NASIG 2000: 'MAKING WAVES; A NEW SERIALS LANDSCAPE IN A SEA OF CHANGE', SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA, JUNE 2000

Christine Fyfe

The Chair of the UKSG presents an overview of the NASIG Conference. What are the similarities and differences of our sister organisation? What can we learn from their conference?

A great bonus of being Chair of the UKSG is the opportunity to attend the annual conference of the North American Serials Interest Group (NASIG) as part of a reciprocal arrangement between our groups. The 15th NASIG conference was held in the Price Center at the University of California San Diego (UCSD) from June 22 – 25, 2000. UCSD is located on an impressive 1200 acre site overlooking the Pacific Ocean. The campus, based on the Scripps Institution of Oceanography, has been part of the University of California since 1912. It is home to the Stuart Collection of public sculpture, including television watching buddhas, tree sculptures and a wonderful mosaic snake path wending its way to the library. Southern California boasts an almost perfect climate and, once the 'June gloom' mist had lifted, the 700 delegates were able to take all the conference breaks and meals outside. A heady mix of sun, sea and serials! Before the conference opened, I had the opportunity to tour the wonderful Geisel Library (named after the author of the Dr Seuss books, a generous benefactor). The Library is housed in an impressive modern glass building and holds extensive special collections – and 35,000 current journals!

Enter the President – in a wet suit

The nautical metaphor of the conference title was constantly reinforced , perhaps most memorably by the appearance of Dan Tonkery, the NASIG President, at the opening of the conference in a wet suit and carrying a surfboard. A NASIG custom which the Chair of the UKSG will certainly not be emulating!

The main programme comprised three plenary sessions, a series of concurrent presentations and two sets of workshops, from which delegates could select a total of four. In addition there were

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opportunities to attend pre-conference sessions, user group meetings and to tour the poster sessions. During the evenings, visits were arranged to the Birch Aquarium and to the world famous San Diego Zoo.

The plenary sessions formed a backdrop to the more focused approach taken by the other presentations. Eugenie Prime, the Manager Corporate Libraries, at Hewlett Packard Research Laboratories and presenter of the first plenary paper, encouraged the audience with evangelical zeal to make things happen by freeing our imaginations and making the impossible real. Prime urged the delegates to embrace discontinuous thinking; it is those who introduce disruptive technologies who succeed rather than those who invest effort in sustaining technologies. Her personal professional goal is to 'access everything and own nothing' a cry which resonated through the conference. Prime went on to argue that the Internet has blurred the distinctions between the roles of publishers, distributors and consumers. She traced four key stages in the development of the Internet. The first phase, Web delivery, was occupied with developing interfaces and features. We are in the second phase, in which additional functionality, such as article linking, is being explored, hampered by the lack of clear standards. The third phase Prime envisages as one of re-aggregation. The Business Web model will provide a customer-centred approach in which businesses come together to provide added value. In the 'B-Web' publishers and authors will have responsibility for collaboration and competition, security, structure and authentication. Libraries and aggregators will take on the role of recontextualisation and evaluation. The final phase of evolution will see the Web as a place for face-to-face communication.

In contrast to Prime's barnstorming style, Bob Cringely, PBS commentator on the information industry, presented a more personal view of the future. He entertainingly described his early career in journalism and his time working with Apple, during which an enduring contribution was his invention of the trash can icon! Having described the achievements of information industry pioneers including Englehart, the inventor of the GUI interface, Nelson (hypertext) and Berners-Lee (the http protocol), Cringely

advanced the view that we typically underestimate the time it takes for new technology to be assimilated into our culture and its cost. He provided the example of the slow uptake of on-screen reading, arguing that we shall inhabit a mixed format world for many years to come. Concluding a discussion of the futile attempts to control the content of the Internet, Cringely asserted that the librarian's role is to assist people in identifying and exploiting high quality information on the Web amidst the mass of low quality content.

Embarrassment of riches

The final plenary session rounded off the conference with a panel discussion in which seven speakers advanced their views of the future of serials.

The concurrent sessions provided delegates with a tough choice. Was it to be BioOne (a collaboration between libraries, publishers and learned societies to create full-text electronic journals) or SPARC, or the US Digital Millennium project, or publisher mergers and journal pricing, or the Open Archive Initiative and PubMed Central, or serials cataloguing and metadata, or globalization, consolidation and emerging economic models? From this embarrassment of riches I chose a session led by Tom Sanville, Executive Director of OhioLINK. In a thought-provoking and closely argued paper he described the emerging use patterns of electronic journals in the OhioLINK libraries. Indications are that e-journals are used at a greater rate than their print equivalents and usage doubles annually. More than half the downloads are from titles not held in print by the member library. Clearly past use is not a good indicator of future use. Although these are still early days, the OhioLINK evidence suggests that, exposed to a wider range of material, users will access and read more articles than before and select their reading from a wider range of journals. As Sanville commented 'What we had was not what we needed'. Sanville also presented interesting evidence relating to the effect on user behaviour of adding additional publishers' journals to the OhioLINK offering. The profound implications of these early findings for our assumptions about collection development, the notion of the 'core collection'

and consortial strategy were keenly discussed by the audience. [Tom Sanville will be presenting his latest analysis at the 2001 UKSG conference.]

Workshops took the form of a thirty minute presentation followed by questions and discussion. The 28 topics offered included: preservation; various aspects of cataloguing; the ISSN; strategies for managing e-mail; cataloguing government publications; formatting holding statements; EDI; new roles in acquisitions; organising your workspace, and promoting and presenting e-journals. As my first workshop, I chose to attend a session led by Maggie Wineburgh-Freed and Mary Buttner examining various methods of accessing electronic journals, including a stand-alone database, a Web catalogue and a Web page listing. Clearly, some of the main issues here – site definitions, organisational complexity, technical and licensing constraints - are universal. Although the approach was technical there was a welcome focus on the end-user experience.

Next, the complexities of metadata were ably elucidated by Yumin Jiang and Margi Mann. In the first half of the workshop Jiang and Mann provided an overview with illustrations of various metadata initiatives including the Dublin Core, TEI (Text Coding Initiative) and EAD (Encoded Archival Description). The second half of the workshop examined OCLC's library metadata application CORC (Cooperative Online Resource Catalog) and Cornell University's experience with it. It was emphasised that CORC is more than a description; it provides a link to data related to the bibliographic record, such as tables of content, publisher and author data, or the object itself. CORC enables many processes (for example the assignment of LC subject headings) to be automated, although many of the audience were relieved to hear that a human librarian is still required to check and authorise these decisions.

Qualitative approach to collection development

In the second set of workshops, Nancy Cunningham described a qualitative approach to collection development decisions. In a persuasive paper Cunningham drew on an evaluative study she had designed to ascertain whether the usefulness of documents is fully retained when

they are delivered by various inter-library loan and commercial document delivery services, both paper and electronic. The documents under study contained images of various types which were crucial to a full understanding of the text. With the assistance of academic specialists, a rating scale of copy quality was developed. Cunningham vividly illustrated her argument with examples from a range of medical, scientific, artistic and literary articles. In many cases the quality of image reproduction was inadequate in the document delivered, sometimes rendering it useless to its specialist requester. The implication of Cunningham's work is that the issue of image reproduction must be considered when deciding print cancellations; access does not equal usefulness. This applies across a surprisingly wide range of disciplines. There are also quality issues for those selecting document suppliers; some performed better than others. Cunningham concluded by suggesting that when designing a qualitative journal use study librarians should seek co-operation from the specialist user community and be prepared to apply the concepts across disciplines.

The final workshop I attended was a case study of a web-based journal cancellations exercise led by Dennis Stephens and Christopher Lott of the University of Alaska. Library budgets in Alaska had been severely affected by changes in the price of crude oil on which 85% of the State's revenue depends. After experiencing problems with the management of unwieldy paper-based serials surveys, the Library decided to adopt a web-based approach. They drew on subscription, price and conspectus information already contained on spreadsheets created in the acquisitions department. This data was converted into a Microsoft Access database and mounted on a Web site, which was made available for six weeks. Academics were asked to rank titles with a priority of 1, 2 or 3, with the assurance that no Priority 1 titles would be cancelled and that if the target of 9.5% reduction was exceeded new titles could be added. This target was achieved following analysis of the responses, further consultation and some intervention to ensure that the needs of students were taken into account. Overall, Stephens and Lott felt that the system was an improvement over the paper-based survey and, although the

response was not as high as they had hoped, it was greater than before. Their system is capable of application to other collection management projects and they intend to develop its potential further.

So how does the NASIG Conference compare with the UKSG? In terms of enjoyment and sociability both conferences score 11 out of 10. As for content, both offer a stimulating mix of papers and workshops and, most importantly, the opportunity to network with other serials specialists. The most striking contrast between the two conferences is the extent to which NASIG is dominated by librarians, and it seems within this broad church, by technical services specialists. The strength is that important cataloguing and metadata developments are very thoroughly examined. The downside is a narrower perspective on strategic industry issues than at UKSG, evident in both the programme

and discussions; several times I felt that the debate would have benefited from an audience less dominated by librarians. I came away with a number of ideas to consider for our own future conferences. The poster sessions were excellent, providing an opportunity for delegates to examine presentations and speak to the managers of over 15 projects ranging from accessing a blended collection of print and e-journals to workflow management. Many displays showcased practical work, which provided valuable tips and contacts for other organisations facing similar challenges. I was also impressed by the mentoring arranged for student delegates and the care that was taken to make newcomers welcome.

Attending NASIG was a wonderful opportunity and I very much look forward to welcoming Connie Foster, the NASIG Chair, to the 2001 UKSG Conference in Edinburgh.

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