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Trekking Through Exhibit Halls

IT SEEMS AS IF THE exhibit halls at the Special Libraries Association (SLA) and the American Library Association (ALA) conferences get bigger every year, and it takes longer for me to get from one end of the hall to the other. Certainly the glitz of new systems, fancy interfaces, and new technologies is more impressive every year, and new Internet companies keep showing up.

At SLA nearly every one of the more than 335 exhibits is relevant to online in one way or another. In the middle of my trek through the 2000 SLA exhibit hall in Philadelphia in June, my feet began to hurt and my eyes began to glaze over, so this list of highlights is personal and idiosyncratic.

Engineering Information Village2

From the time of its inception in 1994, Engineering Information (EI) Village has impressed me. It was a portal to serious engineering sources before "portal" was a buzzword; it featured a metaphoric, virtual-reality interface when such innovations were mostly confined to games; and it was one of the first online services to combine access to high-quality web sites, bibliographic databases, and human experts. The new, greatly changed version (www.ei.org/engineeringvillage2) was introduced at SLA 2000.

My first reaction was disappointment—EI has abandoned its metaphoric interface, which led users through a cybervillage, in favor of a no-nonsense fill-in-the-blanks interface that looks much like other information retrieval systems. EI staff explained that the new look was a response to customer input; engineers and librarians complained that the village metaphor was "patronizing"

and "too toylike," and, in Europe, the term village implies a backwater.

More importantly, the concept of wandering through a village suffers when users must browse through multiple screens. With over 30,000 web sites linked to the old EI Village, users sometimes had to drill down through four village screens to choose a relevant source.

Engineers use EI for serious purposes and to search for relevant research information. The metaphoric and browsing approach connoted too much frivolity. The new system uses one template-based interface to search for selected web sites, patents, and EI's bibliographic database Compendex. The interface features an easy QuickSearch mode and an Expert mode.

But the changes to EI Village2 go beyond the interface. The new version drastically cuts the number of web sites to about 10,000, selected by EI editors to be valuable to engineers. Each site is abstracted (as in the original EI Village), but the descriptions will include a quality ranking (1 to 4) assigned by engineering experts, which can limit searches. The controlled vocabulary indexing terms developed for the Compendex (Engineering Index) database are available for both the web sites and Compendex bibliographic file, and the same search can be run in each. The indexing terms are used also in a new relevance feedback feature.

Popular EI Village features are retained, notably the online connection to a librarian and to senior engineers. Although the term "mayor" is eliminated, online customer support is still featured. According to EI spokespeople, "no one" used the chat features, so chat is eliminated in EI Village2.

Linking to full texts

The now decade-long trend of linking bibliographic database records to the corresponding full-text journal articles has gained momentum. Until recently, the predominant model for linking involves a secondary publisher that licenses full articles from primary publishers, e.g., ProQuest, EBSCO, and

Northern Light. They either create indexing and abstracting databases themselves or lease them from secondary publishers and then link them to leased full texts.

A newer model begins with primary publishers. They are seeking out secondary publishers or banding together to offer more titles. Elsevier Science announced enhancements to ScienceDirect (www.sciencedirect.com) that feature more links from bibliographic files created by secondary publishers and links to non-Elsevier journals. ScienceDirect will now offer access to the Biosis Previews and Inspec bibliographic databases. Links from the bibliographic records to full articles will be made not only to Elsevier publications but also to journals from a variety of science publishers, thanks to a new publishing agreement.

Starting June 1, scientific, technical, and medical (STM) publishers initiated CrossRef (www.crossref.org), a behind-the-scenes linking agreement that provides customers of one online service (like ScienceDirect) links to the full-text articles from many publishers. More than 30 publishers participate in CrossRef, including commercial, academic, and society publishers such as Blackwell Science, Oxford University Press, American Institute of Physics, and Academic Press.

The member publishers have formed a centralized not-for-profit organization to run CrossRef. The Publishers International Linking Association Inc. (PILA) will keep CrossRef up and running, although the journal articles themselves are housed on each publisher's server. CrossRef is based on the Digital Object Identifier, embedded by primary publishers into their journal articles and correspondingly by secondary publishers into indexing/abstracting records.

This type of access does not happen overnight, nor does it come for free to libraries. In addition to the access fees for the online search and retrieval system they are using, libraries also must subscribe to the electronic journals from



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ONLINE DATABASES

the various participating publishers or pay per article. (Prices vary from publisher to publisher and from library to library.) CrossRef facilitates linking, but it is up to libraries to negotiate with their online services or STM publishers to determine how much it will cost.

Ovid's e-books

It seems that electronic journals are already old hat, or at least now an accepted and integral part of library collections. The latest challenge to libraries is incorporating electronic books into collections; the SLA meeting featured some solutions to offering e-books through libraries.

Books@Ovid (www.ovid.com) provides access to SGML versions of medical books to complement the many journals and bibliographic files on the Ovid online system. As of June, approximately 17 book titles were available; by the end of the year, 35 titles should be available. Books come from major publishers of clinical medical reference books, including McGraw-Hill, W.B. Saunders, and Mosby. (Actually, Books@Ovid was introduced last year as Primary Care Online, but under the new title it seems to be getting more attention. Also, the title fits better with the companion full-text journal offering Journals@Ovid.)

Each electronic book can be browsed by chapter or by the table of contents. Using the relevance search engine of PLS (Personal Library System), every word of each book can be searched book by book, or all books can be searched together. Nancy Calbretta, librarian at Cooper Health System in Camden, NJ, told me she likes it not only because of the many standard medical titles it offers but also because users can find journal articles and books through the same system, and the books are always the most current edition.

Ovid's normal licensing agreement offers pricing by number of concurrent users, so more than one user can access the same book title at a time. The main competitor is MDConsult, a popular but expensive system for medical libraries. Ovid includes more general-interest resources, although its book titles are solely medical.

netLibrary's e-books

netLibrary (www.netLibrary.com) provides a more diverse collection of over 22,000 electronic books, aimed pri-

marily at the general academic library. It claims to convert and add over 100 new titles every day. This was netLibrary's first time at SLA; it's a new service to most special librarians.

netLibrary's titles are mostly academic and scholarly books but include both fiction and nonfiction and both public domain titles and current, in-print books. The service has agreements with more than 300 publishers of trade, academic, reference, and scholarly books. netLibrary gets the books from publishers in either print or electronic form and converts them to a proprietary electronic format. These e-books maintain the look and feel of the original print book—including all pictures and graphics—and retain the page-by-page form.

According to the netLibrary spokesperson at SLA, the company plans to get more titles that appeal to public and K-12 libraries. Just as with

The latest challenge to libraries is incorporating electronic books into collections

printed books, libraries determine which electronic titles they wish to access from netLibrary, or a library may select a predetermined subset.

Library of Congress cataloging linked to the OCLC cataloging service puts netLibrary electronic books in your online catalog if desired or on the library's web site. Electronic books are "checked out" by library users much like printed books, and, as with printed books, only one user can have an electronic book from netLibrary "checked out" at any one time (unless you've bought more than one "copy"). Although this doesn't make full use of the power of electronic versions, this limited access encourages publishers to cooperate.

Access is through your catalog, but the e-books themselves are housed on the netLibrary server and must be read on a computer screen. netLibrary is working on a handheld reader that could be checked out by library patrons. (This will probably be of most interest to pub-

lic and school libraries whose patrons lack computers.) Compatibility with ubiquitous hand-held devices such as Palm Pilots would increase the utility of netLibrary e-books even more, if security can be assured.

netLibrary books are fully searchable and feature an interactive table of contents and an index linked to the text. A library's complete netLibrary collection can be searched for relevant titles, and retrieved titles can be previewed before being checked out.

Electronic access to print

Print-on-paper books are not completely obsolete, as the presence of another service indicates. Alibris (www.alibris.com), the big-budget web broker of printed rare and out-of-print books, was also at SLA for the first time.

Its booth person acknowledged that special librarians rely more on current information, but for those who need out-of-print books, Alibris offers a finding service. Librarians can submit their book want lists to Alibris for automatic matching against the Alibris database of out-of-print titles. Books are then shipped to the library and purchase orders are accepted.

The antiquarian book trade is now an Internet-based business. Other sources include Bibliofind (www.bibliofind.com) or Advanced Book Exchange (www.abebooks.com). Addall (www.addall.com) searches multiple book services.

Old faithfuls?

What about the online companies that have marketed to libraries for nearly three decades? To some, they may seem old-fashioned, but the respected names in the field—Dialog (newly purchased by Thomson), Dow Jones (newly named Factiva), Lexis-Nexis, OCLC, EBSCO, Wilson, etc.—remain the biggest presence at conferences like SLA and ALA and still faithfully produce products for the library market.

They understand libraries, even though they may lack the flash of newer dot-com companies. They provide the advantages of longevity, although they must continually look to their competitors (old and new) to provide up-to-date products. I often feature what's new from these companies in my column—their absence from my trek only reflects that I was looking for new faces this year.