

LJ INFOTECH
ONLINEDATABASES
BY CAROL TENOPIR

Online in London, at 25

IT'S BEEN SEVERAL years since I last attended the Online Information Meeting in London, so I was especially looking forward to the 25th-anniversary meeting this past December. Although some Americans chose to cancel, many Europeans attended. In 2000, about half of the attendees were librarians, and I suspect the proportion was similar this time.

One longtime attendee said, "Everyone in Europe goes to the meeting, but no one attends the sessions." The meeting has a reputation for an excellent exhibit hall and the opportunity to make international deals but not necessarily for scintillating presentations. On the contrary, I found many interesting sessions—vendor updates, in-depth tutorials on specific topics, discussion panels, keynotes, and contributed papers—and left the exhibit hall and deal-making to others.

Super searchers

At the super searchers program, search engine expert Greg Notess explained how financial problems in the dot-com industry affect information professionals. In 2001, search engines saw venture capital funds dry up and advertising plummet. Some companies (e.g., EOMonitor, NBCi Live Directory, and Inference Find) went out of business; others looked for new sources of revenue or changed their search engine technology.

This has led to more cluttered search results screens. Ads that match search terms are now displayed on the results screens of most engines, as are paid "Featured Listings"—search results from companies that pay for placement. Some search engines, including

AltaVista and Fast, only index web sites that pay for the privilege. Web site owners may determine how often and how deep their sites will be indexed when they pay for inclusion.

Notess pointed out an upside to these paid inclusion schemes—"the indexing of any one (paying) web site can now be more complete, fresher, and controlled by people who know the site content best." The downside, of course, is the suspicion you are getting tainted search results. Most of us have not yet come to grips with the question of paid listings, and the full effect on retrieval is still unknown.

Other Internet problems

Peter Griffiths, head of information services, The Home Office (UK government), discussed the growing problem of "rogue" or hostile information web sites designed to be misleading or fraudulent. Such sites include those set up by disgruntled former employees (e.g., untied.com, against United Airlines); those aimed to cast doubt on official versions of events (e.g., Pierre Salinger's alternative version of the Flight 800 airplane crash); and sites that attempt to spread rumors.

Some bogus sites are set up as elaborate marketing schemes. The Bangalore World University (BWU) site includes bibliographies of scholarly works, a directory, and information about the research of Dr. Jeanine Salla. However, the founding date for BWU is given as 2028, and the publication dates of Salla's papers begin in the late 21st century. Griffiths explained that this site was part of an elaborate marketing campaign for the movie *AI*.

Griffiths suggested several ways information professionals can combat rogue web sites. First, we should raise "the awareness of end users" because many people just don't realize that so much on the web is bogus. Information professionals must provide alternative sources to verify questionable information, help point their users to reputable web resources, and set standards for the information put on company intranets.

Information professionals also can monitor the web to alert their own organizations if they, their competitors, or their interests come under Internet attack.

Continuing this theme, Laurence Bebbington, law librarian at the University of Nottingham, discussed how individuals or companies may be victimized on the Internet, including violation of intellectual property rights; cyberstalking and harassment; violation of personal privacy; and defamation.

To prevent such problems, librarians should promote awareness of intellectual property laws and liability issues, he said, and library schools must educate students about the legal, regulatory, and ethical issues surrounding the web. In designing our sites, we should make sure to follow all intellectual property regulations and put important legal requirements in prominent places so others can easily comply with the law. To protect yourself from fraud, investigate each online company with which you conduct business and do not conduct online transactions with sites lacking secure encryption. Finally, Bebbington recommends that professional associations promote codes of ethics that address these issues.

Intranet and portal management

Special librarians can have an immediate impact on their companies' bottom lines by helping personnel better use their time spent on the Internet. Two ways are via better intranet management and customized portals. Ian Wells of Mediapps, Ltd., UK (a company that designs portals), said his company has estimated how much time employees spend searching for external information on the web (and the subsequent costs of those attempts). He figures that a typical employee views six irrelevant web pages per day for five minutes each, wasting a significant amount of time over the year. Wells sees customized web portals as the solution.

Robin Murray, managing director, Fretwell-Downing Informatics, empha-



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sized the need for a single user interface in an organization that allows end users to search library catalogs, Internet and intranet search engines, full-text databases, online journals, directories, internal documents, and other materials. When the information professional helps establish such an information portal, said Murray, it will improve employee productivity through consistency of experience, better use of resources, higher user confidence, linking across services, and better usage tracking. Open standards—such as Z39.50, http, and OpenURL—are necessary to make this possible.

Information literacy

Just as school media specialists and academic librarians recognize their essential role in teaching their constituents good information skills, corporate librarians now find themselves serving as teachers as well. Adrian Dale and Sheila O'Flynn of Creatifica Associates showed how poor information-seeking skills create problems in the corporate world. They quoted studies that show over 80 percent of Internet access in the workplace is now for entertainment or personal purposes; 70 percent of searchers typically use only one keyword in their searches; and half of experienced users fail to refine their Internet searches. Their own experiences show that end users lack awareness of Internet deficiencies (incomplete crawling and indexing) or advanced search features (including Boolean logic).

They recommend that information professionals establish formal information literacy programs within companies—"web driving licenses" or "information literacy 101." Such classes bring users "from unconscious incompetence to conscious competence in around eight hours" by offering the basics of information seeking in terms users can understand. They start at the beginning, explaining the difference between reference, research, and current awareness needs; the differences between primary, secondary, tertiary, and quaternary sources; and how the structure of a discipline influences effective information retrieval. Their corporate literacy classes combine individual work and group work and build a better relationship between information professionals and others in the company.

David Bawden and Lyn Robinson of City University, London, described a case study of information literacy training in a multinational pharmaceutical firm. The firm already requires computer literacy for its employees; the information literacy program is built on this foundation. Information literacy, available both as a formal training course and as self-learning modules

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available on the company's intranet, is best taught in the context of the scientific information needs of the company, so individual examples and sources might vary.

In general, information literate employees must learn how to articulate their information needs; identify the best resources to meet those needs; develop effective search strategies; evaluate the retrieved information; manipulate and process information; and use the information effectively. The traditional library and information science areas of source evaluation and search strategies are easier to teach than understanding information needs and effective use of information.

The London meeting also featured talks by academic librarians from the University of Tampere, Finland, and University of Pretoria, South Africa, on their efforts to teach information literacy to students and faculty. This issue obviously knows no international borders.

Electronic publishing and the future

The final day of the conference focused on electronic publishing and challenges for the future. Declan Butler of *Nature* magazine moderated a debate on the future of electronic publishing that featured participants from the Institute of Physics Publishing (IPP), CSA, Elsevier Science, Highwire Press

(the sole librarian on the panel), and BioMedCentral. Not many revolutionary ideas came out of this panel, although several of the participants are doing innovative things. Over half of the journal articles offered by Highwire, for example, are free to users. IPP has switched back to an author-pays model for some journals, although it's not economically viable so far. CSA and Elsevier Science are offering thousands of links to and between full-text articles by participating in CrossRef.

Butler tried to stimulate debate by positing that current electronic journals are too static and should provide more access to data sets rather than just digested text, but the panel didn't bite. Perhaps he can generate more discussion when he reprises this debate with different participants in May at the National Online meeting in New York.

The closing panel, again comprised mostly of industry bigwigs, tried to predict the important issues of the next 25 years. Their projected topics reflected their backgrounds in the information industry rather than librarianship: the disintermediation of scientific publishing; the renewed importance of information management, with the threat of legislation and litigation; and new business models for publishing and for library services (with demonstrated return on investment a key to success).

Some larger social issues were discussed as well, with the likely development of better communication between computers and humans (including translation and better interfaces) and the need to find ways to conquer the Digital Divide.

U.S. meeting

At 25, the annual Online Information Meeting in London is one of the world's longest running meetings that focuses on online topics. With a mix of online vendors, database producers, corporate information specialists, and some academic librarians from around the world, it remains a good place to hear about new developments and to discuss issues. The information industry is global, and the issues important to information professionals are similar in many parts of the world. Many of the same issues will be discussed at Information Today's annual National Online 2002, part of InfoToday 2002, held in New York in May.