

SUMMARY OF THE GLOBAL VILLAGE PLAZA 2004

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The third edition of the Global Information Village Plaza differed substantially from the previous ones. The new format featured a request for questions rather than answers. Questions were purposefully formulated in a “What If?” format intended to elicit provocative debates and open dialogue among participants.

Over fifty questions were submitted to the 3rd Global Information Village Plaza that was held at the annual meeting of ASIST. These were clustered by the moderators, Nadia Caidi and Michel Menou, around eleven themes:

1. **Infrastructures in times of crisis** (e.g., What if power were to disappear? What if there were major accidents such as earthquakes or inter-ethnic conflicts that destroyed a country's infrastructure?)
2. **Language issues** (e.g., What if Orwell's “novlang” were to become the pidgin-English of the Internet? What if bilingualism would be a minimum entry requirement for LIS degree programs?)
3. **Power and control** (e.g., What if the “cult of information” were to materialize into the establishing of a “Ministry of Truth”(a la Orwell, 1984)? What if we designed blogging services that are not censored in China and elsewhere?)
4. **Humans vs. machines** (e.g., What if “THE' network were to take over and we became the neurons of a cybernetic monster?)
5. **Quality of relationships** (e.g., What if humans were to favor relationships with the Other rather than with everybody? What if humans were to favor social well-being to technological progress?)
6. **Cost, access and sustainability** (e.g., What if Internet traffic rights between two countries would be equally shared between them (sum of the traffic to and from the 2 countries divided by 2)?)
7. **Inclusion and digital divide** (e.g., What if people in "developed countries" could cover the costs of their pen-pals' emails - what kind of pen-pals would they like to have?)
8. **Information literacy** (e.g., What if humans were to favor knowledge over information? What if literacy really were still based on the competency to read and understand IDEAS in writing rather than displaying "information literacy" (whatever that is) via intermediary technologies?)
9. **Education and training** (e.g., What if ethics would be part of compulsory courses in LIS programs? What if library and information science institutions throughout the world follow the same standard and curriculum?)
10. **Alternative publishing models & open source** (e.g., What if publishers (including commercial and society) and professional associations work towards uniform model for subscription rates from country to country provided equal access rights? What if information resources created with public funds would be part of the public sphere?)
11. **Scholarly research** (e.g., What if there were a 5-year moratorium on "scientific"

conferences, and the time be used for a critical assessment of the respective fields and their contribution to humankind happiness and enlightenment? What if every publication published online in various subject could be freely accessible for developing countries professionals?

During the session at the Annual Meeting, posters with the questions contributed were placed on the walls around the room. Participants were invited to move around the room and add their comments on stickers. They were also asked to vote for the most provocative questions. After some time minutes, the moderators tallied the votes for the five most provocative questions, and invited the audience to gather around. Special guests selected from among the conference participants (ASIST International Paper Contest Winner Shivanthi Weerasinghe, and information consultant Margie Hlava) contributed actively to the discussion.

Among the most voted for questions were: What if info resources created with public funds would be part of the public sphere? (13 votes); What if humans were to favour social well-being over technological progress? (13 votes); What if humans were to favour knowledge over information? (11 votes); What if 10% of the IT industries advertising budget would be invested in developing effective automatic translation software? (8 votes); What if information professionals could control the world? (7 votes); What can professionals do to counter the chilling effects of propaganda organized by US and other governments? (7 votes); What if all the institutions in the world were to develop interoperable institutional repositories ensuring that their research becomes mainstream and contributes on an equal footing to the global knowledge pool and all the journals are made open archive and through ICTs knowledge is communicated to everyone? (7 votes)

The audience consisted of about two-dozen individuals. At the core of the discussion was the **role and responsibilities** that information professionals and ASIST had in ensuring the values raised by the various questions: access, open source, public interest, equity, interoperability, education, awareness, diversity (linguistic and cultural) and so on. A discussion took place as to whether ASIST could or should have more languages being represented on its website and in the program at the annual conferences.

Much debate took place around the technological aspects. Some attendees disputed the idea that information and communication technologies needed to be at the center of all discussions. As one participant stated: “does it matter that many people have never made a phone call? Or whether they are even interested in making one?” There seemed to be a consensus during the discussions about the importance of a **community-based approach** and community-based needs. It was agreed that technology remains a matter of choice, but that everyone needs to be informed about it (potential and limitations) so that an informed decision can be made by individuals to use it or not. The role of ASIST in **educating and raising awareness** about the potential and challenges of ICTs was again emphasized strongly by many attendees (“ASIST should help me get the information to make that choice”). The idea of the **neutrality (or not) of technology** inspired passionate diatribes from both camps and resulted in the recommendation of a panel on the topic to be organized for the next annual meeting of ASIST.

Another role for ASIST was to highlight **best practices**: what works in terms of projects

and initiatives and how to share that knowledge (e.g., information for health, community development, technological decisions, implementation and evaluation, etc.)?

The issues of **education, awareness and social responsibility** were also a recurring theme: getting people connected, training information professionals as well as researchers in developing nations; encouraging connections and partnerships with colleagues (practitioners and academics) from various parts of the world were mentioned as examples of directions ASIST needed to strengthen. Discussions also revolved around the idea of literacy and trust (“to help people find out what they want to know and keep out information that they don’t want to know”). **Cost and affordability** (of databases and e-resources) were of course major issues that were raised when discussions about access took place. Participants asked whether ASIST could help and advocate for libraries and other information institutions. In particular, ASIST was viewed as having a significant role to play in raising awareness and educating various stakeholders about the importance of **preserving public domain knowledge** and passing it on, as well as in educating the broader public about economics of information (more discussion took place on alternative publishing models and licensing mechanisms, such as Creative Commons, that ASIST could actively encourage and support).

The idea of **having a voice** and **getting the message out** kept coming back over and over (“we need to use technology to our advantage”; “we need to become public intellectuals but not only publishing in JASIST, but also in op-eds, etc.”; “we need to be more active, to explore current issues like e-voting, etc.”).

Finally, the participants present seemed to agree with one attendee who highlighted the role of sessions such as the Global Information Village Plaza, which was portrayed as a means to give an equal voice to participants from all parts of the world. This seemed to highlight the importance of diversity of perspectives and the resulting knowledge one can gain about other cultures, experiences and issues. The Global Plaza’s potential to act as a springboard for future research ideas and initiatives was also raised. Examples included using some of the themes raised at the session for student research projects; raising awareness of the issues through the creation of forums, weblogs, success stories, etc.

By the end of the Global Plaza session, there were many ideas for panels to be organized at the next ASIST annual meeting that were suggested. Among them a panel on the neutrality (or not) of technology; a panel investigating the information creation process (often overlooked aspect of the information cycle according to the participant who discussed the idea); a panel on the role of information professionals and ASIST in education and awareness; and a workshop on international information policy in the context of our global and networked world.