

Report from ALA Annual Conference 2006

Lincoln Trail Libraries System
July 17, 2006

Pat Boze

What a privilege to return to New Orleans. ALA made the right decision in keeping the convention in New Orleans this year. Everyone we met—from bus drivers and cabbies to hotel service workers to the mayor—said, “Thank you for coming to our town. We are so glad you’re here.” Although the downtown and French Quarter areas have made an amazing comeback, the few forays we made into the rest of the town brought sadness and an overwhelming feeling of the huge amount of work that must still be done to save this jewel of a city.

For me, the highlight of this convention was the opportunity to volunteer at a branch of the New Orleans Public Library for a day. The Cita Hubbell Branch (Algiers) suffered wind/hurricane damage and had not been opened for 9 months. The task given to the volunteer group was to clean up the outside grounds, remove dead plants, plant new ones, and paint the metal fence that encompassed the grounds. Although the day was hot and humid, the group stuck it out for 8 hours and finished the task. The staff and volunteers of the branch were so gracious and grateful for the help given and invited us all to come back.

After the fun of physical and rewarding work, the rest of the conference was also productive and thought-provoking. I attended sessions on “empowering” school libraries and connecting with kids and heard debates about the future of PAC’s and who controls the future of “searching.” Another session focused on the growth in individual publishing on the web and how people are creating a “personal learning network” that allows individuals to identify experts all over the world and communicate with those experts via the Internet. Another session featured scientists (NASA, NSF) who are grappling with the organization of vast amounts of information that is being produced in their disciplines. Another interesting session focused on the power of word of mouth marketing and how libraries need to tap into that phenomenon. Legislative sessions brought up some of the issues that are being debated on the national level, including the concept of “net neutrality” and copyright issues related to the move to digital television broadcasts.

Amanda McKay

As a first-time Annual Conference attendee, my experience was a bit overwhelming, but overall, wonderful. I began my ALA conference experience by volunteering along with 900 other attendees. I traveled with 30 other folks to the Algiers Branch of the New Orleans Public Library to sort donated books.

I mainly attended PR and Marketing track programs, including: *Get Strategic: Coordinate Public Relations and Marketing to Reach Your Goals*, *PR Forum: Marketing is Everyone’s Job @ Your Library*, and the Swap and Shop: Great PR Exposed! The most important things I learned were to keep the marketing message simple and consistent throughout the campaign and the organization.

I also attended several other programs, mainly from the Diversity track. These included: *The Silent Majority? Identifying Hidden Users and the Underserved*, *Good to Great: How to Rethink, Reconfigure, and Revitalize Your Library into Greatness!*, *Out of the Ordinary: Library Partnerships That Build Communities*, *Out of the Closet and into the Library: Access to Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Materials for Teens*, and *Mentoring in the Millennium: New Views, New Climate, and New Actions*. I was especially interested in the mentoring program as it spoke specifically about mentoring diverse librarians and encouraging more diversity in the profession.

Combining the heat and the mile-long convention center had the potential to take it’s toll, but all told, it was a fantastic experience that I participated in.

Joe Sciacca

The emotional highlight of this year's conference for me was the opportunity to volunteer along with 900 other conference attendees as part of the "Libraries Build Communities" project to help New Orleans libraries recover from the devastation of last year's hurricane. Along with LTLS Consultants Amanda McKay and Randi Weiss, I volunteered to help sort through thousands of donated books at the Algiers Branch of the New Orleans Public Library. The "Libraries Build Communities" effort included similar volunteer work at several other storm-damaged libraries, as well as a number of non-library projects including Habitat For Humanity and Operation Helping Hands. Photographs of our day are posted on the LTLS web site at www.lincolntrail.info/photoalbum.html. Many of us were surprised at how little rebuilding has taken place so many months after the disaster.

The sense that the nation has moved on and New Orleans has been forgotten was the theme of a moving speech by Anderson Cooper, CNN Anchor and author of "Dispatches From the Edge" on his career covering political and natural disasters. Cooper has made a commitment to doing what he can to keep the ongoing disaster in the public eye. Overcome by emotion several times during his speech as he recounted heartbreaking stories he witnessed during the aftermath of the hurricane, it was clear he has a deep connection to the New Orleans story. Cooper broadcast his nightly show live from New Orleans following his ALA appearance and has promised to return for future stories on the progress towards rebuilding the city.

Another conference highlight was the Diversity Fair. This was the 9th annual Diversity Fair presented by ALA's Office of Literacy and Outreach Services (OLOS) and sponsored by DEMCO. The fair highlights innovative projects focusing on outreach to diverse communities. The LTLS PolyTalk project presented a display of the PolyTalk Library Interpreters Network project and was awarded the 3rd place prize. First prize was awarded to the Ohio Literacy Research Center, and second prize was awarded to the Lexington Public Library. LTLS and the other award winners donated their prizes to the New Orleans Public Library.

Top Tech Trends is an annual feature of the ALA conference. It is a simple concept. Get a panel of "experts" to opine on the top trends in the expanding world of technology. The panelist report on what trends have been hot during the past year and make predictions about new technology ideas that may not yet be on everyone's radar screen. For librarians that don't want to "miss the boat," or who want to confirm their own observations, it is a popular way to feel like you are keeping up. The idea that one can keep up with current trends may just be an illusion, but Top Tech Trends plays to a packed room every year.

It is also important to realize that the "experts" sometimes disagree, and sometimes get it wrong. In past years, panelists cheered the advent of metasearch tools, and this year one panelist said metasearch may be fading because of the inability to de-duplicate search results retrieved from multiple data sources, while another said federated searching remains important despite its problems because users want to find information from multiple sources.

So, without any attempt to evaluate the validity of the predictions, here is a summary of the high points from this year's Top Tech Trends:

Walt Crawford was the moderator this year, and panelists included Andrew Pace, Karen Schneider, Eric Lease Morgan, Tom Wilson, Roy Tenant, Clifford Lynch and Marshall Breeding.

Some of the trends discussed include the notion of enabling content owners and the development by OCLC and RLG of an alternative online catalog front-end called RedLightGreen. Faceted navigation, from Endeca and other providers, is increasing in significance as developers work on ways to manipulate search results and enrich the display options available to users. With faceted navigation, search results can be narrowed by the user in new ways. For example, results for a search for Shakespeare's "Hamlet" in a catalog with faceted navigation might include links that allow the user to select just the hits published within a certain date span, giving the user an easier way to drill down in a large set of hits for the specific items of interest.

Increasingly web content is moving away from the traditional model of static HTML pages. Content is stored in databases and inserted into web pages, or it is generated by blog software. Wiki content is user-editable. As a result, the loss of ability to preserve current web content is a troubling trend for the future.

VOIP, or Voice over IP, is a technology that has the potential to supplant email as the default Internet communication mode. If free worldwide IP telephony becomes ubiquitous, the major issue of email abuse will be reduced because we will rely less on email for critical communications.

There is a growing discontent with the current state of library catalogs from a user experience perspective. Users are increasingly exposed to web-based search interfaces, such as Google and others. When compared to these interfaces, many feel that the user experience with most library catalogs is wanting. The classic example given to represent this idea is the spell checking ability of search engines like Google. Type in “elefint” and Google helpfully suggests, “Did you mean “elephant”? Do the same in most library catalogs and you get the standard “No Results” message.

Social networking is an important trend that enables user involvement at higher levels and facilitates creating communities of users that share interests. Panelists recommended thinking broadly. When user tagging of library bibliographic records becomes more widespread, tag WorldCat instead of the local catalog.

The rise of “microcommunities” is a related trend. The Internet allows people with highly narrow interests to find others in the same niche. This relates to the “Long Tail” concept in which libraries are well suited to meet highly specific niche interests; however, one aspect of microcommunities is that they are geographically dispersed, and libraries tend to define their users by strict geographic boundaries.

There is a feeling that cataloging that is “good enough,” as opposed to complete, may be good enough for discovery of items in library catalogs.

This concept is similar to another idea that “everything is an interim solution,” meaning that there will always be new challenges and that we shouldn’t be seeking perfect solutions, and that today’s new products will be supplanted by something we may not even be able to envision today.

Loss of control: libraries are no longer the landlords of the information space that they once were.

Increase in managed open source services: open source software isn’t completely free. Many libraries do not have highly technical staff expertise. This creates a growing market for companies offering value-added installation, updating and management services to libraries wanting to use open source products.

Panelists were asked how they spot trends and how they keep up with the fast-moving technology landscape. Several ideas mentioned include use of Microsoft’s new “Stuff I’ve Seen” desktop tool for Windows that creates a single searchable index combining all the user’s Outlook E-mail, all files in the “My Documents” folder, and the entire Internet browser cache. The concept is to make it easy to go back and find something you have seen before, and recognizes that most people use multiple tools interchangeably to gather information. Other ideas for keeping up-to-date include subscribing to listservs in areas of interest. One that was mentioned for keeping up with the lively discussion on the future of the library catalog is NGC4LIB (<http://dewey.library.nd.edu/mailling-lists/ngc4lib/>). Other ideas included reading beyond traditional library publications and looking for patterns in sources like the Wall Street Journal, Fast Company, Business 2.0, and others.

A listing of the 2006 Top Technology Trends is not yet on the LITA web site; however, a summary of technology trends dating back to 1999 is available at <http://www.lita.org/ala/lita/litaresources/toptechtrends/toptechnology.htm>.

Randi Weiss

Because my project, PolyTalk, is in the realm of diversity, I attended several programs with that focus. *U.S. Immigration: Navigating the System @ Your Library* featured speakers from the newly restructured U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services office. The speakers pointed out several electronic and print materials to help librarians assist patrons with immigration questions. These resources can be found on the USCIS Web site: www.uscis.gov. A librarian on the panel talked about how her library has integrated immigration assistance into adult programming with great success. *How My Parents Learned to Eat: Dim Sum, Fry Bread, Collard Greens, and Tacos in the Library* featured a panel of librarians from Nevada and New Jersey. The two libraries had partnered to implement meaningful diversity programs in their libraries. Participants left the session with a “cookbook” full of programming ideas. Two of the three John Does from Connecticut shared their experiences from the audience of the *When the Feds Come A-Knocking: The Reauthorization of the USA Patriot Act* program. A librarian from Appalachia spoke about the importance of maintaining an open library in the *Intellectual Freedom*

in Rural Libraries: How to Keep the Library for Everyone program. I also heard a panel of juvenile hall and prison librarians speak about the challenges of providing library services to their patrons in *Literacy 360: Literacy Outreach Programs to At-Risk Populations*. *Swap and Shop: Great PR Exposed* gave me some great ideas about how to effectively publicize PolyTalk.

The slate of special programs at the ALA conference was really impressive. Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright related a story of a reporter in Europe who asked her to pose for a picture with a stuffed peace pigeon. When she began to laugh, the reporter reprimanded her saying that a peace pigeon was serious business. Mary Chapin Carpenter was wonderful at the *ALA/ProQuest Scholarship and Library Relief Event*, despite the fact that U.S. Air lost all three of her guitars. First Lady Laura Bush spoke at the *School Libraries Work: Rebuilding for Learning* town hall meeting. And, Anderson Cooper gave a moving talk about remembering the hurricane victims at the *PLA President's Program*.

In addition, several LTLS staffers participated in volunteer efforts to rebuild the New Orleans Public Library. Amanda McKay, Joe Sciacca, and I sorted books at the Algiers Branch of the New Orleans Public Library. The entire library collection was lost to mold after Hurricane Katrina. Our group of 32 volunteers sorted through some of the 250,000 items that had been donated to the library from around the country.

The main reason I attended ALA was to present PolyTalk at the ALA Office for Literacy & Outreach Services' 9th Annual Diversity Fair sponsored by DEMCO, Inc. PolyTalk took third place in the Fair, which was themed, "Celebrating Examples of Diversity in Adult and Family Literacy Services in Libraries." All of the winners donated their gift certificates, totaling \$750, to the New Orleans Public Library.