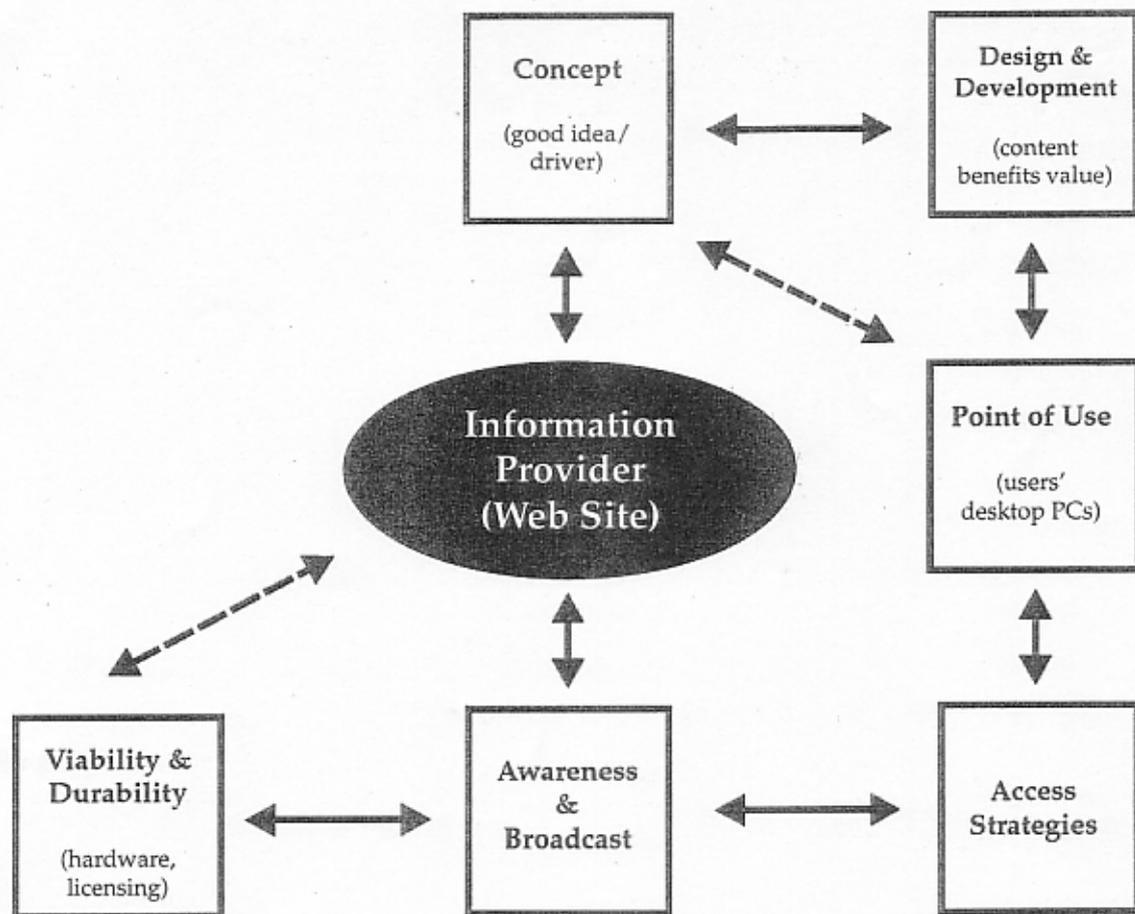


Figure 1. The User Experience.

as complicated as calculating the "bookmark ratio," which is a measure of how many people have bookmarked the site.

While peripheral, the segment I call viability or durability is still vital. It includes hardware compatibility, assuring the right software and plug-ins, ease of connectivity and configuration, and, eventually, on-screen ergonomic considerations.

All these feed back to the information provider's Web site and into the concept (the start-up idea) module. There is a library role in each of these boxes, especially in using our expertise to help develop the best access strategy, the greatest awareness, and viability. Here are a few examples of user experience initiatives:

One library's suggestion/answer book has resided in the lobby for seven-

teen years. It is anachronistic in its low-tech state: a loose-leaf, 8½" by 11" paper format laid out in a three-ring binder for individuals to view. However, it is hardly a relic. Nearly 8,800 suggestions, comments, complaints, and compliments have been scrawled in its pages. While some of it is humorous (see a sample on my Web site), it does not lack content—content that benefits our services and facilities. Hundreds of improvements have been made because of it. As in many suggestion systems, this one provides valuable feedback for fine-tuning services.

I recently consulted on a user test of a new Internet publication aimed at public policy and political science researchers. We e-mailed a questionnaire to the graduate student users with access to our campus-wide subscription to this highly

endorsed and valuable database. The outcome was eye-opening for the publisher and the librarians. The students identified some fundamental issues around the use of this unique source in their fields. Underlining the dynamic quality of the connection between a provider and the library's users was that the university's computer systems were not always compatible with the licensing requirement of the publisher. To put it bluntly, most users could not connect to the database! That this was unknown to the publisher and the library underscores the need for a relationship based on user-experience concepts, calling for much closer collaboration than in the halcyon simple days of books-on-the-shelves.

One of my reasons for examining how students are using the Internet for academic purposes was the dissonance between what the profession was saying, often authoritatively, and what the users appeared to be doing. As a manager, it was not incidental that the library would benefit from exploring possible implications. What if there is indeed a significant shift away from print to Internet resources? A few hundred students completed online questionnaires, providing us with much data for planning and reflection. Relevant to this column is the fact that print vs. electronic is not an issue for our users. Our battles over lease or buy, print or Internet, are irrelevant and "truly academic" and "bogus," to use the students' own term. Here is what they have to tell us:

- Libraries should provide access to all relevant information.
- The library's goal should be to help us write the best papers.
- We want one-stop shopping.
- Owning vs. accessing information makes no difference: Hit the print button or find it on the shelf. Just get it to me now.
- Make information searching more efficient.

While user experience may provide, not surprisingly, conflicting wants and expectations, it is the manager's job to sift through the results. As in each of these examples, there are numerous clues but few absolutes. However, as Internet merchants are discovering, the balance of power has shifted to the buyer. Because of the ease of access and competition on the Internet, the customer is king; perhaps an arbitrary one, but still king. Libraries that seek to understand this will benefit.

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#### Notes

1. S. R. Ranganathan. *The Five Laws of Library Science*. Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1963.
2. Two recent books are helpful in gaining and understanding of the growing field of user experience: Edwin Scholossberg, *Interactive Excellence*, New York: Ballantine, 1998; and Donald A. Norman, *The Invisible Computer*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998.