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Head in the Clouds, Feet on the Ground:

Serials Vision and Common Sense

by Ellen McGrath
University at Buffalo Law Library

The thirteenth annual North American Serials Interest Group (NASIG) conference was held June 18-21, 1998 at the University of Colorado at Boulder. The conference theme is given as the title of this report. I have been a NASIG member for about ten years, but this was my first time attending the conference. NASIG has an excellent reputation for presenting a very relaxed conference with stimulating programs and I found this to be true again of this year's offering.

The University of Colorado at Boulder has a beautiful campus, with a breathtaking view of the mountains. I did have a chance to take a quick tour of the Law Library, thanks to Georgia Briscoe, its Head of Technical Services. There is most definitely an intimate feel to a conference held on a campus, in my opinion, and this was perhaps the most noticeable aspect for me. In addition, there was the ultra casual dress code of sneakers and shorts which was certainly embraced by the approximately 670 attendees and the fun evening activities that incorporated seeing some of the Boulder sights. The scheduled events began on Thursday evening with greetings from the NASIG president, Susan Davis, and campus representatives, followed by an interesting presentation of the history of the campus, complete with slide show. I don't think I'll ever forget the haunting view of the first building, Old Main, sitting out in the middle of nowhere in 1868 with the backdrop of the mountains behind it—amazing!

On to the content of the conference. There was a plenary session each of the three days and the first of these was delivered by Mark Walter (Seybold Publications). He addressed the impact that the Internet is exerting on publishing at present. Mr. Walter's talk was sprinkled with the usual slate of acronyms: STM, SGML, SICL, DOI and even a new one on me, RDF (Resource Description Format). He traced some of the history of computers in publishing from 1970 until today, when the view of the "master" has now shifted in many cases away from the printed page.

There were ten concurrent workshops each day, each of which was given twice, once in the morning and again in the afternoon. This would seem rather a burden on the presenters, but it maximizes the attendees' chances of getting to more of the sessions. The first of these workshops I attended was "What Happened to the Serials Cataloger: Copy Cataloging of Serials," given by Sharon Wiles-Young and Linda Novak of Lehigh University. They described the effects of a drastic reorganization at Lehigh beginning in 1996. The presenters shared many good insights about the importance of training (which must be "intensive and consistent"), cross training, and documentation. And they spoke frankly about the difficulty of training and retaining staff, while also keeping morale up.

I must admit the overall tone of this presentation, while realistic, was almost depressing. It left me with a nagging doubt as to whether we will ever be able to keep up with cataloging in the face of new management trends, new formats, and disappearing staff. On a brighter note, it struck me that general academic cataloging departments are now in the position that most academic law cataloging departments have always been in, namely that staffing is low and all staff must be able to do just about everything. Law catalogers have never been able to be highly specialized, partly due to our hybrid monograph/serial legal materials, but this is one of the things I like most about my work. So this is one instance where law catalogers were out ahead of the curve!

"Building an Electronic Journal Collection From the Ground Up" by Susan Zappen and Jennifer Taxman, the Heads of Technical Services and Public Services respectively at Skidmore College was the next workshop for me. While no earthshattering information was imparted in this session, I thought the natural interaction of technical and public services in regard to e-journals which was exhibited was refreshing and encouraging. The speakers focused on the need for choosing e-journals that support the curriculum, for documenting this in your collection development policy, for integrating them into the public catalog, and for publicizing your choices to your faculty and users.

I next attended "Emerging Trends in Journal Publishing" with Liz Pope (Community of Science), Gerry Grenier (Wiley), and Peter Boyce (American Astronomical Society). This was an interesting session, of the type for which NASIG is so well known. Ms. Pope discussed the options for electronic publication formats as a sort of hierarchy from PDF to HTML to SGML to XML in terms of their complexity (from least complex to most). The issue of how pages are built electronically, whether static or dynamic, was mentioned by more than one speaker, with the dynamic approach being preferred. Mr. Boyce represented the perspective of the society publisher and he emphasized that scholars and librarians had input into the work of the AAS e-Pub Development Team. He spoke of his work as a study of the purposes of the scholarly journal and of the norms of the scholars who read it. Good e-journals should offer low cost, speed of publication, abundant links, electronic features, the ability to be updated, and demonstrable permanence. Mr. Grenier spoke about links more specifically and visited a few publishers' Web sites. He said that a link now is a one-to-one relationship, but that it should be a one-to-many instead and that we should watch for developments along those lines.

The second full day started with a plenary session by Patricia Schroeder, former Congresswoman from Colorado and current President/CEO of the Association of American Publishers, entitled "Publishing in the New World." Ms. Schroeder possesses a laid back speaking style that is very engaging. She spoke generally about her experiences in the House of representatives and the current state of politics. Her discussion of publishing focused on the intellectual property debates now underway and the related bills pending in Congress. Ms. Schroeder commented that creative work is now so easy to copy and distribute, making piracy prevalent, but the act of creation is no easier and is perhaps even more difficult now.

Jean Hirons (CONSER Coordinator, Library of Congress) presented the workshop "The Latest on Latest (Entry) and Other Hot News About Seriality." She discussed the latest thinking on seriality since the Joint Steering Committee conference on AACR was held last October in Toronto. Ms. Hirons had presented a paper at that conference with Crystal Graham, but some of the ideas from it have evolved since then. The original goal was to redefine "serial," but this has now changed to dividing the bibliographic universe into two parts: monographic entities and ongoing entities. The latter category includes: traditional serials, multipart sets and collections that are not complete as first issued, loose-leaves, and electronic resources that are intended to be added to/updated for some time.

An interesting discussion ensued which touched on lots of issues, including successive entry. It is difficult to do justice to it all here, but Ms. Hirons had an excellent handout which helped to clarify these rather confusing new terms for me. Please contact me if you would like a copy of it. (And also be sure to check out the "Technical Tips" column by Ellen Rappaport in this issue as it deals with this topic in more detail.) This was another instance where I felt a distinct advantage as a law cataloger. After all, haven't we been dealing with this fuzziness for many years in our handling of loose-leaves? I simply fall back on my instincts and think "loose-leaf" when I am faced with cataloging a Web site.

I next attended "Do Holdings Have a Future?" given by Frieda Rosenberg (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill). This was a very technical MARC-based presentation, as one might guess, though Ms. Rosenberg did begin with the general concepts underlying the standards that combine to form the MARC holdings record.

Adherence to standards results in consistency and divergence from them can result in problems in data display, migration, and sharing. The differing methods of implementing the MARC holdings standard by various library system vendors was illustrated nicely when Ms. Rosenberg went to her examples from her local DRA-based system and immediately lost me, since my experience is with the NOTIS system.

Janet Swan Hill (University of Colorado) gave a presentation called "You May Already Know the Answer." She had many excellent and practical observations on rules and standards. Ms. Swan Hill gave a brief summary of her career thus making clear the value she places on participating in the process of changing the rules and standards when necessary, rather than just ignoring them. She emphasized (1) Remembering the big picture (Whatever you do affects someone else. We cannot operate in isolation, as this can blind one to this interconnection.); and (2) Sticking to our principles (If we do not, we are vulnerable to making mistakes. We also must be able to articulate these principles clearly. It is important to keep the end result in mind, rather than allowing the "process" to take on a life of its own and consume us.)

As a "special" (law) cataloger, I took Ms. Swan Hill's warnings to heart, when she said that it is easy for special catalogers to rationalize deviance from standards in terms of catering to the special needs of one's own constituency. It is especially important to guard against isolation, which can occur with special catalogers when we feel that our own particular material is the hardest to catalog. Ms. Swan Hill also encouraged viewing new materials with imagination. We already know most of what we need to know when dealing with new formats, it is often just a matter of focusing on the similarities to materials we already know, rather than the differences, which can most likely be accommodated. Ms. Swan Hill's advice in its entirety, while advocating adherence to rules and standards, also forbids letting those same rules and standards become a barrier between catalogers and users.

The final plenary session was given by Ellen Waite Franzen, Associate Provost for Information Services, University of Richmond and was called "It's Personal, It's Digital and It's Serial: Trends That May Affect Higher Education, Publishing, and Libraries." She favored a different type of planning, scenario planning, as opposed to strategic planning. In scenario planning, the questions are changed slightly from "What if X happens?" to "What will our organization do if X happens?" Ms. Franzen spoke about "ubiquitous computing, ubiquitous information," and the reactions to both, including social trends. She had all sorts of neat examples of ubiquitous technology, from personal digital assistants to global positioning devices. Ms. Franzen defined ubiquitous information as information we want and need, when we need it. The reactions to these are evidenced by our unquestioning faith in the Web and its future. She noted an evolutionary trend as regards computers, which were first used for computation, then communication, and now collaboration.

I thoroughly enjoyed my first NASIG conference and I learned a lot from it. I feel fortunate to have been able to attend it, thanks to the generous support of my director. It is obvious that the various NASIG planning groups pay attention to every detail, but then what would you expect from a bunch of serialists? If you ever get the opportunity to attend NASIG, I recommend you take it!