

**Report: ACRL Conference**  
Baltimore, MD, March 29-April 1, 2007

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**The millennials are coming! The millennials are coming!**

The official theme of the 2007 ACRL National Conference—"Sailing into the Future—Charting Our Destiny"—has the carefully-calibrated fuzziness of a craftily-wrought advertising slogan: since it doesn't really signify much of anything in and of itself, there's ample room for conference presenters and participants to interpret it according to their own interests and proclivities. Thus I'm sure librarians with perspectives and responsibilities differing from mine—catalogers, upper-level managers, professionals with decades of experience, etc.—in all probability left Baltimore with widely varying senses of what the conference was about. But for me—as a young librarian with both professional and personal interest in the roles that internet technologies are playing in libraries—the conference's unofficial, but omnipresent and absolutely inescapable theme revolved around academic librarians' struggles to adjust to the rapidly changing expectations of students in the context of new and evolving technologies. Call them what you will—"Genration Y," "millennials," or even "screenagers" (as some conference presenters actually for some reason did)—but by any name, the current generation of college students is posing serious challenges to academic librarians' ability to keep up with the technologies, expectations, habits and mindsets associated with the information-saturated, perpetually-connected 21<sup>st</sup>-century lives of the typical millennial.

At each and every one of the sessions that I attended at ACRL—ostensibly about everything from reference to web design to copyright law—presenters and panelists simply could not avoid the topic of how academic libraries ought to respond to millennial students. Though everyone seemed to agree that there was, indeed, some kind of challenge or a problem here, there did not appear to be any kind of broad consensus on solutions. A number of ACRL presenters participated in the sport—currently quite popular in academia—of bashing millennials as vain, selfish, and disengaged, and suggested that librarians ought to man the barricades in order to defend our traditional role as information gatekeepers, apparently fearing that Western Civilization might otherwise collapse into a state of Wikipediaesque information chaos. Other presenters bemoaned libraries' inability to adequately compete with the resources and brainpower that are fueling the success of well-funded corporations like Google. Still others took libraries to task for failing to fully adapt to the internet age information climate, and argued that libraries ought to meet students on their own terms in and their own world—even if that might mean descending from the comfortable familiarity of the ivory tower and into the uncertainty and unpredictability of the constantly shifting internet information world.

**Transvestitism and libraries**

So: who's right about all of this? Where are libraries headed, and where *should* they be headed? Or does it even matter—are we doomed to obsolescence in the face of

rapid technological change? Improbably enough, I think we can look to our keynote speaker for answers to this question. However impractical John Waters' specific advice (such as having librarians disrobe at unpredictable intervals in order to improve gate counts) may have been, I think there's a lesson to be learned from both the tone and the broader message of his address. Waters made no attempt to censor the content or the delivery of his talk: instead, he sought to frankly and quite explicitly (and also, of course, humorously) speak the truth as he understands it about the people and the city that he knows and loves—however transgressive of cultural or social norms it might be to do so. Much of what Waters talked about was shocking and surprising: a frontal assault on the conventional values and beliefs that many people hold unthinkingly.

I suspect librarians would do well to pay close attention to this aspect of Waters' address. When millennial students share library research tips via MySpace pages, or learn the jargon of a discipline from a Wikipedia article, they are engaged in transgressing the conventions and standards practice of the library world—which would have librarians and/or other authorities (professors, reference works, etc.) serving as the intermediaries in the information search process. But should we fear this kind of transgression? I suspect not—or at least not any more than we might fear, say, the kind of transgression often featured in Waters' films, in which people who do not conform to social norms (such as frequent Waters star Divine, a three-hundred-pound transvestite) engage in highly unconventional activities, often with the explicit purpose of challenging staid and unthinking orthodoxies. Probably librarians would do better to pause in our denunciations of the ways in which contemporary information culture violates our values and norms for at least long enough to ask *why* our students might feel the need to transgress our conventions and standards--why is it that they prefer Wikipedia over a reference encyclopedia? Why would they rather listen to a friend than a librarian? And further, most likely we'd also be better served by carefully considering our answers, and coming up with something a bit more sensitive and thoughtful than a mere dismissal of our current students as unusually selfish and disengaged. Perhaps we ought to go to greater lengths to learn from their unique experiences and proclivities, and to understand how we might serve them better by operating in the information world they've grown up with. I'm not saying librarians should all begin endorsing Wikipedia as the gold standard, or that we ought to devote our workdays to Twittering real-time accounts of our book orders, or begin updating our MySpace profiles any time we leave our desk to answer a reference question. But perhaps there are ways to bridge the empathetic and informational gaps between millennial students and academic librarians that do not involve the wholesale rejection of the viewpoints of one group or another. Waters, after all, undoubtedly does not expect that everyone who watches his films will want to become three-hundred-pound transvestites; rather, he most likely hopes that his viewers will come to question their assumptions about normative dress and behavior, and that they might gain some appreciation of the fact that there might well be perfectly legitimate non-normative ways of looking at and living in the world.

### **Doing things that just aren't done**

Fortunately, Waters was not by any means the only speaker at ACRL harboring iconoclastic intentions. For example, during the panel discussion titled, "The Reference Question—Where Has Reference Been, Where Is Reference Going," Georgia Institute of

Technology librarian Brian Matthews suggested that libraries ought to “burn the reference desk,” and that librarians should explore ways of meeting students in their own world, particularly via social networking sites. Though we didn’t incinerate our reference desk here at North Central, we have recently combined it with our circulation desk and moved reference librarians into an “on-call” status—an experiment which has been fairly successful thus far. Matthews’ talk convinced me that we ought to go further here, and begin expanding our virtual reference presence beyond email and into chat and social networking services. Matthews’ statements have proven controversial: writing in *The Chronicle of Education* on April 20, Scott Carlson took Matthews to task for both the substance and the tone of his talk during the course of offering a defense for more conventional reference service. I’m not sure that either Carlson or Matthews are entirely correct about this, and I suspect that there’s probably a workable middle path somewhere between Matthews’ unabashed and unrestrained iconoclasm and the traditionalism that Carlson seems to be advocating in his article. But it’s clear that Matthews’ challenge to convention and received wisdom has struck a nerve, and I think it would definitely be a good idea to carefully examine our assumptions about reference service without falling back on traditional ideas and practices by default.

During the course of their presentation, “Reinventing Library Services for Undergraduates: Strategies for Reaching Millennial Students,” several librarians from the undergraduate library of the University of Illinois offered a similarly aggressively unconventional approach to offering library services. The panelists argued that librarians “must say yes” and be willing to experiment, and must not reject ideas for being unconventional, untried, or potentially problematic. They advocated that libraries should instead aspire to a state of “continuous change,” and that librarians ought to “do things that just aren’t done” as a matter of everyday practice. To this end, the U of I undergraduate library has established an extensive (and highly successful) presence on social networking sites, has combined their service desks, has begun collecting graphic novels and video games, and has worked hard to make their library building spaces comfortable for and their staff accessible to students. The panelists noted that not all of their experiments have worked, but that many others had been enormously successful, and that if they’d remained content with conventional practices out of habit, fear, or ignorance, none of their new initiatives ever would have gotten off the ground.