The emerging world of open source, library 2.0, and digital libraries

These are exciting times in the area of library technology. Less than two decades ago, the library services' technology scene was a pretty fusty area showing little new innovation. The internet, web 2.0 and library 2.0, along with open source software, have transformed all that. The expectations from library users are that the library systems they use will be as open to community-style interaction, and as engaging as their world of Google, Facebook, and wiki's. Open source systems for libraries have been maturing over that time, and have shown a nimbleness in adopting web 2.0 capabilities. Meanwhile the steady work of state and national libraries on their digital library infrastructure is yielding dividends in the quality and depth of digital resources available online. These developments are coming together to yield rich opportunities for library technology innovation.

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In 2007 I decided to run for the IFLA Information Technology Section standing committee. I was motivated to do this by my experiences supporting the technology used by the GratisNet special library network (> 250 health-sector "Specials") and the difficulty that special libraries face in representing their technology needs both within their own organisations and in the wider library community.

The Specials face many financial, technological, and staffing challenges. They are, correspondingly, creative in using and deploying technology that is low cost and effective for their needs. It is in this context that I joined the IFLA IT section with a particular interest in representing some of their technological needs on the world library body. From my first IFLA Standing Committee meeting, it was clear that many of the challenges faced by Specials are faced equally by libraries in developing countries. My particular point of focus is in the area of open source systems, web 2.0, and digital libraries. Awareness of open source systems is gradually increasing as many libraries adopt this technology either directly themselves or through open source technology providers. Great projects are already underway in the development of fantastic digital libraries in Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Americas. Such projects have been beyond the scope of the Specials that I deal with on a daily basis; however, the beauty of open source is that the innovations created by the mighty among the libraries can equally be deployed by the smallest. IFLA, for instance, have recently moved to a new website based on the open source content management system. Exciting projects such as the digital library systems developed by the Bibliotheca Alexandrina are being gifted to the wider library community as open source (see the July issue of the IFLA Information Technology section newsletter). Similarly, open source solutions such as Koha provide a rich library management alternative to commercial systems. I am sure this does not represent the death knell of commercial systems, as no software is 'free' (keeping any information technology running requires ongoing support, a reliable platform, and ongoing evolution of the software itself), and there is always the need for careful analysis of the best fit on this front for an institution. Rather the creative innovations that are being accelerated by web 2.0 and library 2.0 are leading to wider innovation in library software marketplace as a whole.

Another challenge facing the Specials, and indeed all libraries, is that of digital rights management and changes in the copyright and licensing of digital resources. The fragile balance between the rights of the author/publisher and the need for free flow of information has been upset by the digital era. This has immediate and long term ramifications for the collection building of libraries, and there is desperate need to clarify (and strengthen) the rights of libraries to manage their digital collections. IFLA has been a good forum to promote better approaches to archival management of digital subscriptions and to review the ramifications of changes to copyright and intellectual property.

Another issue that the IFLA IT section has responded to is in the area of RFID. The European Union has just released results of a consultation regarding RFID that sets some parameters around privacy and RFID. Many current RFID implementations will look both insecure and vulnerable to privacy intrusion as understanding of the RFID technology permeates society and the cost of entry for libraries rapidly decreases.

It is immensely exciting working in a forum which is truly global in both the scope of issues addressed and the personalities involved. Equally, technological change does not happen in isolation, and brings with it challenges of professional development and support. This is where the interface between IFLA and regional associations is important. The GratisNet community is an example of the way in which libraries excel at collaboration and mutual support. Formed initially as a group that fostered inter-library loans, it has also proven a framework for libraries to assist each other in wider issues they face of access and professional development.

The IFLA standing committees' meetings at the national conference are a good opportunity to engage in current developments in your area. Of course, what you get out of such engagement is very much determined by what you can put in to it. Generally involvement in IFLA is only possible with a supportive employer. That can be pretty demanding when conferences are in locations distant from us. Everyone is welcome to join the IFLA Information Technology section newsletter mailing list – July being the latest issue. You can also find the IFLA IT website at **http://www.ifla.org/en/it**. For any comments, or feedback, or if you are interested in getting involved in the IFLA IT Section, do contact me.

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