

## Electronic dream, virtual nightmare

By Lester J. Pourciau

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### *The 1996 VALA Biennial Conference and Exhibition*

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**V**ALA, the Victorian Association for Library Automation, held its biennial conference in Melbourne, Australia, January 30–February 1, 1996. Each day of the conference began with a plenary session and included multiple tracks of contributed papers. More than 600 people attended the conference which offered more than 30 exhibits. There was an Internet room sponsored by AST Computers in association with the State Library of Victoria, AccessOne, and UB Networks. Overall, the conference was one of quality that left this writer with the very clear impression that Australian librarians are doing excellent work.

#### **Dreams, madness, and reality**

The opening plenary presentation was made by Walt Crawford (Research Libraries Group) who spoke about "Electronic Libraries: Dreams, Madness, and Reality." His remarks about dreams reviewed ideas that affect libraries and publishing. Particularly, he indicted the notion of the universal scholar's workstation, comparing it to the radio personality of the 1930s and '40s, "The Shadow: It seems to have the power to cloud men's minds." Crawford maintained that, setting aside issues of commercial and intellectual ownership, economic reality will not allow even the most ambitious program of digitization to keep pace with newly printed publications.

Moving on to madness, he spoke of fallacies inherent in the argument that print is obsolete, pointing to the expense of universal full-fledged electronic access, making light sport of those predictions of the domestic, TV-based "infotainment" center, and taking issue with the

claims of Project Gutenberg that it had "given away" 2.6 billion electronic texts.

Discussing the reality of the electronic library, Crawford compared print with electronic publishing, pointing out that electronic publishing eliminates only imagesetting, printing, binding, and some portion of distribution; it has no impact on the need to acquire, edit, design, index, and publicize things. Further, he pointed out that print publishing is actually several related industries; that most of them are financially healthy and growing.

He closed with a credo [appearing in a different form in his and Michael Gorman's *Future Libraries: Dreams, Madness, and Reality* (ALA, 1995)]. Among the tenets of his credo is the conviction that "electronic publishing and dissemination will continue to grow in importance, displacing print where electronic does it better," and that "printed books, magazines, and newspapers will survive for the indefinite future." He also thinks that future users will get most of their information without the mediation of librarians. He thinks this is true now and asks "how would it be otherwise in the future?" He expressed hope for strong support for the "true expert systems in libraries: the wetware, the stuff between the ears of good librarians."

#### **The virtual campus**

Two tracks of contributed papers, one addressing the virtual campus and the other addressing content solutions, included some excellent reports of research and experiences. Of particular interest was Jillian Beswick's discussion of the introduction of library services for external students at Edith Cowan University (ECU) in Perth. She discussed various strategies implemented to increase low library usage by external students, and briefly discussed future plans. In 1995, external students at ECU made up 18

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percent of the library's client group and have diverse circumstances and backgrounds.

Beswick reviewed the establishment, in 1992, of a computer-based communication facility called the Virtual Campus. This Virtual Campus was designed to provide external students with the electronic equivalent of a university campus. With the creation of the Virtual Campus, the ECU Library introduced services which allow students to request library material via e-mail, search the library catalogs of ECU and of other tertiary institutions in western Australia. Students can also access FirstSearch, UnCover, Current Contents, ASKEric, and, through Hytelnet, search library catalogs throughout the world.

The initial response to these services was perceived to be slow and, in order to explore the reasons for this, a telephone survey of external students was conducted in mid-1994. Among reasons given by students for not taking advantage of services included the steep learning curve associated with new technology, the time involved in learning it, and the unavailability of computer and telecommunications equipment. With knowledge gained from the telephone survey, the ECU Library developed several new strategies aimed at promoting and increasing the usage of electronic library services. These have included both print and electronic promotional campaigns, the establishment of real time user education sessions using the chat facilities on the Virtual Campus, and the trial use of access to CD-ROM databases via Silverplatter's Electronic Reference Library.

Although Beswick acknowledged difficulty in assessing the precise impact of their promotional efforts, they do know that e-mail requests for material have increased from approximately one per month to 10 to 15 per week. Also, the demand from external students for authorizations and passwords to ERL, UnCover, FirstSearch, and Current Contents has been particularly strong. And the number of external students registered as users on the Virtual Campus doubled during 1995. Among future plans for the development of electronic library services are providing electronic document-delivery request forms, and developing self-paced information literacy programs.

### **HELP is here**

Vincent Galante, Sue Grandfield, and Jackie Saunders (La Trobe University) discussed the

Hypertext Electronic Library Project (HELP) initiated in the La Trobe University Library. HELP was envisaged as the provision of workstations in the library for the express purpose of providing access to information resources on the Internet and to locally mounted electronic versions of past exam papers and electronic reserve materials for which the university had copyright. In 1994, the university's Quality Assurance Fund granted the library funding to implement HELP. The grant was approved for the purchase of equipment and furnishings, and for additional staff time.

The first task for the HELP team was the design of a user interface (library homepage) identifying the various services offered. A key aspect of the library's application for funds was the electronic reserve for examination papers. There were many problems with the printed copies of the examinations: extensive wear, mutilation of bound copies of the exams, and the range of other problems typically associated with bound periodical volumes.

The Reserve Online facet of HELP was initially limited to material that was copyright free or that had been produced within the university. One of the requirements experienced early on was that of an acceptable use policy to guide use of the HELP stations in the library. This resulted in a general overall statement that the purpose of the HELP workstations is to support the educational, research, and administrative purposes of the university.

The presenters offered the view that this effort appears to be moderately successful. They spoke of two significant efforts being made to support the HELP project. One of these is a "train the trainers" program designed to familiarize library staff with the HELP workstations so that they can then assist students. The other is an ongoing program of instruction aimed at library users. This includes hands-on assistance by library staff at the workstations, and more formal, classroom-type instruction (e.g., hour-long "Introduction to Netscape" sessions) offered during the first two weeks of the semester.

It seems, by any measure, that the HELP project is a success. The real challenge appears to be not "how to attract students to Internet workstations but how to facilitate and encourage the scholarly use of the workstations." Overall, acceptance of HELP by students was judged to be very good and the HELP team sees it as an ongoing project. ■

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