

The Future of conferences

Conferences have been on my mind a bit recently. I've been involved in discussions about an 'unconference' on e-Government to be held in Canberra in the next couple of months, there was a brave effort by Senator Kate Lundy in trying out the Public Sphere concept, and then there was a discussion in Radio National's *Future Tense* looking at how they all might happen in the future. It's obvious that things will be changing on both sides of the lectern.

The unconference concept is a reaction to the highly organised and expensive gatherings (attended mainly by suits) that many of us have become accustomed to. Instead, there are sessions that are shorter, focused and delivered by people who have a story to tell or an idea to spruik. Having experienced the dubious quality of many of the speakers at the more 'professional' conferences, I'd be happy to give this format a try. What I'm less happy about is some of the technological implications, and I'll come to that a little later in talking about *Future Tense*.

Kate Lundy and her staff set up her first Public Sphere (see <http://tinyurl.com/cel5mh>) at very short notice, as much a test of the concept as an exploration of the issues of what Broadband might bring us. While the event was centred in a room at the ANU, its main audience was scattered all over the country, served by a video stream, a live blog, and plenty of twittering. PowerPoint slides and video clips were also available online from some of the speakers.

There's no doubt that the experience was a success, albeit a limited one. There hadn't been a great deal of publicity so the number of participants – especially those online – was manageable. Had there been ten or twenty times more it would have been a different story. I followed it via Twitter and was interested in the conversation between the far-flung community, the lone organiser, and a few of the people in the audience at the venue. It wasn't overwhelming, but larger numbers would have been very hard to handle, not to mention the necessity of coping with unruly participants – who seem to infest many online forums. Senator Lundy intends to have more of these, so we'll see how she manages to keep them productive.

The *Future Tense* program (<http://tinyurl.com/qp7y49>) discussed more than just the technology that we're going to be using (DJs as session chairs? A courageous decision indeed) but that's what I'll concentrate on. I'm sure that no one will have any problem with the timely publication of papers or putting slideshows on freely available websites (whatever the conference organisers may think of this) but there's a lot more to consider. One thing that's being taken for granted is the Twitter back-channel. Some may think it a mark of rudeness to the speakers, but it's an idea whose dark hour has come. It not only provides a commentary for people who can't be at the conference, but it does give the Tweeters an opportunity to respond to what they're hearing. Of course, it means that there'll be less chance of any meaningful discussion between the speaker and the audience, but it's likely that the structure of our current conferences (and the habit of speakers over-running their time and reading out every word on their many, many slides) has constrained this sort of conversation for many years.

Icons and all that

One challenge faced by many web designers is the choice of interesting icons to be used – particularly for navigation – on their pages. That's why I like this post on Designer Daily about icons for web design (<http://tinyurl.com/dakvb2>). Of course, this means that they'll probably be picked up by web developers and used all over the place, but never fear; there'll be others around by the time you get sick of these.

Trouble in the cloud

Google ran into a little trouble early in May. The full details are not available of course, but one problem led to another and the result was a series of somewhat unexpected circumstances. First, many of their cloud computing applications (Gmail, Google Docs etc) were unreachable for a couple of hours, but more unexpectedly many other sites that rely on Google Analytics to gather their statistics were either unusable or responding quite slowly. It looks like it's time for a re-evaluation of many of the monster's services.

Virtual reference works for me

Here's a free plug for the *Chat with a Librarian* service (which you can find at <http://tinyurl.com/ywzzak>). I needed to track down a review that was said to have appeared in *Library Journal*, but not being a subscriber couldn't search the database. My request to the service was fielded by a librarian from Cessnock who after a couple of pertinent questions was able to show that the words used in the review could not be found at all – which was what I had expected. Thank you, Cessnock.

A murky situation

There's been quite a bit of reporting on the Elsevier 'fake journal' affair. Following a story in *The Australian*, it looks like it was first picked in the professional press by *The Scientist* (<http://www.the-scientist.com/blog/print/55671/>) and then by others, including Library Juice (<http://libraryjuicepress.com/blog/?p=1355>). It's interesting to me that the internet, while not facilitating this sort of publishing, has enabled the detective work to proceed to identify its scope (such as tracking down ISSN registration details) and the exposure of these questionable practices, especially to a wider audience.

Don't forget to visit my blog <http://www.alia.org.au/webbsblog>

Kerry Webb
kwebb@alianet.alia.org.au

Library RFID roll-out supporting ACT community groups

FE Technologies has won a \$1.4 million contract to install a new collection management system across the Australian Capital Territory's Library and Information Service.

The Victorian firm will implement its Smart Library™ Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) technology by the middle of the year, replacing the library service's old barcode system.

The Smart Library™ system, developed and manufactured in Geelong, replaces traditional barcode scanning by encoding RFID tags with specific information about library items, including books, CDs and DVDs.

With more than half a million items to be converted to RFID across eight libraries, the ACT Library and Information Service (ACTLIS) is engaging community groups to assist doing the job while raising funds for their clubs.

The ACT community volunteers – who are receiving hourly "wages" for their clubs – have almost completed three of the eight library collections, with the system expected to be up and running by mid-year.

Director of the ACT Library and Information Service, Vanessa Little, said, "It's certainly a simple system to use. We have Girl Guides who are 10 and 12 years old who have had no difficulty in learning the process."

Andrew Powell
General Manager, FE Technologies
andrew@expresspromotions.com.au

