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A Global Information World.

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ONLINE DATABASES
A Global Information World
By Carol Tenopir

IF YOU EVER DOUBTED THAT WE are a global information community that shares similar needs and concerns, a trip to the Online Information Meeting in London will convince you. The December 2007 session, the 32nd annual meeting, drew a standing room—only crowd from 101 countries; nearly every session included issues and viewpoints that crossed country boundaries.

Wales on Wikipedia

Keynote speaker Jimmy Wales, founder of Wikipedia and Wikia, said global sources for general information should be in multiple languages so that everyone can have an encyclopedia of their own. The users who create and edit topical Wikipedia articles (e.g., "Miss Piggy") or subject-focused Wikia articles (e.g., all things Muppets related) form stronger community bonds than those who are just readers.

Wales emphasized the value of building a free and open place, governed by a code of conduct and mechanisms to correct violations, rather than a "police state" aimed at preemptive protection.

Wales got a cheer from some library delegates when he emphasized the importance of educating students about the quality of sources. A college student shouldn't be citing an encyclopedia, Wikipedia, or otherwise, he said, but banning Wikipedia is fruitless. He got a second cheer when he emphasized that Wikipedia is "neither a threat nor an opportunity for librarians." The same disarming sentiment doesn't apply to the big proprietary systems; Wales ambitiously called the newly launched Search Wikia "Google's worst nightmare" because it's a completely open search engine.

Search & discovery tips

The meeting included speakers in three tracks: "Library & Publishing," "The Challenges of 2.0," and "Information Search and Discovery." In the last track, Amelia Kassel, president of the California-based consultancy MarketingBase, shared tips for going beyond Google. She called Alt Search Engines a good place to start, as it provides information on more than 1000 alternative or niche search engines.

Kassel's favorite for searching blogs, Technorati.com, now tracks more than 100 million blogs. Such a search helps those who want to find what bloggers are saying about a company, person, or issue and for "buzz monitoring." Kassel also recommended Keotag and Serph for simultaneous searching of social network conversations.

While major search engines offer video search, Kassel cited some new to me, including TeacherTube ("geared toward teachers and students for community sharing for instructional videos") and Vidipedia ("structured like Wikipedia but with video content"). For searching podcasts, Kassel recommended pluggd.com. She pointed to Social Search Guide as a search engine geared toward social networking sites.

Lars Vage, a librarian at Mid-Sweden University, described many innovative European search engines. He recommended the French search engine Exalead's many advanced search features and its new BAAGZ system for social networking sites. Sweden has produced two innovative image search engines: Picsearch and Polar Rose. To keep up with the many developments in European-based alternative search engines, Vage recommended the Norway-based Pandia Search Engine News blog. All of these sites are available in English.

Libraries and VLEs

Libraries across the globe are challenged to integrate e-resources into their collections, services, and patrons' lives. David Ball, university librarian, Bournemouth University, UK, said academic libraries face obstacles when virtual learning environments (VLEs) become "the primary means of interaction between students and universities." VLEs support online learning, map resources to the curriculum, and foster communication among the learner, teacher, and peer groups.

Libraries, Ball said, must "provide appropriate resources in electronic form and through interfaces meeting the expectations of the digital natives." That means ebooks, e-journals, and e-textbooks all must be integrated into VLEs because students won't use information not available in electronic form. Indeed, e-resources must be included at a "granular level" so content can be "used, reused, recombined, updated, traded, and transmitted," said Ball. MySpace and iTunes, he said, suggest how content is "packaged, accessed, mixed, and shared."

Bournemouth's "MyBU" integrates reading lists, e-reserves, past exam papers, library collections, and library federated searching. A successful VLE environment is more than a distance learning platform, since it allows sharing and reuse of information objects.

Changes in the way publishers license and allow segmentation of information, as well as the way libraries provide access and work with instructors, he suggested, will be needed to achieve the full potential of resource usage and distribution.

> International meeting highlights search engine innovations and new ways to integrate e-resources

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