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From the Other Side of the Street

What's a Nice Guy Like You Doing at a Conference Like This?

by **Dave Mitchell** (Guilford Press) <dmitch@guilford.com>

Column Editor: **Kathleen Ketterman** (University of North Carolina Press)

Y'all — Several of us were surprised at the Silence of Publishers during the 1995 Charleston Conference. There were a lot of them present (over 70), but they just weren't talking. Here's one's explanation. Hey, let us hear MORE from all of you publishers out there! I think it was somebody famous who said, "How can I know what it is I don't know if I don't know it in the first place?" — KS

When I was in college, my parents, who are now divorced, used to call before the holidays to tell me how much they missed me and ask me when I was coming home. When I got there, it wasn't quite what I had expected. Sure you could talk if you were lucky enough to get people aside on their own, or better yet, go out. At the dinner table, however, the same old patterns emerged. They would never fight with each other, but rather would find some fault with me or my siblings. I felt my presence was not required as much as it was tolerated as an audience for them to express their anger.

I felt much the same way representing a publisher at the **Charleston Conference** this year. While everyone I spoke to on a personal level was very open and willing to talk, after several of the general sessions, I felt, well, bashed. Part of the publisher bashing was quite subtle; some of it was more obvious. All of it points to the fact that there are still some major misconceptions about publishers, and demonstrates how much publisher participation at this conference is really needed.

First, I must say that the overall spirit of the conference is positive, especially in the smaller sessions and in the hallways. People, especially the librarians, took the time to answer questions and voice their opinions. The accent on informality and openness by the organizers

suits the goals of the conference — seeking to narrow the gaps of understanding between publishers, and vendors. I learned a

lot at the conference, gaining valuable insights about the way librarians do their jobs. As an avid library patron (yes, I'm the one who always returns things late), it was especially interesting to learn more about something which I had always taken for granted. I met several people that I have contacted since, and look

forward to seeing again. Charleston is a gracious city, has great restaurants, and is easy to get around, which makes it the perfect venue.

Paradoxically, some of the general sessions were open season on publishers. While the organizers did a good job in selecting speakers and topics, publishing was under-represented. Publishers made up fewer of the speakers than they should have, especially on the CEO panels the first day, which had only one publishing CEO. There were a few remarks made about publishers on that panel which went unchallenged, due to the shortage of publishers.

The most common publisher "bashing" came in the form of gross generalizations made concerning issues that affect only a handful of publishers made by a handful of speakers who have a bone to pick. The statements were made in a way that included all publishers, I presume, as a way to protect the anonymity (and prevent the animosity) of the particular publishers in question. Listening between the lines it was obvious to me, and I can only hope it was obvious to everyone else as well. The problem is that statements like this undermine the purpose of the conference. You don't resolve problems with innuendo or generalized anger. I'm not trying to fire the shot heard around

the publishing world, but it would be better to find a way to address those issues directly with the particular parties involved, like inviting them to Charleston next year for a special panel. This way they can answer for themselves.

"...[T]here are still some major misconceptions about publishers ..."

The publishing panel on the last day consisted of good speakers who presented interesting and important material. The title and the point of view bothered me, however. Call it a blow upon a bruise. Through-

out the conference libraries and vendors were presented as dynamic organizations adapting to the changing world around them with grace and style. This is true, by and large. Publishers, on the other hand, were compared to dinosaurs, big lumbering beasts with small brains, tottering on the brink of extinction because they are too stupid to see that the vegetation they have been feasting on all these years is disappearing. Call me oversensitive, but I didn't find it cute, nor do I find it an accurate portrayal of most publishers today.

Most publishers are looking very closely at the changes that are happening in the industry, and find ourselves in a Catch-22. Delving into electronic publishing, where product development costs are high and success rates are low, could be a faster route to extinction than continuing to publish successful print-based products while we see how this all plays out. On the other hand, doing nothing means you might not act until it is too late. It is very hard to know just exactly what resources to commit at this juncture. Instead of dinosaurs, I compare publishers to the cliff divers in Acapulco — dive at the wrong time and you get creamed.

Many players in the electronic publishing field advise a certain amount of caution. Much of the poor success rate for CD-ROMs is that they have been created so publishers can "do something" as opposed to doing something well. It is important, given the high development costs, that the particular medium adds value to the information. "Shovelware" puts a lot of information together, but does not add value, just bulk. A very wise person at a seminar I attended once said: "You want to be on the cutting edge, not the bleeding edge." The trouble is these days that there is so much blood (or is

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Outsourcing: You Haven't Seen Anything Yet by **Rosann Bazirjian** (Florida State University)

This is a special advertising section on outsourcing! The article focuses on outsourcing as a "powerful tool for business growth" and provides a list of the top five tactical resources for outsourcing, as well as the top five strategic reasons for outsourcing. There are then approximately 40 pages of business

outsourcing arrangements currently in place for companies such as **Papa John's Pizza** and **AT&T**. Although focused on the commercial sector, this was an eye-opening article. See — "Outsourcing: How Industry Leaders are Reshaping the American Corporation," *Fortune*, vol. 132 (8) (Oct. 16, 1995), p. 173-223.

Who Are You Betting On? by **Rosann Bazirjian** (Florida State University)

This article discusses the current state of affairs between cable and telephone companies. Not too long ago, there was talk of mergers and partnerships aimed at creating large digital networks that would bring movies, e-mail, television and computer files into our living rooms. Now, however, we see the opposite occurring. We

see telephone companies and cable television attempting to get into each other's business. **Andrew Kupfer** discusses the pro's and con's for each side, and analyzes some of the obstacles they are both facing. See — **Andrew Kupfer**, "Can Cable Win Its Phone Bet," *Fortune*, vol. 132 (6) (Sept. 18, 1995), p. 175-188.

Newtoniana Collection by **Pamela Rose** (SUNY Buffalo)

The **Dibner Institute for the History of Science and Technology** at MIT and **Babson College** in Wellesley have amalgamated their Newtoniana collections to be permanently housed in **Dibner's Burndy Library**. All the important editions of all of **Isaac Newton's** writings, as well

as his death mask, are under one roof, making it the largest collection of Newton material outside the United Kingdom. See — **Constance Holden**, editor, "Newton Goes to Cambridge," in Random Samples section, *Science*, vol. 270 (Nov. 3, 1995), p. 739.

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it red ink?) that it is hard to tell the difference between the cutting and the bleeding edge.

Libraries are very far more ready to receive and use electronic publications than are the rest of the markets we serve. The critical mass of customer base is not there yet for many of us to push ahead. We continue to watch, and learn, and feel that is an appropriate strategy.

But, I digress, back to Charleston. Not

only were publishers not heard from the podium, they were also not heard from the floor. I simply do not understand why the publishers in attendance by and large did not speak up more often nor ask questions. I would think it was a conspiracy of silence, if it wasn't working against us. Consequently, a number of misconceptions about publishers went unanswered.

One of my colleagues said, "This is a tough conference for publishers," and admitted to not wanting to come back. This is clearly not the answer. Tough or not, the Herculean goals of this conference are cir-

It's on the Web by **Pamela Rose** (SUNY Buffalo)

An entire first-year undergraduate materials science course lives on the web at <http://vims.ncsu.edu>. Developed over five years by **John Russ** and students at **North Carolina State University**, it consists of twenty

online chapters with interactive exercises. See — **Constance Holden**, editor, "Materials Science — Live on the Net," in "Random Samples section," *Science*, vol. 269 (Sept. 29, 1995), p. 1821.

Dell: On The Road Again by **Rosann Bazirjian** (Florida State University)

This article is about a computer prodigy other than **Bill Gates**! It is about **Michael Dell**, and **Dell Computers**. The article discusses possible reasons for the businesses' 1993 decline in sales and their current strategy for success. Dell is now focusing on direct marketing of their computers, rather than retail sales, and concentrating on customizing

computers for its customers via phone and fax through a direct-sales force. This change in strategy, combined with a new group of experienced executives, has set Dell on the path to success. See — **Rahul Jacob**, "The Resurrection of Michael Dell," *Fortune*, vol. 132 (6) (Sept. 18, 1995), p. 117-128.

Lights, Cameras, Action? by **Twyla Racz** (Eastern Michigan University)

The **Library of Congress** is leading the efforts to preserve old films. It is a race against time because both old and new films face disintegration. Therefore, in 1993, the **National Film Preservation Plan** was developed which includes a federally chartered foundation to raise money for preservation. In order to heighten public awareness, the **National Film**

Registry was established which adds 25 films with "cultural, historical or aesthetic significance" each year to its list. In addition, 30 of these films will tour to be seen in public theaters all over the country. See — **James H. Billington**, "The Race to Preserve Old Films," *Civilization*, vol. 2 (6) (Nov/Dec 1995), p. 91.

cumvented by publishers not attending and not speaking up. I agree with **Judy Webster** who said at the close of the conference that there are still tough issues that are being danced around. My experience is that the conference is good enough to take them on. I think it serves everyone best to continue to bring up these issues, come out into the open and discuss them rationally, leaving out the unfair potshots, and giving everyone their chance to be heard.

Who knows, if my parents had done that, perhaps they'd still be married. 🐼