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American Association of Law Libraries

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Report from the Field

American Association of Law Libraries

Technological progress was evident but gradual—no startling innovations

by Terry Ballard

One benefit of attending the American Association of Law Libraries conference, which was held in Indianapolis July 20-25, was to visit the Innovative Law Users Group (ILUG) session to catch up on the latest developments regarding the INNOPAC system, for which I am responsible in my library. I got into Indianapolis just in time to catch the second half of the ILUG activities.

Sandy Westall and Leslie Straus spoke on the future of INNOPAC, which looks just fine at the moment. Straus also talked about the exciting new features that the staff at Innovative Interfaces (the INNOPAC creators) has put together in a package called "Millennium." It will concentrate on the next generation of products for the Web.

A Visit to the Exhibits

The exhibit hall was dominated by the major vendors like West Publishing and LEXIS-NEXIS. Everybody seemed to have a new CD-ROM product, but I didn't notice any startling innovations here—more linking and clickability, but no quantum leaps.

I was surprised by how small the exhibit hall was. I could easily cover the whole thing in a half hour. On the positive side, the things they gave away were really good—jars of honey, caramel corn, sandstone coasters, and staplers, among others. WESTLAW, however, scored the ultimate coup. On Sunday when it was raining like crazy, they were giving out umbrellas. LEXIS-NEXIS, on the other hand, hired a magician who turned dollar bills into hundred dollar bills. After the show I saw him fielding questions from several library administrators.

Notes from the Sessions

Bob James from the Superior Courts of Maricopa County, Arizona, told how they have made a major effort to supply people with the information they need to get through the court system—both by delivering the information where the people are and by putting the instructions in language that any intelligent person can comprehend. They have worked on all fronts, from automated telephone systems to kiosks to Web access.

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When a few people groaned at the mention of automated phone systems, James defended them from a quality control standpoint. "We find that a number of people go into our offices and get information from janitors and security guards. When we put out information on the automated telephone system, at least we know that people are getting accurate information." James said that their philosophy of service was exemplified by a quote from hockey star Wayne Gretzky, "A really good hockey player can play where the puck is. A really *great* hockey player plays where the puck *is going to be.*"

A program concerning CD-ROM access over a WAN began with a speaker who talked mainly about how CD-ROMs can be accessed through a server in a normal LAN-type situation. A later speaker, William Thomasmeyer from Logicraft Information Systems, talked about the major trends in CD-ROM WAN access. When he asked for a show of hands, about half of the people in the room who had the discs on a LAN indicated that they also had them on a WAN.

He said that the major trend in the

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business is moving from client-based to server-based technology. This is because of bandwidth problems inherent in WANs. He said a T1 line is 10 times slower than a LAN. Placing most of the processing on the server end allows simpler messages to be transmitted through the phone lines. Publishers will be making most of their products available in HTML format. This "Open Client" programming enhances running speed. Also, people are getting so accustomed to Web pages that this is becoming "the coin of the realm" in the information industry.

A session on electronic serials yielded a very informative and spirited talk by Eric Lease Morgan, who invented something called Mr. Serials to index, store, and retrieve electronic journals for users on the Web. He opted for a live demonstration—risky in front of hundreds of people, but it worked.

The Tapestry of Information Storage

Next came the session that was the most memorable of the conference for me. Michael Gorman, coauthor of the book *Future Libraries: Dreams, Madness and Reality*, took the floor and began an entertaining, devastating, and sometimes wrong-headed assessment of the current state of information technology. He started off by stating "There is lots of hot air in our field, based on science fiction, wishful thinking, and trendiness." He argued for a cold, dispassionate look at what is happening.

Then, he looked at the entire tapestry of human information storage, saying that the ancient writings and cave paintings defied time but, until recently, not space. In others words, you had to go to the cave to look at the paintings. Today's technologies, such as e-mail, transcend space but not time—it can be accidentally erased with one push of a button. The only medium that does not present a preservation challenge is acid-free paper.

"The real challenge in the electronic information age will be finding the items of enduring information in the bushels of electronic chaff." He then described the process of finding a topic on the World Wide Web. "I'm always given the first 10 of 20,000 sites that matched my search, and that list always includes a faculty directory of an Australian university." (Hey Michael, here's a tip. Just use the quotation marks around your topic in AltaVista or Hotbot and it will do a straight phrase search.)

While his remarks were frequently punctuated with laughs, he simply brought the conference to a halt when he said "The current state of the Web is an electronic Haight-Ashbury: It's full of bright colors, everybody is stoned, and 'hey man, it's all free.'"

On a more serious note, he said that copyright becomes more complex by several magnitudes in an electronic age. "The process of resource libraries electronically sharing things they don't own is surreal at best. The electronic library would result in the death of the library and librarianship."

Innovation and Resistance

I went back to the exhibit hall in search of innovation and found a few noteworthy things. Both LEXIS-NEXIS and WEST-LAW had developed new products (available in beta testing) for Windows 95. Leslie Straus at Innovative Interfaces proudly showed off the new Java applet that displayed acquisitions information in colorful bar graphs and pie charts. She also demonstrated a new feature called "Z39.50 broadcast," which allows for multiple searches in databases with Z39.50 servers from one search entry.

At the other end of the spectrum, I found one book jobber who refused to automate at all—didn't even own a computer. "I have a small select clientele and I'm on a first-name basis with every one of my customers. There's nothing you can do with a computer that I couldn't do better with my typewriter." I predicted that he would have a Web page within two years. He scoffed at this and said that he would never give in. In a way, I hope he doesn't.

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New Databases from EBSCO

EBSCO Publishing has announced the release of Newspaper Source, designed to meet the needs of libraries seeking national coverage of current events in one comprehensive database and R.R. Bowker products including *Books in Print*.

Newspaper Source

Newspaper Source consists of indexing and abstracts for six leading national newspapers: *The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, The Washington Post, The Christian Science Monitor, Los Angeles Times*, and *USA Today*. Benefits of Newspaper Source include full text for *The Christian Science Monitor*, indexing and 60-word abstracts for each article, and easy-to-use EBSCO software. For users, convenient searching of multiple EBSCO Publishing databases via EBSCO*host* will result in the most comprehensive research results, according to the company.

Newspaper Source is scheduled to be available online via EBSCO*host* in October and on CD-ROM in November.

R.R. Bowker Products

EBSCO has entered into an agreement with R.R. Bowker to provide *Books in*