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Vertigo, and a Void

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Conference keynote speakers were the well-rounded political journalist **Gwen Iffel** (opening session) and **WSJ** technology writer, **Walter Mossberg** (closing session in which the speaker boldly talked about the “Soviet ministries” monopolizing technology industries and the simple fact that “The Internet is a grid...into which a great number of devices will be plugged — and people will take from it whatever they need”). **INFO-EXPO** (exhibit hall) hours were generous (there were exhibitors from North America, Europe and even China). Evening receptions and tours took attendees to the **Baltimore Aquarium**, **Westminster Hall** (where **Edgar Allan Poe** is buried), and to various libraries from Baltimore as far as Washington, D.C.

The proximity of the meeting to Washington, D.C. and major cities in the Northeast ensured highly qualified speakers from government, academic, trade, publishing and other sectors. As usual, attendees had many choices of sessions to attend (and new catch phrases to learn) on diverse topics: digitization, open access (one session was sponsored by the new

SLA Government Information Division), **RSS** and collaborative applications, millennials (and **Wake Forest University Library’s** involvement with avatars, got game, instant messaging...), negative clinical trial results (reasons they aren’t published and workaround solutions to find information), ontologies, taxonomies & search, touch down suites (digital and physical, as defined by **Johns Hopkins University** libraries), content buying business models, systems that are “vendor neutral” or even “agnostic,” competencies, new leadership challenges.

There are quite a few interesting comments and insights (particularly on sessions one might not have attended) on the **SLA** blog site, http://slablogger.typepad.com/sla_2006_conference_blog/. Among the conference impressions one heard in talking to those trying to choose sessions to attend: “Why was there no sound recording (of sessions)?” A number of the **SLA** division-sponsored sessions plan to or already have links to presentations on their Websites. Post-conference impressions? One **SLA** blogger, **Jill Hurst-Wahl**, on June 21, 2006 wrote: “Well, the conference is over and everyone is probably settling back into work, sifting through piles of email, and if you’re like me, feeling like the conference was ages ago al-

ready. With the announcement that **Scott Adams** will be a keynote speaker at next year’s conference, I am very excited for **Denver 2007!** It sounds as if they’ve got lots of exciting sessions in the planning stages, including two that really captured my attention: “The Science of Beer” and “Vendor Speed Dating!” Only 350-odd days to go!”

The **SLA 2006 Annual Conference** was lively and diverse, addressing the various specialties of attendees who work in many types of professional arenas. Many presentations were professionally serious, while others featured at least playful or tongue-in-cheek titles or descriptions. It would be interesting to find out why several continuing education sessions cancelled — was it a case of presenter cancellations or outdated themes and topics that weren’t able to draw the registrations hoped for and expected? Although **SLA** overseas members have other conference choices, a number of international conference attendees travelled great distances (and probably some had to expend personal funds). It can be concluded that **SLA Conference** programming still fits the bill and conference registration remains solid and healthy. The global “village” may be more technological, but in-person attendance at conferences still seems to be a professional priority. 🐘

Little Red Herrings — Vertigo, and a Void

by **Mark Y. Herring** (Dean of Library Services, Dacus Library, Winthrop University) <herringm@winthrop.edu>

Recently an acquaintance sent me the *Friends* newsletter from the **University of Massachusetts at Amherst (UMA)**. As the budget came to its close last year, the budget line called “**Education and Reference Materials**” (**ERM**), served to fund the 29 public academic libraries in Massachusetts. It supplements the budget lines at individual universities. The **ERM** line showed a **64% reduction, from \$14 million to \$5 million**.

What makes this a story worth retelling is that from these funds come library materials, not equipment or salaries. In other words, this is the budget line that helps to supply the lifeblood of any library: books, serials, periodicals, and research databases. **UMA’s** share of the cut for the year was \$3 million, reducing the overall acquisition budget for that library by 56%! Misery loves company so the entire state of Massachusetts should have been overjoyed. It sounds all too familiar. Budgets at states all over the country have attenuated state support of higher education.

As any librarian knows, a reduction of this size means having to make hard decisions about people and materials, about hours and services. For **UMA** it meant proposing to sell off rare books to make up the difference. In states closer to home, North Carolina and Tennessee, for example, libraries of all types are reducing, curtailing, contracting, and, in some cases, closing because of tight budgets.



These budget cuts are critical because larger libraries, particularly those that are classified as research, may be one of a half dozen institutions holding certain journals. Reducing that number means reducing the number of places where that title may be found. Not only do such cuts hamstring the research process, but buying patterns in libraries are such that what you put off this year will likely cost you twice as much next year. Furthermore, because libraries purchase materials that are revised often, one is faced with buying not one, but two or three back years when the budget situation returns to normal.

Some readers are doubtless thinking, “What about the Internet? Surely that has reduced costs.” I would be the last to argue that the Internet is not helpful. But just like the prediction thirty years ago that microform was going to make every library the size of a shoe box, so also the Internet has not turned out to be the panacea everyone once thought. Since I have harangued on this theme more than once, I’ll limit my remarks to three points.

First, the Internet, while containing much information, has only a fraction of the overall total: about 20% of all journals, and less than 5% of all books. Bear in mind that access to most books and journals require a steep admission price. Second, the reliable, corroborated research on the Internet — for example, the very kind of information college students are really looking for — is not free by a long shot. It is, in

fact, very expensive. Third, because there is no quality control on the Internet, what information is available is a mixed bag of truth, verisimilitude, outright lies and the most venomous hatred known to man (and I haven’t even mentioned pornography, the Web’s chief content). Anyone can put up a Website on any topic. Ignorance of the subject matter is no barrier. With more than eight billion pages on the ‘net, it appears we are witnessing the triumph of narcissism over information.

Scores of others reasons exist why the Internet is no substitute for a library. It’s also why when you think of good, local causes, you should consider the local libraries in your community. Obviously, I have the name of a good library in mind, but all of us who work in libraries share in this matter of budgets, and all of us need financial help. Libraries have acted as our intellectual museums, those places where the *best* ideas of human creativity and ingenuity are forever preserved for all present and future generations. But we cannot preserve all this information single-handedly.

Truisms are generally true: you don’t always know what you’ve got ‘till it’s gone. Or as **Yeats** is said to have put it, “Things reveal themselves in their passing.” Libraries may appear to some as anachronisms, historical oddities, in our fast-food, sound-bite, cell phone world. But if they disappear, in part or in whole, the subsequent vacuum will leave a void so wide and deep only vertigo will ensue. Don’t let this happen here. Support your local libraries with more than words! 🐘