

## Information [Science] in the Post-Aquarian Age

Ralf Shaw - SIG/CON 2003

Warning: Reference will be made to antelopes. If your preparation for SIG/CON did not include an explanation of the importance of antelopes in information science, please seek to redress this deficiency soon.

No animals were harmed in the creation of this presentation.  
Some may be harmed in its delivery.

Speakers of a certain age (those who can recall the dawning of the Age of Aquarius) are expected to reprise their early work.

This can be a problem if one failed to choose one's early work carefully - for example, early "reprographers" and what can we say about "library automation."

Fortunately, I chose Scrabble Weights, specifically the impact on the US economy of the ASIS(T) annual meeting theme. As you will recall, this early work, reported at SIG/CON in 1981, each theme was assigned a Scrabble weight (ws) based on the point value of the letters, and this value was then correlated with the Dow Jones closing stock average for the year. The findings indicated that the lower the Scrabble weight, the higher the closing average.

I am pleased to update the research, reporting on the period 1980-2002. Once again, my research team computed the Scrabble Weights the score each annual meeting theme would earn if played at Scrabble, not allowing for double or triple letter or word scores. We also compared these Scrabble Weights with the closing Dow Jones averages, adjusted for inflation. Contrary to the earlier work, there was a direct, positive correlation between the year's ASIST theme Scrabble Weight and stock market performance - or, the higher the Scrabble weight, the higher the closing average.

We can only conclude that we are indeed in the Post-Aquarian age.

(Furthermore, this year's theme, "Humanizing Information Technology: From Ideas to Bits and Back" weighs in at 99 - the highest in the 24 years analyzed. Obviously, the stock market has a lot of work to do.)

Are there other indicators we are in the post-Aquarian age? (We must admit that an age which, so soon after its dawning, experienced the mid-morning of the leisure suit would be likely to see an early demise.)

First, we need to define the Aquarian Age. It clearly began with its dawning, as recounted in the musical "Hair" in 1968. What has changed since then?

"Peace, love, and understanding" has become "post-war, AIDS awareness, and tolerance of diversity"

"The Age of Aquarius" is available as a ringtone for your cell phone

Harrison Ford is starring in a movie titled "The Age of Aquarius."

There has been a 30%+ decline in the use of "new age" or "Aquarius" in newspaper headlines since 1999.

The society known as ADI became ASIS in 1967 -- now it is ASIST.

How is information science faring in this post-Aquarian age?

Seminal work on information theory is reported on Comedy Central's "The Daily Show:" Stephen Colbert, The Daily Show July 28, 2003. Reporting on the Joint Inquiry into Intelligence Community Activities before and after the Terrorist Attacks of September 11, 2001

Has it ever occurred to you that the far more likely explanation is that with these 28 pages of blacked-out findings the Bush administration is offering us an extraordinary piece of contemporary conceptual art?

Look at the report. I mean, really look at it. Notice the bold black lines, the definition of negative space to recontextualize the familiar. This piece asks us, "What is a government report?" "Does it need to contain information?"

It forces the reader into an agonizing reappraisal of our societal dependence upon "facts," "names," "dates," "places," "cause," "effect." Not since Duchamps signed a urinal has our preconceived notion of "thingness" what a thing is been so subversively undermined. I say Bravo, Bush administration, for this remarkable report no disport nonport.

Information science has clearly reached the mass market (or at least basic cable). One need only add a Bucklandian antelope.

Other developments indicate a shift of ages in information science:

\* As has been repeatedly proclaimed, we have moved from a systems perspective to a user/cognitive perspective on information systems. However, with the wild popularity of an annual meeting session on "The Death of the User," we are clearly beyond users and cognition - to the information needs of the undead, as first revealed by Joe Janes at SIG/CON.

\* In the Aquarian Age we believed consultants could solve any problem; now we understand that consultants can problematize any solution

\* In the Aquarian Age we didn't understand faceted classification, so we didn't talk about it; now we don't understand faceted classification

\* In the Aquarian Age we studied invisible colleges and their gatekeepers; now we have six degrees of separation on Friendster

\* In the Aquarian Age we studied bibliometrics and observed power laws; because one needs a "critical mass" to observe these distributions, and because no one wants to be critical, we are looking for alternative power laws.

\* In the Aquarian Age we examined information retrieval; now we have information hiding-in-plain-sight using metadata on the Web

\* Information retrieval, we knew, depended on recall; we now know that recall is geographically differentiable, and in California it is total

\* Information retrieval also depended on precision, but precision is "so last millennium"

\* Both recall and precision are based on relevance. Being relevant was, "a big deal, man," at the dawning of the Age of Aquarius. Now there is such fear of being irrelevant that we observe a Lake Woebegone Effect. With everything being relevant, the problems of recall and precision disappear.

\* In the Aquarian Age we were seeking a definition of information science; now we are seeking a definition of information science

<the end>