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ACCESS '98: SHOOTING THE RAPIDS: INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY IN TRANSITION

Jeanne Enright

Lovely autumn days greeted about 200 delegates from across Canada and the United States for the sixth annual Access conference. Access '98, hosted by the University of Saskatchewan Libraries, was held from 2-4 October 1998 in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, located on the scenic South Saskatchewan River.

For those unfamiliar with the Access conference, it originated in Winnipeg, Manitoba, in 1993 and has been held each year in the fall in various cities across Canada. The three-day conference is organized in a single-stream format and is intended for individuals managing or working with information technology in libraries.

The Access '98 Planning Committee arranged a program of high-calibre speakers who deftly guided delegates through the latest developments in information technology. As well, the program included some of the broader social issues related to the application of information technology in libraries, for example, privacy, censorship, and the law.

All Access '98 registrants were invited to a wine and cheese reception and early bird registration on Thursday evening at the Delta Bessborough Hotel, the conference location. This was an opportunity for fellow delegates to network, an important feature of this small conference with registration limited to about 200. Throughout the conference, coffee and lunches were provided in an informal and relaxed atmosphere that provided

further opportunities to talk with other delegates.

In his introductory remarks, David Fox, conference chair, described this year's theme, "Shooting the Rapids—Information Technology in Transition," as a metaphor for the turbulent but exhilarating period that we are living through in the development and application of information technology in libraries. Each day of the conference was devoted to a particular area of information technology.

Day 1: Integrated Systems and Local Infrastructure

The conference opened with keynote speaker, Roy Tennant, digital library project manager for The Library, University of California, Berkeley, manager of the Berkeley Digital Library SunSITE and owner of the electronic discussion groups, Web4Lib and Dig-Libns. A thoroughly enjoyable keynote speech entitled "Whitewater Wisdom, Technical Truisms, and a Kick in the Tail" offered some practical suggestions for those working with information technology in libraries.

The first part of his speech focused upon the lessons he has learned as a commercial white water river guide that can be applied to libraries, and was supplemented with images from his trips down the Colorado River. When white water rafting, one must understand the changeability of the river, climb on shore, "read the water," and know where it is going. Similarly, in libraries one must moni-

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tor both the library and computer lit-
erature in order to identify trends.
Other parallels included understanding
risks, keeping priorities straight,
paddling in unison or not paddling at
all (be a team player or resign from
a committee), and "rigging for a flip"
(preparing for a disaster in your
library).

In the second part of his speech,
technical truisms were highlighted such
as

- Never install software with a zero
at the end of the release number.
- Buy hardware at the last possible
moment.
- Back it up or kiss it goodbye.
- You can never have too much
RAM, disk space, or CPU speed.

The third part was entitled "Kick
in the Tail," or what we must do both
individually and collectively to move
into the new millennium. Collectively,
we must create and facilitate change
in both ourselves and our organiza-
tions, invest in people and infrastruc-
ture, and use the best people for the
job. Individually, we must strive for
flexibility, learn to thrive on uncer-
tainty, move faster than the organiza-
tion, and say it simply. We need to
combine some of our existing skills
(public service attitudes, organization,
and categorization) with some new
ones (systems design, applying com-
puters to information problems).

In the second session of the
morning, Peter Scott, manager of
small systems of the University of
Saskatchewan Libraries, and Darryl
Friesen, programmer/analyst, pre-
sented a nice overview of library
intranets as well as information about
the hardware, software, and security
used for the intranet at the University
of Saskatchewan Library. They in-
stalled SWISH-E, a free software to
create a searchable index that supports
Boolean searching.

One of the afternoon sessions was
"The Role of Libraries and Librarians
in Organizing the Web," presented by
Terry Noreault, director of the OCLC
Research and Special Projects Divi-
sion. Today, libraries are linking to

commercial search engines, creating
their own search engines, creating
catalog records for Internet resources
and portal pages. Portal pages inte-
grate multiple information sources
(local, licensed, global) and are labor-
intensive. There is an overlap between
libraries and even within libraries in
selecting resources and maintaining
pages.

At OCLC, the objectives of the
CORC (Cooperative Online Resource
Catalog) project are to explore co-
operative cataloging of Web resources,
develop metadata standards, evaluate
various workflow options, develop
automated tools, and explore access
issues. This pilot project will involve
50 to 100 participating libraries for
12 to 18 months, requiring a half-time
equivalent from participants and an
evaluation of cataloging costs. The
pre-presentation concluded with a demon-
stration of a research project, Mantis,
an automated cataloging tool for
electronic resources <<http://www.purl.org/mantis>>. In summary, en-
hancing access to Internet resources
is an important role for libraries but
the size of the task necessitates co-
operation. Sophisticated description
of Internet resources is desirable and
cost effective but much research needs
to be done.

The final session of the day was an
integrated systems vendor panel that
included representatives from Ameri-
tech, Gaylord, Geac, Endeavor, In-
novative, and Sirsi. Each vendor was
given ten minutes to answer each of
the following two questions: "What's
unique about your product?" and
"What's your greatest challenge in the
next 12 to 18 months?" After that,
delegates had the opportunity to ask
questions and express concerns.

Day 2: Electronic Publishing and Digital Libraries

The second day of the conference
began with a database vendor panel
with representatives from Chadwyck-
Healey, OCLC, OVID, and Silver-
Platter highlighting the new features
of their products.

After the vendor panel, Marty
Rosen, coordinator of technical ser-
vices and electronic systems in the
Indiana University Southeast Library

assessed some of the online periodical databases and encyclopedias that include Web links from their products. One example showed the Cigar Smoking Golfers Association as a Web site related to "smoking." He commented that as librarians, we would like some control over the resources that are included in these products. If vendors are going to provide these links, librarians suggested there be clear standards and a mechanism for feedback and that vendors monitor sites for reliability and not have financial arrangements with Web site developers.

The morning continued with "Internet Coding Standards" presented by Tim Bray from Textuality. Of particular interest was an introduction to the Extensible Markup Language (XML) that we are hearing so much about. The spec for XML is small (40 pages); a key feature is that you can invent your own tags. For more information about XML, see <<http://www.textuality.com/xml/>>.

After lunch, Louis Rosenfeld, president of Argus Associates and co-author of *Information Architecture for the World Wide Web*, defined the concept of information architecture and its importance in organizing information in the online environment. Web site developers need to consider organizational structure, language, navigational systems, browsable indexes, and searchable indexes in order to make it easier for users to find information. Interestingly, he noted that the demand for information architecture and library and information science skills in the marketplace is exploding in terms of jobs, dollars, and the environment.

Another worthwhile session was "Practical Digital Library: Tools and Techniques," presented by Roy Tennant and Steve Sloan, systems librarians, University of New Brunswick Libraries. Tennant recommended some simple and inexpensive tools that one can use to build a digital collection. He mentioned that sometimes free software can be as good as or better than commercial software. Sloan related his experience in digitizing collections such as the Benjamin Marston Diaries at the University of New Brunswick

Electronic Text Centre <<http://www.lib.unb.ca/>>.

The day concluded with a panel that showcased innovative developments in Canadian libraries.

Day 3: The Internet

Clifford Lynch, executive director, Coalition for Networked Information, raised a number of interesting questions and issues for us to ponder in the feature presentation, "The State of the Internet." For example, as more collaboration and communications take place at a distance with advanced networks, it could generate information artifacts that end up on a video or multimedia server. For libraries, it raises a number of complicated questions. How are we going to organize video? Who is going to manage this information? What does archiving it mean? Who owns it?

After the feature presentation, George Machovec, technical coordinator for the Colorado Alliance of Research Libraries, discussed various approaches to authentication and security. Several examples were cited including Colorado Alliance, which uses a hybrid IP filtering and user ID scheme.

A session about search engines, an essential tool of the Internet, was presented by the panel of Gregg Notess, reference librarian and associate professor, Montana State University; Rich Wiggins, system architect, NEM Online, Michigan State University; and Joyce Ward, director of content classification at Northern Light. Notess observed that there is surprisingly low duplication between search engines, inconsistent growth, and incomplete coverage of the Web. Wiggins' entertaining presentation focused upon users' search strategies, search engine trends, and developments. Ward explained how documents are classified by mapping, automatic, and editorial classification at Northern Light, a search engine that combines a Web database with a special collection of full-text documents from major publishers.

One of the final sessions of the conference was "Consortium Licensing of Electronic Information Resources—the Ontario Experience." In Ontario,

the Consortium of Ontario Libraries (COOL), which includes universities, community colleges, public libraries, and school boards, signed a deal with *Britannica Online* and plans to negotiate with other vendors. Warren Holder, electronic information resource coordinator, University of Toronto Libraries, described the situation as a classic win/win with more content at cheaper prices.

Conclusion

In addition to the sessions highlighted in this report, the program contained other noteworthy and informative sessions about planning for desktop computing, network computers, Z39.50, browsers and editors, Web to database development tools, and Java applications. Many of this year's presentations are available via the Web, in both PowerPoint and HTML versions at <<http://library.usask.ca/access98/program.htm>>.

Access '98 proved to be a valuable learning experience for anyone managing or working with information technology in libraries including electronic resources catalogers. Be sure to mark Access '99 on your calendar to be held from 25-27 October 1999 in Guelph, Ontario, and hosted by the TriUniversity Group of Libraries: the University of Guelph, the University of Waterloo, and Wilfrid Laurier University. The Access '99 Web site can be found at <<http://www.wlu.ca/~wwwlib/access99/>>.

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