Future of the book conference

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With all the excitement about the new ALIAnet website and membership database launch, other exciting events of the past month have been pushed out of the limelight. However, one notable event was the *International Conference on the Future of the Book* held in Cairns during Easter.

Opened by Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Industry, Tourism and Resources, Warren Entsch, it was a relatively low-key event, but with plenty of inspirational speakers, and with enough variety to interest everyone who attended. Keynote addresses came from a broad base of people with connections with the entire book production chain, from the creator to consumer. Themes covered the architecture of the book (and how long it would endure) to new technologies, the transformation of the book business, and the changing roles of the reader and writer.

An international range of speakers included Jason Epstein, Alfred Rollington, Michael Cairns, Oliver Freeman, Greg Bain, Colin Steele, Göran Roos, Chandi Perera, Laurie Gerber, Renato Iannella, Jan Fullerton, José Palmero, John Man, ALIA president Christine Mackenzie, Patrick Callioni, Howard Dare, and Bill Cope.

Much of the event focussed on new technology, and reflected upon the changes that the entire supply chain is experiencing in the drive to produce books more cheaply, more quickly, and with less waste. All those present conceded that much could be done to improve production and delivery methods, but many disagreed as to how the world would be affected by the influx of new technology.

E-books captivated many attendees (so much so that one demonstration e-book went missing during the conference), and more than one workshop session became a debate over how the technology might enhance or hinder the written word. Of surprising interest to some was the intriguing presentation made by Alfred Rollington of Jane's Information Group (the company that produces the Jane's series of books on warships and the like). Mr Rollington demonstrated how the intelligence-gathering process has markedly altered the way in which materials are published, and how new markets have evolved over the 'repackaging' of information to suit particular client groups. The act of filtering information in order to determine what is opinion, what is spin, what is propaganda, and what is true analysis (and indeed, what is history) is used to create 'new' content that is either on-sold or distributed to those who demand it.

More than one of the plenary sessions debated the exponential growth of information and how we might transform this into knowl-edge and wisdom, but I doubt that any solutions were found. The ability to self-publish, and the authority that content on a website commands has combined to make it much harder to reveal what is worthwhile and what is purely self-indulgent.

But that aside, the future of the book is assured, if only because of the demand that the world has for the printed word, in all forms. The process of publishing itself might see radical change over the next decade or so, but this in itself was seen as promoting greater efficiencies in production and delivery. What was largely ignored (except by the writers who were well-represented at the conference) was the issue of content quality, and associated editorial activity, which appears to be on the decline in the larger publishing houses.

The next Book Conference is to be in Beijing, China, and will be held as a follow-on event to the Beijing International Book Fair 2004 (around the end of August or early September) Check http://book-conference.com/BC-2003/img/BC04 for further details.

The new ALIAnet

Recently I was invited to speak at a meeting of the Canberra Evaluation Forum, a group of predominantly federal public servants who assess the value of the services that government departments provide, and on this occasion with a particular interest in delivery of services through the internet. I joined forces with Dr Patricia Gillard, who conducted the review of the Association's information technology strategy in 2001/02. Our presentation focussed on transforming internet services by evaluation and user research, and was warmly received by an enthusiastic and attentive audience. It is clear that many government departments are looking for ways to enhance their communication with their constituents, and are using the internet as a vehicle to provide a good deal more than the odd Annual Report (and as an aside, there are plenty of 'odd' web-published annual reports in the government domain).

Much is being made of 'content management systems' at the moment, with many perceiving them as being the panacea to scattered and spotty information delivery. In practice, nothing could be further from the truth. Many more than just a few heads nodded sagely when I mentioned that the strength of a good content management system is enshrined (and I chose the word carefully here) in the god-like content manager who is required to actually maintain and manage the system. The word 'librarian' was uttered frequently enough during the joint presentation to reassure me that there is still a role for librarians and information workers in government departments. Seems like they are crying out for our services, actually... ∎