

Front Line



OnLine

ALIA has a hundred tribes, none, to this organisational anthropologist, as remote as the Information Science Section, whose members, it was rumoured, ate unwary travellers in large, even mega, bytes off silver platters. So it was with some trepidation that I accepted an invitation to attend their biennial conference 'Information Online and on Disc' recently.

There were three intensive days of papers touching on issues which I, and I suspect many of the readers of this column, had only faintly heard of or dimly comprehended. I even volunteered the notion that I would need a minder, a translator, to guide me through

the intricacies of discussion and debate. Not so. It was a meeting of enthusiasts, peopled by evangelists on the look-out for new converts. Indeed, some of the sessions took on the atmosphere of a prayer meeting as delegates gathered to be informed of the coming of the ultimate database. So that this neophyte, (soon to be acolyte?) had no difficulty in finding elders who would translate, enlarge, explain the inner mysteries.

...here looms the problem: of choosing, defining, refining — and eventually finding the money to pay for — the appropriate tools.

And as the conference developed, it became plain that this was not an alien culture. It had clear connections to the old familiar litanies of user, artefact, timing, order and access. The difference was the modes in which these conjunctions were to be effected. Technology was the prevalent, but by no

means the dominant icon, but it was technology with a smiling face, any colour, whatever size you wanted.

And here looms the problem; not the problem of what might be possible, for plainly almost anything is, but of choosing, defining, refining — and eventually finding the money to pay for — the appropriate tools. The catalogue of possibilities took on for this browser through it, some of the qualities of a pre-war Gamages toy catalogue, so rich, so enchanting were the goods offered. And nowhere was this more apparent than in the exhibitions.

The exhibitors who continually support our various assemblies are a hardy and a faithful lot. As one who has done a bit of spruiking, demonstrating and floorwalking lately, I can testify that showing off your product is not an exercise for the faint in spirit nor the weak in constitution. It requires a particular hardiness, not least of which is the stress imposed by dealing with the well-meaning, but almost totally ignorant enquirer such as me. I felt I had to qualify each of my enquiries with the assertion that I was an individual, not the head of an organisation endowed with megadollars looking for a megasystem, but it made no difference. Every exhibitor welcomed me as though I was an oil-sheik, treated me with kindness, and fed me richly with information.

We owe them a special debt for their interest in us; perhaps we should even consider a special category of membership for

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them, so substantial is their contribution to the success of our gatherings. Their interest transcends the merely commercial, and indeed, a pleasing proportion of the exhibitors come from our own ranks. Our own Association had a stall, always busy, and managed with the usual aplomb and great good humour by Helen Mandl; the State Library of New South Wales and the National Library of Australia also had stalls which compared well with those offered by the companies.

The program for the conference was well-balanced. The organisers had achieved the miracle of getting the bulk of the papers into print and into satchels so that delegates could, if they wished, read- or sing-along with the speaker. Some did. This speed-reader has some difficulty with this; he would prefer to have the paper, read and mark, if not inwardly digest it, and then listen, not to a reading of the paper, but a commentary on it by someone other than the author, followed by questions and concluded with the author's response. This almost happened on one occasion, when Neil Maclane gave a commentary on José-Marie Griffith's paper, she being grounded by her company's policy. He had but a matter of hours in which to prepare his commentary, and it had, as he

acknowledged, some rough edges, but it was superbly effective in enhancing, expanding and illuminating the original paper, so that I can with confidence, seriously propose this mode for future conference organisers.

The conference reflected well on its organisers, and perhaps more importantly, on the profession...

The published conference papers I am sure will be available to non-attending readers, but as a sometime editor, I am worried by the several excellent papers which for various reasons, didn't get into the main volume; I would entreat the organisers to find some way of reducing the ephemerality of these also excellent and intriguing papers, not least those several given by lay speakers, whose external perspective on our options and obligations was illuminating.

Good news from Curtin

During the period December 1990 and January 1991 some significant changes have taken place in library education at Curtin University of Technology.

The University has decided that the Department of Library and Information Studies shall become a School. This has confirmed its place as an independently funded unit and recognises its strength in teaching and research. It is likely that a further name change will take place early in 1991 from the School of Library and Information Studies to School of Information and Library Studies.

The School has enrolled its first PhD student — Edith Khangure, and Darlene Lion has been awarded a Postgraduate Scholarship to study for her Masters on a full-time basis. There are now 13 students enrolled in the Masters by research.

After organising the 1990 conference a number of leading practitioners have enrolled for the Postgraduate Diploma in Information Management which can lead to a Masters by course work.

Following the application of a new funding model for Curtin, Library and Information Studies have gained an increase in funding.

Staff changes have taken place. Malcolm Traill has exchanged posts with Joseph Meloche of the Fisher Library, University of Sydney. Neil Greeve has been seconded from Canning College and Peter Hocking

has returned to Perth from TBV (the Swedish equivalent of TAFE) in Sweden.

Darlene Lion, Kerry Smith and Peter Maskell will be part-time tutors. Vicki Tkacz is taking a well-earned break from organising placements for students.

Maggie Exon is Acting Head while Professor Patricia Layzell Ward is Acting Deputy Vice Chancellor for the Division of Arts, Education and Social Sciences.

Patricia Layzell Ward □



Maggie Exon at prize-giving, November 1990.

I came away from the conference with a head filled with detail, and wondering how I could possibly continue to survive without online and CD-ROM access to information, but also with some general conclusions about it and the ambient technology:

- The two-step (i.e., Neil Maclane/José-Marie Griffith's model) of delivering a paper has much to recommend it. Listeners get two bites at the cherry, and there is the possibility of real debate, instead of the usual sporadic, sometimes not well-considered questioning of the speakers;

- The technology is extraordinarily volatile; the speed with which new products and processes are emerging is staggering;

- The notion that we, as a profession, are technological fringe-dwellers, in our level of sophistication, our purchasing power, and the relatively low level of complexity of our needs, was suitably humbling and very revealing;

- The technology carries with it a sleight-of-mind which sometimes dazzles and confuses intelligence and purpose;

- The example of the Australian Bureau of Statistics and the marketing of its extraordinary reserves of information in a variety of formats, suggests that for many hitherto collected, but largely inaccessible reserves of information (such as patents) there is a large and eager market, provided that: the end-product is reliable; addresses a genuine user need and is appropriately costed. This is the up-side of the user-pays equation;

- It is clear that the low-level intermediary (i.e., one who simply calls up large and undifferentiated sets of information for an enquirer, and presents them without evaluation or discrimination) is an endangered species;

- Pre-experience education in the online, on-disc field can only ever be introductory, sketchy and indicative;

- There is a need for a new discipline lying at the boundaries of information and anthropology.

The five laws of information technology were well in evidence at the conference:

- It constantly outstrips, and perhaps the distance is increasing, our capacity to control it, legislate for it, even to apply it;

- It is capable of infinite refinement, expansion, adaptation;

- It is evolving in a highly competitive, even harsh, environment;

- Its horizon varies — from very close to infinitely distant, and it is not always easy to see how far away a given phenomenon might lie;

- It has high, troubling and potentially very expensive levels of redundancy.

For me the conference was everything such events should be: educative, provocative, colloquial, stimulating. I am particularly grateful to Alan Walker, the program organiser, who persuaded me that I should attend. The conference set and attained very high standards, and reflected well on both its organisers, and perhaps more importantly, on the profession: ALIA can be proud of it. I will buy a season ticket for future events, and I recommend you do too. □