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## **New Order, New Thinking.**

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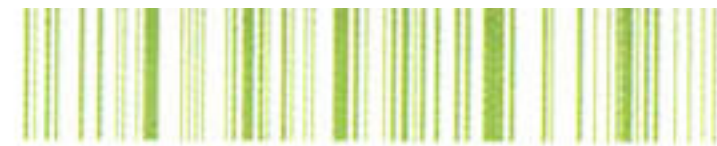
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## ONLINE DATABASES

# New Order, New Thinking

By Carol Tenopir

PUBLISHERS, LIKE LIBRARIANS, are figuring out how to incorporate social networking and other Web 2.0 technologies into their information products and services. The 50th annual meeting of NFAIS (National Federation of Advanced Information Services, formerly National Federation of Abstracting and Indexing Services), held February 24–26 in Philadelphia, challenged publishers to remain relevant in a more collaborative future. The first step is to think in new ways.

### Changing assumptions

David Weinberger, author of *Everything Is Miscellaneous* (Times Bks., 2007) and coauthor of *The Cluetrain Manifesto* (Perseus, 2001), observed that our old-fashioned assumptions about knowledge are beginning to evolve. Formerly, knowledge was scarce, to be organized into a tidy tree structure. Scarcity and physical limits require chopping ideas into containers such as books and organizing them into physical libraries.

Cultural power and authority, he said, spring from such limits, e.g., ideas made to fit into physical objects like books and condensed into metadata, information about those objects. Now that we are in the “third order,” where everything is digital, we can finally innovate, having shed the inhibitions of the physical world.

In Weinberger’s new order, the “leaf” can go on many branches, “messiness” is a virtue because it enriches ideas, and there is no difference between data and metadata. This abundance of connections is “beyond the control of authority” because of the demise of authority and the impossibility of using experts “to authorize or exclude content.”

“Your user feels cheated” if not fully connected, he warned. Social networks are a manifestation of the digital reality in which “all contents are connections to everything else” and where users “own” the organization of information.

Digital users identify the ideas that they think are important. Because we cannot tell what will be interesting in

the future, he advised the audience to include everything and let users “slice through it all.” In fact, he said, it “costs more to exclude than to include.”

### Changing authority

What does authoritative content look like in an age of abundance? Weinberger suggests multiple voices, context-specific authorization (which may include peer review), information prod-

ucts that involve user participation like reviews, and fluid, “just in time” organization of information.

of user involvement, while retaining the assurance of quality and expertise. Other speakers offered practical compromises to meet the challenge. Aaron Schmidt, director of the North Plains Public Library, OR (and author of the *Walking Paper* blog), reminded us that Web 2.0 concerns people more than technology. Participatory databases through libraries should supply user profiles, public spaces where users can add

**User-generated content can coexist with authoritative content**

ucts that involve user participation like reviews, and fluid, “just in time” organization of information.

Authority becomes less important when organizations that provide information acknowledge their own fallibility, just as Wikipedia often does. “Institutions that don’t admit fallibility will lose credibility,” Weinberger said.

User-generated content can coexist with authoritative content. Metadata adds value and authority to complement patron tagging that allows for additional access points. Collaborative user-generated organization reminds users “we are in this together.”

### Librarians challenged

Weinberger’s ideas indeed challenge publishers and librarians tasked to organize and offer high-quality, authoritative information. Not many in the NFAIS audience bought all of his ideas, but he certainly got all of us thinking about how information products can better incorporate connections and the power

notes and share ideas with others, and a way to search the open web and proprietary databases easily together, he said.

Today’s users feel they have a right to participate, including adding tags and notes to historical photo collections and comments and book reviews in the library catalog, providing user-generated photos or captions/descriptions to digital libraries, and employing the multiple style templates available to users to customize the look of library database interfaces (also known as “skinning”).

Kate Wittenberg, director of the Electronic Publishing Initiative at Columbia University, urged publishers to “take advantage of tools that appeal to users to enhance content.” Also, social networks and the gaming community help involve users with library services. Such extra content can be integrated with traditional materials, allowing some control of discovery to be turned over to users.

In the new information order, authoritative content and metadata are joined by user-added content and tags. Each user can continue to access information only but can also participate. The wisdom of the experts in information sources can coexist with the wisdom of the crowd.

### LINK LIST

#### NFAIS

[www.nfais.org](http://www.nfais.org)

#### Walking Paper

[www.walkingpaper.org](http://www.walkingpaper.org)

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