



FANTASTIC PLASTIC?

Dear Editor,

Libraries have always been early adopters of technology. However our world will be the poorer if the current craze for 3D printing becomes ubiquitous in libraries.

In the November/December 2014 issue of *INCITE*, you reported 'Andrew Kelly (Town of Victoria Park Library) took us through his experience of managing a 3D printer program at his library. As he spoke, the 3D printer was running and creating a bracelet made of the same kind of plastic LEGO® uses for its products.'

LEGO® blocks are made from acrylonitrile butadiene styrene (ABS) and about 400 billion LEGO® blocks have been produced since 1949. ABS is durable and cheap but, as 3dprintingforbeginners.com says, it has drawbacks: '... it is a petroleum-based non-biodegradable plastic, but which fortunately can be recycled. Another problem is that ABS

does create (mild) fumes which may irritate more sensitive persons – an installation of the printer in a well ventilated area or even a specific fume hood may be necessary. ABS can also deteriorate by prolonged exposure to sunlight.'

Most of the models currently produced using 3D printers are made from ABS or polylactic acid (PA), which is fortunately biodegradable, being from organic sources.

Do we really need any more plastic objects clogging our landfill and polluting our oceans? Millions of pieces of LEGO® are still washing up on beaches in pristine condition around the world, after spilling from a cargo ship off the coast of Cornwall (read about this at bit.ly/1tkSKLa). Great for collectors, bad for our environment. A paper by two CSIRO scientists highlights the problem: you can find up to 40,000 pieces of plastic per square kilometre in Australian waters, and almost half of seabirds have plastic in their guts. In their article (bit.ly/ZIECtb) on theconversation.com they say by 2050 that will be 95% of seabirds.

3D printing pundits spout the advantages for manufacturing, food technologists create 3D chocolate sculptures for chocoholics, but the reality is more plastic trivia. The 3D print of the month for June 2014, from a site offering free models, was – wait for it – a Yoda-shaped vase!

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(Editor's note: Philippa says that there is a green, handmade alternative to LEGO® available from Japan. Check it out at bit.ly/1znt1Jd).

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