

Computers in Libraries 2005

Notes and summary

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The conference had some interesting sessions, and it's always good, from time to time, to step out of the day-to-day matters and look at the institution broadly and see a little differently what it looks like and where it's going. There were some speakers of some note in the field, and I came away with a couple of specific things I'd like to try here.

Bruce James, Public Printer of the United States and Director of the Government Printing Office, gave a keynote address focused on the evolution of publication in the automated era. He used the GPO facility as a metaphor of this evolution: the 125 year old building, built with 36 inch thick concrete floors to accommodate printing presses, now is proving difficult to retrofit. It is difficult, he said, to drill holes for network cables, through such floors. He discussed the trend towards online publication of the nation's working papers, saying how ironic it was that it's taken ten full years just to get the Federal Register to appear online exactly as it looks in print.

Marshall Breeding, of Vanderbilt University (<http://staffweb.library.vanderbilt.edu/breeding/>) gave a good talk on the future of academic libraries and technology. He's a regular contributor to Computers in Libraries and ALA publications and specializes in such technology issues. His talk concerned the trend toward simplifying library systems by consolidating them with related, larger systems (such as using a campus student information system for library patrons instead of having a duplicate database). He said that libraries will move away from standalone technologies and begin to merge with larger, enterprise systems. He said that the top four or five vendors of integrated library systems are kept busy answering their customers' requests for improvements and haven't devoted sufficient resources to really new research and development. Compared to the big commercial technology companies, the library vendors are not big enough to do a lot of innovation. He said that as time goes by single library ILS implementations will be less defensible and collaborative, consortial systems will become even more common (like ILCSO <http://office.ilcso.illinois.edu/about.html>). Breeding went on to say that user interfaces need to get even more transparent, that the Library and campus should merge their systems as much as possible. He also discussed how the library's services need to evolve so that obtaining material through ILL is more seamless and can be ordered more simply directly from the OPAC. He voiced a lot of criticism of library OPACs (being an authority on systems) saying that too much time goes into retooling OPAC interfaces when the bulk of our users rarely go there.

Michael Stephens & Aaron Schmidt (St. Joseph's County Public Library and Thomas Ford Memorial Library) presented a session on the use of IM (instant messaging) in libraries. They discussed IM in relation to other forms of virtual reference, making the big distinction that (according to the Pew Internet Study – http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Instantmessage_Report.pdf) 53 million adult Americans use IM. They said that IM is already "on" and doesn't require going somewhere special (such as another VR tool) for online reference. They discussed the use of IM at their libraries – setting up accounts on the top three IMs: Yahoo, MSN and AOL, then using a program called Trillian (free download) to receive messages from all

three at the reference desk. They said that it is easy to set up, and reviewed basic issues such as staff training and workflow at the reference desk. Trillian can log all transactions, so records can be kept. Schmidt discussed the use of IM as an internal communication resource. He promoted its use for simple internal communication and said that it works better than email for some purposes. Both presenters said that it is important to promote IM to users – distribute the reference screen name on cards, post it on the web page or portal channel, and it will get used.

Gary Price & Chris Sherman co-authors of The Invisible Web and search engine authorities gave individual sessions on search engine updates and specialty search engines. The newest thing is the “local” or “near me” feature which allow (for example) a Google search of “libraries near Wayne, NJ”. Results include maps, phone numbers and web links. All the major search engines are adding this functionality. They reviewed the A9.com search engine, which is an Amazon product using Google searching technology. Sherman said that they’ve used a special vehicle to photograph 10 million storefronts, link it with GPS data to produce things like “walking maps” of metro areas for locating businesses or other places. Sherman discussed the explosion of blog and RSS, creating real-time publication and collaborative works, accumulations of news and information feeds, and the use of things like Furl to save web information online and Pluck to create local copies of web information. Looking ahead, Sherman said that Google might create an operating system to compete with Microsoft. **Raul Valdez-Perez** of Vivísimo.com described his company’s www.clusty.com search engine, which clusters results into folders. He described it as seeking to organize the web and make searching a more meaningful process. Perez said that clusty allows specialized searches such as using its new “Gov” tab to limit search results to FirstGov, .gov domain sites, DefenseLink, Reuters, AP and CNN political desks, and think tanks such as RAND, Brookings and Cato.

Roy Tennant User Services Architect, California Digital Library, gave some brief comments on the relationship between print and digital versions of periodicals and the impact on libraries. He said that digital publishing in XML format allows multiple versions of the same document (web, PDF, PDA, etc) to exist in one ‘file’ and that e-publishing of this type is slowly rising. He said that the “thunk factor” of print publication will keep it viable, though, for the foreseeable future and said that combinations of digital and print will be the norm for a long time. He discussed the site www.redlightgreen.com, an RLG site providing information from over 130 million books with links back to campus libraries.

These were some of the strongest impressions I was left with. As after every conference, it is obvious to me that we spend much of our time immersed in our own set of problems and conditions, and sessions such as these are useful for letting some new ideas or perspectives influence the local operation. For more on the sessions, check the CIL blog at <http://www.infotodayblog.com/> .