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ALA Midwinter 2016 Conference Report

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Conference Report

By Ellen McGrath, University at Buffalo

As I contemplated conference offerings for the coming year, I decided to take some time off from attending the American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) annual meeting. I am a law cataloger and I have been attending AALL conferences since 1985. Back in those days, the educational programs offered for catalogers were plentiful. I also benefited from attending and presenting at a number of AALL Cataloging Institutes over the course of my career. Sadly, those institutes no longer exist. And the cataloging and technical services programs (and even committee and SIS meetings) have become a regular source of contention at every AALL annual conference, which is very distracting from the true purpose of attending a professional development event.

As I looked back, I realized that too much of the time of technical services law librarians during the annual meeting is spent debating how to get AALL to listen to us and to grant us the freedom to determine how to allocate our valuable in-person time together educating ourselves about technical services issues and talking to each other. It is time wasted because we go over the same ground every year, with perhaps some slight deviations, yet nothing ever changes. It is time that could and should be spent on the real issues that we face every day in our technical services work.

More recent developments in AALL clinched my decision to stop attending its conference. Last year's seemingly sudden administrative decision to do away with many of the official AALL representative positions was a real blow. Fortunately the two SISs to which I belong, TS-SIS (Technical Services Special Interest Section) and

OBS-SIS (Online Bibliographic Services Special Interest Section), were able to lobby effectively enough to retain their three official representatives to the American Library Association (ALA): the Committee on Cataloging: Description and Access (CC:DA), the MARC Advisory Committee (MAC), and the Subject Analysis Committee (SAC). These positions are essential in ensuring a smooth flow of information between ALA and the law cataloging communities.

This year, the news that AALL administration was doing away with all SIS tables in the exhibit hall and recommending the organization change its name, both decisions made with little or no apparent input from its membership, was sort of the straw that broke the camel's back for me. All of which is a long way of explaining why I decided to attend the ALA Midwinter Conference in Boston, January 8-12, 2016, instead of going to AALL in Chicago this July. The additional fact that the ALA conference registration fee was approximately one third of that of AALL's didn't hurt either J (These opinions are mine only and do not reflect those of my institution or anyone else.)

What follows is a list of the sessions I attended in Boston, from Friday afternoon through Monday morning, annotated with my takeaway impressions:

"What's Important? RMG's Annual President's Seminar: The View from the Top"

This session was moderated by Rob McGee (RMG President) in a free-flowing and straightforward style. It is apparently an annual event in which he invites "global ILS companies and other library industry executives to focus on initiatives and trends that impact libraries." On the panel was one representative from each of these companies: BiblioCommons, Boopsie, Infor, Innovative Interfaces, Overdrive, ProQuest, LibLime, SirsiDynix, and The Library Corporation. Since my institution uses the Aleph integrated library system (ILS), I was especially interested to hear from Jane Burke (ProQuest). *Continued on next page ....*

ALA Midwinter cont...

I had to laugh when McGee asked her how much ProQuest paid to purchase Ex Libris. She tactfully declined to supply the amount, as ProQuest is a private company. McGee was equally blunt in inquiring of Bill Schickling of Innovative Interfaces why the equity companies/owners acquired it. McGee called a representative of one of the equity companies in the audience up to the panel to participate. He was attending the conference with Schickling and touring libraries to learn more about the library market. Marshall Breeding (independent consultant/expert on state of library systems) was in attendance and he summarized the state of the industry by saying that the ILS market has gone from a highly fragmented state to its current highly consolidated state. Thus libraries have fewer choices. McGee wrapped up by observing that company success is dependent upon its library customers' success and that libraries are competing with commercial companies in terms of the digital experience of its users.

"Discovery Is Great, But What about Usage?"

Two librarians from small academic libraries recounted their recent experiences in implementing the OCLC WorldCat Discovery Services product. Both listed the single search box as a major reason for their decision to implement it. The problems of false positives, ineffective known item searching, confusing relevancy ranking results, and more were listed as cons. One library did experience higher use of their paid full-text resources and a drop in interlibrary loan (ILL) requests. The other saw circulation of print materials drop and e-books usage rise.

"OCLC Linked Data Roundtable: Stories from the Front"

"Staff from libraries that are implementing linked data discuss current activities and share recent experiences with OCLC's Entity Lookup Service, LC's BIBFRAME pilot program and other linked data projects."

"Faceted Subject Access Interest Group Meeting"

Two speakers related their FAST (Faceted Application of Subject Terminology) projects. The first project focused on an examination of the difficulties experienced by non-expert catalogers in assigning Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH). FAST proved to be more user-friendly and the decision was made to assign FAST to digital and manuscript collections instead of LCSH. The second speaker described an interesting pilot project to create an autocomplete catalog search interface using the assignFAST gadget.

"Authority Work of the Future: Taking Controlled Vocabulary and Authority Control Beyond the Library Catalog" and "Authority Control Interest Group Meeting"

These two sessions featured a number of speakers, each of whom described an interesting project to leverage name and subject authority work and/or to ensure access in an innovative way.

One of the commonly repeated phrases that stuck in my head from this conference is that authority control is morphing into identities management. Researchers are becoming more aware of their need to register for IDs (such as ORCID), in order to be absolutely accurate about their output as distinguished from other researchers with the same or a similar name.

"BIBCO/CONSER/NACO/SACO At-Large Meeting" and "Program for Cooperative Cataloging (PCC) Participants Meeting" and "Heads of Cataloging Interest Group Meeting"

The twin themes of linked data and identities management/authority control continued during these three sessions. The demonstration of the "Authority Toolkit: a tool for creating and modifying LC/NACO authority records in OCLC" by Gray Strawn was amazing. I need to follow-up to see how to implement it for my own NACO (Name Authority Cooperative) work. It was interesting to hear first person accounts of the various projects. But I confess I am still frustrated by the fact that an ILS system that implements linked data for us common folk still seems to be off in the future ... sigh!

I attended an Author Forum with Ken Burns, Mark Kurlansky, and Terry Tempest Williams and a Speaker Series interview with author, Andre Dubus III (*House of Sand and Fog*). I heard a couple mystery authors (Hank Phillippi Ryan and Joseph Finder) interview each other at the PopTop Stage and attended a preview of adult fiction at the Book Buzz Theater, both in the exhibit hall. And yes, on my return, my suitcase was full of free books I picked up. The personal reader side of me loves that aspect of the ALA exhibit hall!

I am so glad I decided to spend my conference attendance dollars on the ALA Midwinter conference this year. I learned so much from the sessions hyper-focused on cataloging issues near and dear to my heart -- and to the future of my work. It was refreshing to simply be invigorated by the learning and not to be dragged down by the negativity of constantly fighting to be heard. This is definitely NOT in any way a criticism of my fellow technical services law colleagues, who always strive to learn and to help each other, in spite of the recurring organizational obstacles. They are the best thing about my AALL membership and the reason I will keep renewing it.