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And They Were There-Reports of Meetings-ALCTS/AS Preconference

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And They Were There

Reports of Meetings — ALCTS/AS Preconference

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ALCTS/AS Preconference — Advancing Acquisitions: Services, Standards and Skills (June 24 and 25, 1999)

Report by Joyce L. Ogburn (Associate Director of Libraries, Resources and Collection Management Services, University of Washington, Box 352900, Seattle WA 98195-2900 phone: 206-685-2889; fax: 206-685-8727) <jlogburn@u.washington.edu>

This institute was the most recent one sponsored by ALCTS on the business of acquisitions. It was structured to offer a choice of concurrent sessions to attendees, ranging from licensing, consortium work with vendors, being an acquisitions ambassador, outsourcing, and tracking staff costs. Additionally, there were three keynote speakers, on whose speeches I will report.

The business of acquisitions opened with Martha Whitaker of Blackwell's Book Services. She opened with comments on the nonsustainability of the current business models of vendors and posited that they need to reinvent themselves. Economics of scale and stretching margins are being achieved with a large vendor and a larger market share. Vendors are consolidating just like consortia are forming. Both limit choices, but clearly larger resources stretch further.

Big changes are needed still. Vendors sell books but give away value-added services (automation, reports, etc.) What are librarians willing to pay for? Blackwell spends $500,000 a year for paper on notification slips while seeing a low rate of return. If this is a valuable service, librarians need to put money into it. She asked, which services should be fast tracked and how should they be paid for? Should vendors supply e-books? Vendors will need to team up with these suppliers and take advantage of their infrastructure for approvals, publisher relations, library relations. Book vendors have to stay relevant, which may include full-text indexing and profiling with e-books. Also, they make preview easier and there are no returns. Blackwell's is talking with Powell's about some kind of service.

Mike Powell of Powell's books followed on the program. He noted that core values still exist in the book business, but customer behavior and expectations are changing. The pace of change is the hardest thing to cope with. Bookselling is the last of the cottage industries. Competition has been ferocious with Barnes and Noble, Borders, and Amazon.com—the casualty rate is high for the small bookstore and their share of the market is dwindling. 52% of books are now continued on page 83

Legally Speaking

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So what does the Microsoft decision mean for the worlds of publishing and librarianship? For many years Windows has been the de facto standard, with many strong adherents among the Macintosh world. Librarians more than anyone else realized the power of the Internet early on, and have invested heavily in Web technology. It is to our benefit to have more operating systems available that will run programs and databases. Although Microsoft claims that there are advantages to standardization, this case really represents an attempt to foster technology that will run on any platform. Once that happens, the price will come down.

As heavy technology users, it is to the benefit of publishers and librarians to be freed from dependence on a single operating system. The time investment necessary to make Windows databases run on the Macintosh is prohibitive, which keeps Mac from being competitive. Computer technology has become the single biggest expenditure in libraries, in some cases overshadowing book budgets. As serial and book prices continue to rise, a decline in the price of computer technology will provide more money for the hard-pressed libraries.

Of course the Microsoft decision is still subject to appeal, but the world of publishing and librarianship should celebrate this decision. Antitrust law is complicated, but benef-

Copyright Questions & Answers

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Endnotes
2 Case at 9.
3 Case at 10.
4 15 USCS § 1
5 15 USCS § 1
6 Case at 22.
7 Case at 22.
8 Case at 11.
9 15 USCS § 2
10 Case at 13.
11 Case at 13.
12 Case at 15.
13 Case at 15.
14 Case at 17.
15 See Case at 15.
18 Case at 18.
19 Case at 25.
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sold in drugstores, KMart, grocery stores and Costco. If the share is too small, bookstores will lose customers and publisher attention. There is the need to find new strategies. What does a small bookstore have to offer over the Internet? Not much since personal service doesn’t translate well over the Internet.

Powell’s innovations are to supply used and new books, paper and hardcover together. Their inventory reflects their decision to focus on breadth. They plan to put 2 million titles online. E-commerce now makes up 15% of Powell’s sales. E-books will become available, loaded onto a reader, easy to use, and clear to read. Seeing, hearing, touch are still powerful means of communication. Books on demand is another growth area. Community roots have not proven to be as important as was once thought. There are now more methods of requests and access: walk-ins, fax, telephone, Internet (which ironically has increased phone use).

Powell concluded by saying that censorship is a challenge, reading is important, and that words still matter.

Ross Atkinson of Cornell University delivered the last keynote speech entitled: “Managing Resources Transfer: Some Suggestions for the Recreation of Acquisitions.” As usual, he had profound and provocative observations. He started with the premise that the library’s role is to reduce time to access information and to provide it in the right time frame. Acquisitions’ role is to provide confirmation and identification, location of material and importation into the library.

He argued that the skills required are economic, political, negotiation, ethical. In his view, acquisitions librarians should be honest brokers and representatives to external parties. In the transition from traditional to digital, the hybrid library will not last long with digital formats prevailing. He sees this as a good thing that will bring value to the user.

Atkinson noted that transition is not easy and service professions tend to be reactive. Librarians should move past prediction and get to where we want to be by designing the future. The library profession should take a position and espouse its ideologies, as we will need ideology in our new environment and should emphasize that which distinguishes librarianship.

He posited that most of us are agents and that when resources are scarce, there is a competition for resources and agents help obtain resources. They also compete. Agents have clients, but can also contract with each other. Agents can quickly disintermediate a whole range of intermediaries.

The online world shrinks the space between writers and readers and leaves less room for intermediaries, and as Atkinson said they will “eat or be eaten.” Librarians feel that the first course on the menu should be a few large science publishers, who don’t add enough value to reconcile with their high prices. Librarians should step in and take on some of the dissemination of scholarly information, making sure it is peer reviewed and certified. Otherwise, publications may go around libraries if economically viable. However, librarians don’t know what it takes to publish and the costs involved.

Publication involves information exchange and content. People publish to tell other people about themselves and to draw attention to the writer. Someone needs to bring the writer to the reader’s attention. Information chaos is a show stopper, so librarians should draw attention in a normative fashion and prescribe what to read.

He asked, in this environment what needs to be shifted? On a grand scale functions like collection development and selection may actually be an impediment. A new model may be to get the user to the resources and let them choose. Cataloging should be normative, not descriptive and acquisitions should identify, locate, and import information.

Hypermediation is occurring more than ever before. Writers and readers will do more, but mediators will do more also. The concept of anything, anywhere, any time, any place needs a system in place. Examine the complexity of information transfer and content itself: Current information objects are complex, made up of documents, parts of documents, collections of documents, and databases—and many have contracts for use. Someone has to negotiate the process. Librarians need to raise debates to an abstract level to have concepts

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to move through the transition. There are spatial and temporal sides and acquisitions has a role in moving objects in this environment. The boundary is now the workstation, not the building.

He also predicted we will eventually have large warehouses of paper libraries and we may be forced to share resources. We will have to be cheaper and need to negotiate. Digital archiving is a big job with technical and political sides. Technical problems are easy compared to political problems which include ownership of publications by publishers. Publishers don’t want to archive these works, but they still want to own them. We need to negotiate transfer back to the academy.

According to Atkinson, the academy is about knowledge production and requires information sources to support it by bringing subjects and objects together. More can be communicated orally than graphically. He predicted that the dominance of graphical (written) information will decline and give rise to multimedia, with voice-activated computers and computers that talk back. It has been said, he noted, that ours is the last generation that will know how to type.

However, the library may be a place where people come together to work with information objects and to provide personal interaction. In the future, the line between classroom and library will get small. Distance learning involves both instruction and information objects; their conveyance includes instruction and publication. Atkinson asked a series of questions: Who does this? Do they need to be on site? Should librarians perform distant information services? What is best for the user? Perhaps we should get out of the way? And if not, why? He further noted that users are our focus and we work for them, whereas companies work for shareholders and for themselves.

He argues that whoever owns information controls access. How the owners use technology to control access depends on their clientele. Why doesn’t the academy take back publishing (i.e. ownership and control)? Publishers are competitors with universities; however, universities see their competitors as only each other. Libraries are used as leverage in this competition. We should limit areas where institutions compete and information access should not be one of those areas. Everyone needs access: the competition should be in how information is used.

There needs to be a shift from institutions to the discipline, and accordingly, there needs to be a designated channel which is certified and discipline-based. Librarians are needed to bring order. Atkinson thought that it is less important that we agree with his position than that we have a position, a vision, and work actively toward it.

He ended with the upbeat note that it is a privilege to be a librarian now; it’s our turn and a special time. Librarians understand the key issues for transition and have the right ideologies. It’s time to stand up and pull together to put together services and open access to materials.