

Information Online 1985 +: a salute

Information Online has been one of ALIA's most successful conferences, both professionally and financially. Founded by the Information Science Section (NSW), the first conference was held at the old Sydney Hilton Hotel in January 1985. This is a conference that has grown alongside information technology itself, just as it grew to become a flagship event for our industry and the Association.

That first conference 27 years ago was a decade before the internet became widely available in Australia, yet many issues were addressed then remain as relevant today – electronic publishing, marketing online services, training and education, business and professional access to online information, business, health, medical, and legal databases, and searching techniques. Many of the first speakers have contributed greatly to our knowledge economy – Roger Summit, (founder and CEO of Dialog), Carmel Maguire (University of New South Wales), Katie Blake (Enterprise Management), Des Tellis (Australian Earth Science Information Service, AESIS), George Maltby (Overseas Telecommunications Commission), Paul Budde (Paul Budde Communication), Graham Greenleaf (University of New South Wales and Austlii), Alex Byrne (then Australian Defence Force Academy, now State Library of New South Wales), Michael Middleton (then University of New South Wales now Queensland University of Technology), Ian McCallum (then AUSINET now Libraries Alive).

From the beginning we sought collaboration with information providers and aimed to provide them with an opportunity to demonstrate their products and grow their market. ACI Computer Services, Dialog Information Services, the Overseas Telecommunications Commission, and Datatel Pty Ltd were sponsors. Among the first 31 exhibitors were several still important today – Biosciences Information Services, Chemical Abstracts Service, Commonwealth Agricultural Bureaux, Engineering Index, FIZ, Dialog, ISI, Lexis, National Library, National Library of New Zealand, SDC (now Ovid), and STN.

It all started in 1983, with a small after-work meeting of about 20 online searching enthusiasts gathered together at the University of Sydney's Fisher Library to hear Janine Schmidt and Joan Morrison rave about their experiences at *Information Online* in London. If a magic carpet had been available, everyone in that room would have hopped on it.

Instead, sitting around that table, Information Science Section (ISS) committee members Elizabeth Swan and Enid Roberts suggested it may be possible to hold our own Information Online in Sydney. The full ISS committee approved our plan and the first conference committee was established, consisting of Alan Walker (Convenor), Elizabeth Swan (Exhibition Convenor), Amanda Russell (Marketing Convenor), Janine Schmidt (Program Convenor),

program committee members Pamela Leuzinger, Joan Morrison, Howard Petrie, and Alan Walker, and, Enid Roberts (Treasurer).

Deirdre Irwin, another ISS committee member, persuaded the NSW Branch of ALIA to part with another \$1000 to add to our seed funding, inspected potential venues, selected the Hilton Hotel as the most appropriate and, crucially, found our first Conference Organiser – Wael Foda of ACMS. Wael was critical to our success, guiding us in all aspects of managing the event. Our philosophy was to keep delegates fees as low as possible, but Information Online was also profitable for the start, returning \$40 000 from that first conference.

Wael was also there to help us make some key tactical decisions, including moving to a biennial event rather than annual and planning for the move to the Darling Harbour Convention Centre as soon as the conference was big enough.

But a good conference also needs a strong, inclusive social program and Wael frequently surprised us with amazing events he encouraged us to offer. Highlights for me were the cocktail party on *HMS Bounty* when we met the new *HMS Endeavour* as she sailed for the first time into Sydney Harbour on a balmy summer evening for the 1988 Bicentennial celebrations. As the ships passed near the Heads, the Australians on board spontaneously started singing *Waltzing Matilda*, surprising several international guests.

The very first dinner was also special. Campbell McComas, a Monash-trained lawyer, who by then had embarked on a career as an impersonator, joined us for dinner disguised as a Canadian professor. Sitting next to our major sponsor Roger Summit, Campbell happily talked absolute rubbish about online searching. Roger had had a trying day. His staff had searched in vain at the booth all day for information on this Canadian Roger thought he should know. Eventually McComas rose to give his after dinner speech which became more and more outrageous as he sent various members of the committee up before finally removing his disguise.

Information Online was developed by a group of ALIA members who passionately believed it was important for librarians to be at the forefront of online information retrieval. Just as librarians for centuries have had close relationships with publishers, and have been able to provide expert advice to their users on printed publications and to evaluate and manage the collection and use of printed publications so, in an online age, we need to have close relationships with information providers and we need to be equally expert and able to contribute our specialist knowledge about online information to our communities.

Elizabeth Swan
Information Edge – Web Search Pacific
e_swan@infoedge.com.au