

Report: ALA Annual Conference 2005 / Ryan Williams / Information Services Librarian /North Central College

Thanks to the generosity of LIBRAS, I had the opportunity to attend the 2005 ALA Annual Conference this June. It was my first time at ALA, and I found the experience satisfying and worthwhile, as well as somewhat overwhelming in its variety and sheer immensity. In addition to a few valuable hours spent wandering through the exhibits, I caught a number of conference sessions, and I've outlined some highlights below.

"Do You Trust Your IT Staff? Do They Trust You?" (RUSA MARS)

This session, subtitled "A Dialogue," kicked off my ALA experience with an engaging conversation between librarians and IT staff on the topic of communication between the two groups. All of the session's presenters agreed that if librarians and IT staff both look at library technology as a means toward the end of providing service for users, they'll be better able to communicate with one another in the process of working toward mutually-held goals. It's a mistake, the panelists contended, to conceive of library computers and networks as being "owned" or controlled by librarians or IT staff; rather, communication and patron needs are better served by viewing library technology as existing for the purposes of the users.

Instruction Section Orientation (ACRL)

I'm an Instruction Section member, but since I felt quite unfamiliar with the structure and operations of the ALA's sections and committees, I decided to drop by the Instruction Section's orientation session to see what I might learn about the section and its activities. Through conversation with section members and committee heads, I picked up a lot of information about the section's activities, and also about how I might get involved.

Open General Session: Senator Barack Obama

It was a privilege to be among the thousands of librarians in the crowd that turned out to hear Senator Obama's address on Saturday night—I find his idealism, sincerity and deep commitment to the value of education immensely appealing. It was also good to hear him take a strong stand in opposition to those provisions of the USA PATRIOT Act which interfere with privacy rights and civil liberties. Here's hoping Obama is able to put some of his ideals into practice during his tenure in the Senate.

"The Googleization of Everything: A Threat to the Information Commons" (ALA-SRRT/ALA-OITP)

I attended this session mostly with the hope of hearing a viewpoint to counterbalance what I'd be likely to hear at the Google 5 session scheduled for Monday (see below), but I wasn't in the least bit disappointed to discover that the session's speaker, Siva Vaidhyanathan, was one of my favorite "copyleft" activists, and that he did not intend to offer a one-dimensionally critical portrait of Google. What Vaidhyanathan did do was perceptively explore several ways in which Google Print project might influence the shape of the future of copyright law, fair use and the public domain. Vaidhyanathan's talk was mostly speculative (at least in part because it was held before Supreme Court handed down its decision on the Grokster case), but addressed a number of topics that I find of great interest, and left me even more eager to attend Monday's Google-related session.

"Fighting the Good Fight: Authors on the First Amendment" (AFL-FOLUSA)

Though I came mostly to hear Cass Sunstein, who didn't show up, I still got a great deal out of this session (not the least of which being a stack of free copies of books authored by the session's panelists). Prominent First Amendment lawyer Floyd Abrams gave a captivating talk about his involvement in the Pentagon Papers case, and Victor Navasky, the publisher of the *Nation*, discussed the various conflicts of interest that come about when journalists get tangled up in First Amendment court cases themselves. And, much in the same way it was interesting to hear Vaidhyanathan discuss the Web and copyright in the context of the impending Grokster decision, it was likewise interesting to hear the opinions of all of this session's panelists on the case involving the *New York Times'* Judith Miller, which lent the session a feel of immediacy and importance.

"What Makes a Reference Work a Classic?" (ALA-PUBLISHING)

This distinguished panel of librarians offered a stimulating discussion of what makes a reference work valuable, and each had different (and sometimes contradictory) takes on the topic. This session struck me as somewhat backward-looking, as for the most part "work" was discussed as if it meant "book." For this reason, I found the later portions of the session, in which the panelists explored the ways in which electronic reference resources and librarians' increasing reliance on electronic sources for ready reference to be of substantially greater interest.

"Google and Libraries: What's in Store for Google Print and Google Scholar" (LITA)

As far as information access goes, Google has already changed pretty much everything, and it was the contention of this session's panelists (Adam Smith of Google and representatives of each of the five libraries involved in the Google Print project) that the Google Print project will reshape the ways in which librarians, scholars and the general public access information in dramatic ways. As for specifics—well, they didn't have any, really: none of the panelists seemed to feel very comfortable making predictions about exactly where their wildly ambitious project might lead them (and the rest of the world along with them). This probably didn't do much to appease the fears of so-called "Google resisters" in the packed ballroom that afternoon, but I found the panelists' enthusiasm infectious, and was thrilled to hear the vision that they did feel confident enough to articulate (even if they shared few details): one of a world in which deep access to the incredibly rich, varied and wonderful resources of libraries like those of Harvard, Stanford and Oxford is available to scholars—and to everyone else—regardless of geography and income. Libraries will necessarily be changed by this revolution in information access, and it's reasonable that librarians fear this change, and it's important, I think, that we use our specialized knowledge and professional expertise to evaluate and make the best of the changes that Google is bringing about. But Google's mission (at least as articulated by Adam Smith and the panelists at ALA) is very much compatible with the mission of libraries, and it would be extremely foolish of librarians to reject the unprecedented opportunities Google is offering—such as bringing centuries of human knowledge out from the depths of sometimes inaccessible book stacks and onto the desktops of everyone on the planet. Very possibly the library of twenty years from now will be vastly different from what we know today, and the work of librarians will likewise be dramatically altered, but this session fed my hopes that those changes very possibly will allow libraries to fulfill their fundamental mission of providing information access in ways that we wouldn't even have been able to dream of just a few years ago.