Citation:
Morris, L (2019) Prester John's mirror, mass access and other unhelpful fables. Copyright Licensing Agency: Blog for Higher Education.

Link to Leeds Beckett Repository record:
http://eprints.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/6186/

Document Version:
Article

The aim of the Leeds Beckett Repository is to provide open access to our research, as required by funder policies and permitted by publishers and copyright law.

The Leeds Beckett repository holds a wide range of publications, each of which has been checked for copyright and the relevant embargo period has been applied by the Research Services team.

We operate on a standard take-down policy. If you are the author or publisher of an output and you would like it removed from the repository, please contact us and we will investigate on a case-by-case basis.

Each thesis in the repository has been cleared where necessary by the author for third party copyright. If you would like a thesis to be removed from the repository or believe there is an issue with copyright, please contact us on openaccess@leedsbeckett.ac.uk and we will investigate on a case-by-case basis.

Prester John's mirror, mass access and other unhelpful fables

Laurence Morris

For those not already familiar with Prester John, he was a legendary king, said to rule over a lost Christian kingdom somewhere in Asia or Africa. Accounts of his activities have taken various forms over the centuries, from early Christian traditions and medieval chronicles to imperialist rumour-mongering and even a John Buchan novel. However, a recurring theme of such writings is the wealth and wonder of Prester John's kingdom, with some accounts telling of his magical mirror.

Like many a magical mirror, Prester John's was not limited to his immediate surroundings. It could show him what was going on anywhere in his realm, and even provided advice on how to respond to what he saw. The magical mirror — and please bear with me here — has been on my mind lately while thinking of student expectations, academic skills tuition and copyright issues.

Over the past decade and a half I have worked in Library-based academic skills tuition at various institutions, from the Ministry of Defence to my current role within Higher Education. While technology and priorities have evolved, a notable constant has remained: there is always a perception of an 'easy' workaround to the challenge of mass access to student readings, if only the institution's systems were a little more responsive… Once upon a time, the fashionable proposed solution was reams of photocopying, nowadays the proposed solution is more likely to be web-based.

As readers of the CLA HE blog will be aware, some of these potential solutions are likely to be more permissible than others, depending on their nature and extent. The key associated issue, and arguably an equally important one, is one of communication and user education. If students of HE institutions are not aware of the legal, technical and commercial restrictions on sharing other people's intellectual property, then the capacity for short-term frustration and potential long-term misconduct is clear.

Which is where my role as an Academic Librarian comes in. In my dealings with learners, I don't just explain the workings of the current system, but also why it operates as it does and the practical implications of this. Depending on context, this might involve addressing issues such as what constitutes "fair use", third-party arrangements, digitisation restrictions, or concurrent user limits on institutional ebooks. Even if 'it' is "all available online now", it is not always accessible online — and however big it was, even Prester John's mirror presumably had a limited number of concurrent users.

In providing such guidance, the role of the HE information professional moves beyond mere technical and administrative training and into more overt tuition, shifting from a Gradgrindian focus on the facts to questions of interpretation, information ethics and academic and professional good practice. It can also be helpful for learners to understand why academic and other institutions operate in the way that they do. Such understanding supports student satisfaction by framing expectations, but it also develops student employability, preparing learners for encountering similar issues in the workplace. It might even be the groundwork for user-driven suggestions for service development. Essentially, as in other areas of learner engagement, the challenge is to use a query to unlock an opportunity for useful dialogue.

Or, to put it another way, despite what people might have heard, Prester John's mirror did not exist. And even if it had, there would have been a myriad of practical and ethical issues associated with its use. Educating learners about such points — and thus also about the potential pitfalls of deceptively simple answers — remains a usefully pragmatic component of Higher Education. Some people might engage best with obvious real-world challenges, such as how to provide mass access to a reading.

Others might be better served by tenuous analogies to medieval legend — and it is all part of the same conversation.

About the Author

Laurence Morris is an Academic Librarian of Leeds Beckett University and a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, writing here in a personal rather than institutional capacity. Thanks to Dr. Russell Foster of King's College London for discussion of the mirror and other geographical fables.