The students’ view: reports from the conference

This year’s lucky students, who were awarded delegate places at the 30th Conference and Exhibition, were Lorraine Johnson from Loughborough University; Angela Nicholson and Nicole LeBoeuf from Strathclyde; Helen Barrell from MMU and Sophie Price from UCL. Here are extracts from their reports.

General

As someone about to embark on a career in delivering information in a changing environment, I was particularly interested in the issues presented in the UKSG programme, and the conference itself surpassed my expectations. To have learnt more about the current issues from those within the sector has been rewarding and to realize how much more I’ve still to learn is daunting and exciting.

Most importantly, many thanks go to UKSG for their generosity in providing student places at a heavily subscribed conference: to Alison Whitehorn, Karen Sadler and Graham Stone who provided help and information. [Angela]

The UKSG’s 30th Annual Conference was the perfect opportunity to listen to professionals discussing the latest changes and developments affecting all those working with print and electronic serials. Although a hectic three days, the conference was a rewarding experience that I hope to draw upon as I prepare to enter the professional workplace.

I would like to extend my gratitude to all those at UKSG for the opportunity to attend the conference. I hope one day I will be able to return! [Sophie]
I’d never been to a conference like this before, and so every day brought new adventures. For example, staying in a student bedroom that was mysteriously similar to a Travelodge was quite something compared to my own memories of undergraduate accommodation riddled with prison-style beds and chronic damp. The catering was really splendid – I ate so much for breakfast on the Monday that by the evening I struggled to bend over to put on my shoes! So I tempered my ‘input’ after that. The excitement of vast quantities of lovely food aside, I think I got a great deal from the conference. Not only in attending the plenaries and briefing sessions, but also from the people I met – and this bringing together of people in one place from a range of worldwide locations and aspects of serials is really important. On the Sunday evening, I was having drinks with publishers from The Netherlands and librarians from Scotland and Sweden. It was very interesting to share our various experiences, especially between librarians and publishers, to try to understand the issues that each ‘side’ faces. Meeting up with the other library students was fantastic as well, in discussing our respective ‘librarianship’ (is it still called that?) courses.

Gillian Anderson, from the University of the Highlands and Islands, and Sheila Cannell, from the University of Edinburgh, took time on the Monday to talk to us about the librarianship profession and what areas there are within it which we might pursue. [Helen]

When I heard about the opportunity to attend the 2007 UKSG Conference held at the University of Warwick, England, I eagerly grasped the chance to expand my knowledge on such an important and interesting sector of librarianship. The resulting experience was invaluable, giving me much greater insight into the daily workings of serials management and overall library and publishing relations. Theoretical and philosophical questions as to how much of the library should be digital and how much should be physical were combined with practical projects on link resolving, publisher negotiation and journal usage statistics. The conference was both invigorating and exhausting, and has left me with a greater appreciation for the issues that drive the library profession. [Nicole]

Plenary sessions

From the start of the first plenary session, with a welcome by Paul Harwood of UKSG and Denise Novak of NASIG, it was clear that the next few days were going to offer a fascinating and international view of the serials sector. The conference certainly got off to an interesting start with speakers from Google and Microsoft sharing the platform. First, Clifford Guren presented Microsoft’s approach to providing search tools for academic study with Windows Live Search and Windows Live Book Search. He reminded the audience that only 10% of information is available online and this will not change significantly, but that people expect to find all the information they need online. Book Search provides access to out-of-copyright books and Live Search seeks to provide quality information to the searcher, with Guren stating that little of the information available online is currently adequately referenced or dated, whereas the content supplied through Live Search should be filtered for quality. This was followed by Philippe Colombet of Google, who presented a different approach to content involving the ‘wisdom of crowds’ and discussed their developments with an increasingly broad suite of tools. Although these speakers naturally presented their view on where their products would fit into the marketplace it was interesting to observe the increasing overlap. It is impossible to ignore the impact Google has had on the search for information, on the library and on the librarian, so it was worthwhile hearing a little of where they are going next. The librarian Scott Plutchak then rounded off this first session by inviting us to explore the difference the digital world has made to the librarian. He suggested that as librarians, we provide information but in this digital world, this does not mean that we should focus exclusively in the physical library. He asked us to remember it is the librarian skills that provide the best information, not the library space. He suggested that we focus skills and aptitudes to create new environments, moving out of the library to engage with users wherever they are. [Angela]

The plenary sessions offered an interesting look at the issues involved in incorporating new technologies into academic and professional library services. I was surprised at the variety of views
presented on the subjects; Microsoft’s concentration on formalizing structure and Google’s emphasis on capturing existing social construction of content particularly reflected a continuing rift between standardization and flexibility. I was also surprised at the inclusion of e-books in the topic of discussion, as they seem to be a separate form of medium from serials, yet their introduction into the marketplace replays many of the challenges faced by digitalizing serials including variety of publisher formats, move from acquisition to access, and bundled purchasing instead of individual buying. The discussions on web 2.0 and re-designing academic library space also provided an interesting framework in which to rethink the impact that virtual space has on the physical building and vice versa. [Nicole]

The overall tone of the conference was inspiring, and I came away with a great feeling for what splendid things will be happening in the realms of information provision in my lifetime. Of course, electronic media played a large part in the different plenaries and briefings. Kicking off the conference with representatives from Google and Microsoft was fantastic, as not only did it set up many themes that would be discussed over the next few days (electronic access, copyright, the needs of students from the e-generation, for instance), it was also really impressive to see such a clash of the Titans. [Helen]

The second plenary then explored further the marketing of librarian skills and services, with Melinda Kenneway advocating the use of technology to reach users and answer their needs, seeking to create a strong visible library brand. After the earlier discussion of the users’ access to digital services wherever they find convenient, Sheila Cannell of Edinburgh University reminded us that the library space itself was still regarded as crucial to many students and academics and is very much associated with a place set aside for learning as well as a hub in which to interact with other students. Learning may be carried out in a range of various styles and these requirements should be incorporated into the space provided. Many libraries had tackled the issue of how to provide an appropriate learning environment and the project at Edinburgh aims to incorporate these experiences with the views of students and academics, to provide a flexible environment. [Angela]

With such a mixture of delegates, coming from both libraries and publishers/agents/suppliers/aggregators/vendors (you know what I mean!), what was great was that the plenaries reflected the interests of both. For example, Sheila Cannell’s paper on library design, which on the face of it might not seem to be entirely relevant to a journal publisher, was very interesting as she reflected on the fact that libraries are not so much warehouses full of shelved volumes, but computer suites where students can access online journals. [Helen]

The Tuesday session started with a focus on e-books. In common with other sessions, we heard the opinion from the position of both the publisher and librarian. First to speak was Tom Davy of Thomson Learning, who suggested that we should not regard e-books as simply a digital format for textbooks but, as with other areas of publishing, the wrapper was being taken off the content and smaller sections, like articles, will become part of the suite of learning objects students use. This was then followed by Warren Holder from the University of Toronto Libraries who are actively adding e-books to their digital content holdings. Their reason for this is they feel that this is the response to users who increasingly work in a digital environment and expect instant access to a range of resources, agreeing with Tom Davy that users look for quality content rather than select the format. As with the well-established e-journals (25% of e-journal use being when the library is closed), such resources also offer access when the library building in closed, with ~15% of usage outside library opening times. They are actively monitoring the use of such resources but the indications suggest that usage is aligned with other content. The measurement of usage was then explored further in the next session. This was an area that I was least familiar with and it was revealing to find out the possibilities and potential hazards when evaluating journal holdings based on assessing the price per use. Peter Shepherd of COUNTER also outlined the current standards and the challenges they faced as a result of, e.g., search engine retrieval practices and repositories. [Angela]

Tom Davy’s interesting presentation about e-text books highlighted the increasingly competitive market in which textbook publishers have to survive and ways in which they have to work harder to gain market share. With students becoming
increasingly ‘Googlerized’, he pointed out the need to structure e-books to cope with the changing needs of today’s user and to provide specific learning outcomes. [Lorraine]

The plenaries on e-books shed light on a new area which has great potential to make differences to the way library users will approach books in general, I feel. The lecture on e-journal price per use was also interesting. Considering the difficulties of working out if someone has used an e-journal or not was something that I hadn’t thought of before, but now it seems quite obvious! The open access plenaries were thought provoking, but it seems as if it will take a long time for these issues to be resolved when so much is at stake for both sides – the need for information-sharing in the academic community and the livelihood of publishers. [Helen]
The final day started with Stephen Pinfield posing the interesting question of whether open access repositories and peer-reviewed journals can co-exist. Pinfield questioned if there was necessarily a competition between these that would remove scholarly publishing, concluding that the most likely future was a co-existence with new business models. This was followed by Sally Morris who defended existing practice and highlighted potential risks involved with removing the traditional scholarly publishing process. She particularly focused on the value of the peer review process and although agreeing that business models needed to adapt and that hybrid models may be the future, also warned that careful consideration should be given to whether the demise of the scholarly publishing of journals is a desirable option or beneficial to scholarly communication. This is certainly an area where I’m still undecided but that I will continue to follow. [Angela]

Stephen Abram’s lecture was really a perfect note to end the conference on. Thanks to him, I went home and joined ‘Second Life’! It gave me several ideas to take back to the librarians I work with, and they were interested in the idea of having profiles on MySpace to interact with the students more. They then told me that the University of Birmingham (where I work) has bought space in Second Life already. So it was certainly interesting to find out these things that are happening right under my nose without me realizing! Trying to engage with ‘Library 2.0’ will evidently be a challenge that will face me in my future as a librarian, so it was quite a stirring presentation and has galvanised me into preparing for it. [Helen]

The last two speakers provided a fitting note to complete the conference, both drawing on their experience and observations of how the serial sector had reached its current position. Although with very different styles, both acknowledged the considerable challenges and change due to the increasing influence of technology and both looked to the future and in common with speakers in the previous days, encouraged the sector to both develop their business models and to utilize new communication technologies to reach and engage with users. It’s certainly an interesting time. [Angela]

The final speakers rounded off with two extremely different styles of presentation. John Cox meandered gently through the history of journal publishing with an interesting talk on the changes that have taken place since its inception. Preferring to allow the power of oration in his communication with his audience, he shunned the assistance of an IT-based presentation. In sharp contrast, Stephen Abram left the audience with no illusions as to where his thoughts of the future lie. His dynamic, fast-paced presentation designed to provide a ‘wake-up call’ to all those librarians who should be caught napping provided a stark message to prepare for the changing user or be firmly left behind. All in all it was a stimulating, thought-provoking conference that probably had those librarian delegates leaving with renewed vigour for the challenge ahead – or quaking in their shoes at the thought of reaching out to users via podcasts or MySpace! [Lorraine]

**Workshops and briefing sessions**

Selecting from the 30 available workshops was not an easy task. Fortunately, the choice was aided by the fact that there were four workshops that were particularly aimed at an introductory level audience either new to the industry or the topic and this certainly helped me. In most cases, the workshops included contributions from each of the different perspectives of the librarian, serials agent and publisher, with each guiding us through the stages of the serials process and the issues faced. They also highlighted those new areas where significant change has taken place and best practice is still to be established, or covered the handling of electronic journals and other subscription electronic resources. My fourth workshop choice was ‘Text and data mining’, which certainly proved to be particularly interesting. Geoffrey Bilder of CrossRef guided us through what data mining offered by providing ways to seek information amongst the noise of text information available. With so much text accessible, it is a challenge for the reader to handle and keep up with it. Bilder suggested how it may be possible to interpret and find the new information amongst large amounts of unstructured text, seeking out new ways to see patterns and relationships in data. He went on to suggest that if information is currently hidden within the text then perhaps the methods of publishing should change, and went on to describe the current and future prospects for how this information may be included with the text to allow data mining.
with examples of current products that are incorporating these capabilities. [Angela]

Having opted for the introductory level workshops and briefing sessions, I found all of them provided some really useful insights into various fields related to serials management. The ‘Back to basics’ and ‘Financial imperatives for libraries and publishers’ briefing sessions were particularly informative as they gave very practical advice about working in academic libraries, highlighting some of the difficulties encountered. The ‘Back to basics’ briefing session provided a very useful step-by-step guide on the process of serials acquisition in an academic library from two perspectives – that of the librarian and of a subscription agent. Jill Taylor-Roe offered an interesting and informative session on funding issues in an academic library based on her extensive knowledge gained by practical experience. She demonstrated the particular difficulties encountered on a day-to-day basis and aimed to engage publishers in dialogue to try to resolve some of these. The session entitled ‘Introduction to impact factors’ tackled the main issues relating to this complex subject and, importantly, highlighted the pitfalls of relying upon the data used to calculate impact factors. [Lorraine]

Elaborating on issues we had considered at Library School, Fiona Bennett highlighted the need for librarians and publishers to consider the preservation of digital content. Other sessions examined the everyday practicalities of managing print and electronic serials and recent developments in document supply. [Sophie]

I chose to attend briefings which relate to issues that are pertinent to my work, so the CURL/BL storage briefing was good as it gave me the overview of the project, which I am aware of, as The University of Birmingham is involved with it. It was encouraging to hear delegates from other universities expressing an interest to become involved in the project, and I think this highlights the importance of awareness-raising for these kinds of multi-institution endeavours. ‘I need this article …’ by Mike McGrath, the editor of Interlending & Document Supply was useful too, to see the wider picture regarding inter-library loans, and Fiona Bennett’s session on digital preservation was definitely revealing. Again, it was an example of how vital it is that libraries and publishers work together. [Helen]

The workshops offered a unique chance to explore in depth topics of great interest for those in serials. My first workshop, ‘Back to basics’, was conducted jointly by Claire Terry of Swets Information Services and Fiona Tipple of University College Dublin. Their presentation clarified many of the steps necessary for managing a journal collection. My second workshop introduced me to impact factors and the restraint one had to exercise in reading the statistical information. My third explored how COUNTER could offer statistical measurement for the rising market of e-books. My fourth, and most populous attended workshop, was the UKSG link resolvers project conducted by Simon Inger. What at first seemed to me a routine, highly used but never considered element of my daily e-journal use turned out to be an extremely contested technological conundrum. Once again, it was interesting to see the variety of views between publishers and libraries as well as uplifting to hear their dedication to improving this simple but essential feature of online journal access. [Nicole]

Social

The exhibitions and product reviews deepened my appreciation of the array of products that are out there as well as extended my knowledge of emerging technologies and services. The dining and refreshment breaks were wonderful, not only for the lovely food and drink provided but also for the chance to relax, reflect, and meet some of the other conference attendees.

One of the many informal gatherings
Gillian Anderson, Warren Holder and Jill Taylor-Roe were just a few of the many delegates who took the time to share their own personal experiences and offer general encouragement. Their enthusiasm was infections and their expertise at pub quizzes unmatched. The venue for the banquet, Stoneleigh Abbey, was very elegant and set the stage for a memorable night. [Nicole]

One of the things that struck me was the many delegates who were generous with both their experience and time, and this continued into the social parts of the conference. The first night was a meal within the University. During the day we had been encouraged by many to sign up to the conference quiz with everyone telling us it was always great fun. Great fun it certainly was but what they didn’t mention was that this was rather more challenging than any (admittedly, pub) quiz I’d taken part in and was more like being thrown into University Challenge! This was serious stuff and it appears quite a UKSG conference institution. One team led throughout the rounds and managed to receive the well-deserved prize with a score of a rather terrifying 49 out of 50. [Angela]

Set in the gardens of Stoneleigh Abbey, the formal dinner proved to be an unforgettable evening with delicious food, wine and friendly company. Although my team didn’t win, the quiz evening was also enjoyable and provided an opportunity to meet and talk to professionals in a relaxed atmosphere. [Sophie]

The second evening was the conference dinner held a short journey away in the grounds of Stoneleigh Abbey. Founded in 1154 by a group of Cistercian monks, this was now a dramatic building set in large gardens. Over the centuries the house had entertained guests who included Charles I and Queen Victoria. A regular visitor was Jane Austen whose relatives the Leiggs lived in the Abbey, with Mansfield Park and Persuasion both containing descriptions of its grand interiors and gardens. After a tour of the house, we again enjoyed good food and good company before heading back to our rooms in the wee small hours. [Angela]

The social events contributed enormously to ensuring that all delegates were able to have the opportunity to get to know each other in an informal atmosphere. Whilst the initial dinner and quiz provided an entertaining and enjoyable first evening, the highlight of the social programme was the formal dinner. Arriving at the wonderfully atmospheric Stoneleigh Abbey set in stunning surroundings, the scene was set for a lovely evening. The reception and dinner were excellent and the entertainment provided by ‘the waiters’ fun and quite unexpected! [Lorraine]

I was surprised by how friendly everyone was, as on the train to Coventry, I’d been worried that I’d spend the conference being Billy No-Mates. However, everyone was so keen to talk about their experiences in the workplace – and then talk about
their life stories! – that there was no chance to feel alone. I enjoyed the conference quiz, and am slightly startled by the random facts I knew that I wasn’t even aware of. Despite this, the Scottish library folks won. Disappointingly, they didn’t run about with their faces painted in woad. Maybe next year? The disco wasn’t particularly thrilling, though, I must say, despite my attempts at teaching the other library students how to jive. The conference dinner at Stoneleigh Abbey on the last night was magnificent, and it was fascinating to learn about the history of the house and the family who had lived there. The dinner featured opera-singing waiters and vast quantities of wine with a splendid vegetarian menu and the poshest portaloos I’ve ever been in. [Helen]

The UKSG conference was both bigger and broader than I expected. I am still unsure as to how much the role of the serials librarian will change in the light of increasing digital content, soaring costs and tightening budgets. But having witnessed the dedication and expertise of those in the profession I feel that any new challenges will be met quickly and effectively. I thank the USKG for funding my visit to the conference and aspire to one day reach the same level of professionalism as witnessed at the conference. [Nicole]