

# HOW WAS IT FOR YOU?

*Bernard Naylor*

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To modify the remarks of the football commentator, this has been a game of four halves. That means that it has probably been a game of polo, rather than a game of football, but it has also been a game in which the four halves, to which I shall refer shortly, in turn, have interwoven with one another during the last forty-eight hours, rather than followed one another consecutively, as halves in sports events more commonly do.

## **The first half**

The first "half" that I would like to refer to is the product reviews. I thought that the product reviews were, in a sense, typical of the state of the serials issue itself in the library world. There was a breathlessness about them, which you may have found very familiar. There was also so much pressure of time that some people had difficulty getting their slides straight, and so on. It all seemed to exemplify an area of activity under enormous pressure. I have a particular image in my mind, of Keith Courtney, on Monday evening, bobbing up and down furiously. At the time, the overhead projector was not quite so conveniently arranged as it was later on, and the object of his energetic efforts was to ensure that people's overheads were changed on cue, as they worked through their very condensed and hurried presentations. In fact, Keith was bobbing up and down to such good effect that I thought I'd detected evidence of an earlier stage in his career. Could he possibly have once been a coach for bunny girls in the Playboy Club? From your reactions I gather some of you think that was indeed the case. Anyway, it all held together in the end and that's a great tribute to all the speakers and to the Chairs of the various sessions.

These were very different sessions from what you might have got at a UKSG conference in the earlier days. There were

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common elements coming through, but one thing that I did notice particularly, which is indicative of the way that you participants now see these product reviews, is that they retained very large audiences. By contrast, I have been to a number of conferences where product reviews are offered and it has often been an excuse for the auditorium to empty, almost completely. You obviously found them very relevant. This also indicated that the exhibition and the auditorium programme were integrated at this conference, to a degree, which is not necessarily typical of all conferences that you might attend in the library world.

### **The second half**

My second "half" is about workshops and briefing sessions. There were eighteen of these scheduled and I managed to attend two workshops and one briefing session, or was it perhaps one workshop and two briefing sessions? (I think that one of the workshops that I attended was actually a bit more like a briefing session.) I thought I might make a claim to have bi-located, and to have attended rather more than three sessions, perhaps six, or even nine. But I do not know how many of you were here on Sunday evening. If you were, and went to the event in the town, you may have registered there, that bi-location is known evidence of associating with witchcraft and sorcery. I, therefore, thought that if I claimed to have bi-located, I might have been taken out to the Grassmarket, like the witches we were told about, and then strangled and burnt at the stake. I decided that, even for UKSG, I was not prepared to do that.

Of course, with such pressure, so many events to attend, and the possibility of attending only three, some people who offered sessions in the workshops programme may have been a little bit disappointed with the attendance. I am reminded of an experience that I had long ago, when I was just newly married and I went to stay for Christmas with my mother-in-law. She is actually a very dear lady, still alive and thriving, and someone of whom I am extremely fond, but, on that occasion, she decided to greet me for my first Christmas in her home, by offering me three neckties as a Christmas gift. Before I came down for breakfast, I opened my presents, including

these three neckties and, as a gesture, I put one of them on. My mother-in-law greeted my appearance by saying "I see you have put on one of the ties I gave you". I said, "Yes, I have", smiling in a fawning sort of way, the way that young son-in-laws do. She fixed a steely eye on me and said, "What's wrong with the other two"? Well, I want to assure speakers in the workshop sessions that there was nothing wrong with any of your offerings. It was just that there is a limit to how many of them one can take on board. I think that all of the speakers who contributed to those workshop and briefing sessions, from my limited evidence, had done a lot of work to prepare their material and to offer illustrative material. Small attendances or no, we owe them a debt of thanks for that.

### **The third half**

To turn now to the third "half", the main papers. They were universally of a very high quality. I am put on the spot because, though it probably did not strike you, while there were twelve papers in all, if we ignore the concurrent sessions, six of them were given this final session. So my opportunity of establishing a critical view of them was highly pressured. But I think that they fell into three main categories. There were papers that analysed the recent past, papers like Ken Eason's, for example, on NESLI, or Martin White's on electronic reality. There were papers that described present day operations, or present day activities, whether operational in specific environments or experimental, such as, the Open Archives initiative and the EASY project, which we have just heard described. Then there were papers that speculated about the future and offered us ideas about the shape that the future might take. We had experiences offered to us from a variety of environments, some from the academic environment, for example, illustrating the major role that JISC has played in rolling the agenda forward in this area, but also experiences from the business environment as well and from the non-educational sector. There was a great deal of concentration on infrastructure technology, with perhaps rather less attention given to questions of quality: quality of metadata, or quality of the real content itself – although I would agree that those questions are rather more

difficult to address and to assess. The infrastructure technology papers did seem to me, on the whole, to have a lot of common content and common objectives. You could probably draw up a list of desiderata for our sector, on which many of the developments or speculations that we heard about are focusing.

What I would say, from my own experience, is: do not lose heart, if you felt a bit bewildered about some of the detail in technology. So do a lot of other people, not least the person currently standing at this rostrum and it is understandable that you do not particularly like to say that. But it is, I think, a common experience for all of us that the technology is quite bewildering sometimes in some of its aspects. It raises the question of how much you really do need to know of the detail of the technology as distinct from having an appreciation of what the significance of the technology is for the service you can offer. I make an analogy with the telephone network. There is an awful lot of technological complexity that underlies the telephone network or, for example, the packet switching network, the Internet, but a lot of that we do not need to know about. But we do need to know what the implications are, for our work, of what it does. I am not, in saying this, in any way belittling the importance of these technical issues, only saying that the degree of technical appreciation which some people, closely involved, need to have may be something that we, in general, do not have to aspire to.

I felt though, that one of the things that we must hope for is that we can move forward into a period when there will be prototype operational models, where these developments can be exhibited in a more touchy feely way, where we can see them as operational realities, even if they are in a relatively experimental mode. In some ways I am perhaps calling for something like the hybrid libraries experiments that have recently come to an end. They are winding up just at a time when some further developments are obviously in the pipeline and one may wonder how those developments can be fitted into operational frameworks: first of all, in an experimental way, and then rolled out before our wondering eyes for assessment for future general operational needs.

If I may be allowed a small adverse comment about the main events in the auditorium. I felt that there should have been a bit more audience involvement. This is quite a big auditorium. It is a very big meeting now, UKSG, and the subject matter is often very technical. People perhaps feel a bit nervous about exhibiting their ignorance. What I would say, returning again to sporting parlance, is there was a need at times for a bit more rumble out there. If there had been a bit more aggravation and bounce, searching questions and critical comment, that would have been even more interesting.

#### **The fourth half**

The last quarter, of course, is the social side and we might immediately think of yesterday evening's spectacular venue and spectacular event and thank our organisers for laying that on. It was a very remarkable setting for our conference dinner. But all of us will also think of the Monday evening quiz, which is a hardy annual and an important feature of UKSG. And I do not mean that casually, because it is socially important in bringing us all together and creating a good atmosphere among us all. I would just like to take the opportunity, to register a protest with Chris Beckett, on behalf of the Scandinavian team, at the pro-UK bias in all the questions. The Scandinavian team did remarkably well in their answers and, if there had been a bit less bias, they would have done even better. You may or may not wish to associate that protest with the fact that David Alsmeyer and I were both allowed the privilege of being honorary Scandinavians for Monday evening.

Of course, the last question that arises is: what do you take away with you from this particular social event? I wonder whether we might try to inaugurate a kind of psychometric test, which says: Which question and answer will you always remember from the UKSG quiz? That would tell you things about the kind of person you are. Better still, ask somebody else, and then you can start to speculate about the kind of person that they are. Well; in order to give you a bit of fun over lunch time, I will tell you that I will never again forget that Attila the Hun died of a nosebleed. I would just offer you two initial speculations as to why that might stick in my

memory. The first may be because when I was a little baby I had one of my toys snatched away from me by Attila the Hun. These days, I sometimes feel that I am nearly old enough for that to have occurred. The other possibility is that, whenever I have a nosebleed now, I could think: "Good gracious, one day I might be really famous. I could share the same cause of death as Attila the Hun."

Anyway, that is just a game to send you away

with. There is just a moment now for me, perhaps speaking on behalf of you all, to thank everybody; speakers, and chairs; all of you, for the way you have participated; to thank Christine herself and the organising committee; to thank Alison Whitehorn and Karen Sadler, for all they have done to bring this big and complex event together and give us all such a professionally rewarding and satisfying time; and then finally to wish you all a safe journey back home.

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