

Report: LITA 2005 National Forum, “The Ubiquitous Web: Personalization, Portability and Online Collaboration,” September 29-October 2, 2005

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This past September I was among the small horde of laptop-wielding eggheads who happily descended upon Silicon Valley for the LITA National Forum, where we listened to numerous breathlessly enthusiastic accounts of the latest and greatest web trends for libraries. Throughout the conference I heard the clacking of keys as participants blogged their experiences from moment to moment so that their colleagues back on the farm wouldn't fall behind on the hot topics of discussion. Conference attendees seemed particularly excited about the promise of RSS and related technologies, and I attended multiple sessions during which presenters highlighted ways in which libraries (and even database vendors) are beginning to use RSS feeds to deliver content to their users and create more dynamic, robust and interesting websites. I also caught a valuable session disclosing preliminary research on user behavior and preferences with respect to federated search engines, and another engaging talk on web tutorials in libraries.

It would have been easy to leave the LITA Forum feeling caught up in the romance of limitless geeky web possibilities, convinced that each fresh tweak of a code doodad would bring us all one step closer to some vaguely-defined technophile utopia. But there was a definite undercurrent of uneasiness roiling underneath the conference's overt techie optimism—and this was particularly apparent in the keynote addresses, which all raised doubts about the wisdom of the directions in which libraries are taking (or being taken by) web technology. As a general rule, eggheads are far more concerned with tweaking those doodads than with troublesome questions like, “Why *should* we tweak that doodad?” and “How will people be affected if we *do* tweak that doodad?”—and I, for one, certainly came into the LITA Forum expecting lots of tech tips and not much of anything in the way of soul searching. But none of the LITA Forum keynote speakers (Roy Tennant, danah boyd, Michael Gorman and David Levy) were particularly interested in nuts and bolts: rather, they each prodded at the techie librarian crowd, presenting unpleasant ideas and challenging the assumptions of both the tech world and the library world. Which isn't to say that they agreed with one another much at all: Gorman and Tennant made strikingly different cases for maintaining old-fashioned library values in the age of the web, while boyd argued for a thoughtful library embrace of the web's democratizing powers, and Levy suggested that we all ought to pull back from the lot of it and give ourselves some time to breathe and think. I found this undercurrent of

debate stimulating and fascinating, and I think our profession needs to do a great deal more of this kind of soul-searching than it typically engages in.

Tennant had the opening keynote, and he spoke about what he termed “Googlezon” as a threat to libraries. The appeal of Google, Amazon, etc., is tremendously powerful to the general public, and Tennant expressed concern that libraries were losing ground to corporate interests in the hearts and minds of our patrons. People value the awe-inspiring speed and convenience of Googlezon so much that they’re none too worried about accuracy, reliability, preservation of materials, quality, and so on. Meanwhile, though, no one’s asking questions about Google’s crazy growth in wealth and power—from nonexistence to cultural dominance and \$500 shares of stock in well under a decade. Tennant expressed the fear that libraries are surrendering their roles as cultural gatekeepers to search engines and their ilk, and further that we can’t count on Google’s values to match those of the library community. Trust Google and its competitors too far, and we might wake up one morning with books unreadable to ordinary people because they’re locked behind subscription walls, and all information everywhere being sold for corporate profit, and with no one to point the public in the direction of resources that are useful and/or authoritative. According to Tennant’s way of seeing things, the organizations that have constructed world-spanning library catalogs and resource-sharing that reaches every corner of the earth ought to be able to leverage their tremendous organizational and intellectual power in order to offer information services that can compete with Googlezon while offering better, richer, more stable and more accessible content. We’ve always been the information experts and the cultural gatekeepers, Tennant argued, so why shouldn’t we take steps to maintain that status in a changing technological environment?

In her keynote address, danah boyd—not a librarian, but a social scientist and widely-read blogger—took issue with Tennant’s characterization of Googlezon as being an enemy to libraries and library values. boyd argued that the core value of librarianship—providing access to information for all—is identical to Google’s core mission, but that lately Google’s essentially been doing a better job of taking advantage of new technological possibilities in working toward achieving that goal. boyd (despite having worked as a consultant for Google and Yahoo) offered almost as much skepticism about the motives of large corporations as did Tennant, but in the end took a sunnier view of things, mostly because of the faith she places in the genuinely democratic aspects of the net. She questioned the idea that librarians ought to serve as monolithic gatekeepers of information. As a scholar herself, she recognizes the value of research and authority, but as a netizen and blogger, she also sees the tremendous value and power of the net in its capacity for giving voice and space to the communications of those who otherwise would be voiceless and spaceless. Rather than being concerned with how to maintain the walls of authority around

information, boyd argued, librarians should be thinking about how to take advantage of the web's tremendous communicative power in order to help patrons find the best available information—both from traditional authorities and from the nontraditional information and communication sources available via the internet. And further, she argued that librarians simply must embrace the best of the Googlezon ideas and technology. Why shouldn't patrons have higher expectations for interface design, searchability and online retrieval of information from libraries, when they've seen the wonders that Google and Amazon can perform in these respects?

In the end, boyd and Tennant expressed fairly similar visions of what libraries *ought* to be doing in the information age, even if they differed both in terms of motivations and desired ends: both want librarians and libraries to embrace Google-like technologies in order to promote information access and help users get to the information that they need. ALA President Michael Gorman, on the other hand, expressed very little agreement with either of them. Like Tennant, Gorman believes that libraries ought to preserve our role as cultural gatekeepers, even in the face of fundamental changes in the technology of information. Unlike Tennant, however, Gorman feels a profound distrust for the web—in his vision, libraries should not embrace the possibilities of the web, but rather shape the web according to the traditional organizational methods of librarianship. We are betraying and failing our users, Gorman contends, if we cannot tame the chaos of the web under the authority of our bibliographic control. Using web technologies is fine, but not if we lose sight of our profession's vision of organizing all of that information in an authoritative, coherent and sensible manner.

The conference's closing keynote was delivered by David Levy, whose talk, "Information and the Quality of Life," suggested that the constant deluge of information in which we are all immersed might be dangerous to our ability to think clearly and make good decisions. In the age of the internet, we have unprecedented access to information, both in terms of depth and currency—but how often do any of us actually take the time to sit down and process it all anymore? Levy argued that we need to learn the art of looking at information selectively and choosing what we need to use in our lives via careful contemplation. His vision would, in some ways, seem to come closest to Gorman's: one might be tempted to see the calm order of library classification as a means to the end of taming the chaos of the information age. What Gorman's vision lacks, however, is the value that Levy places on an almost mystic kind of contemplation. Gorman's ideal information world would be all rigid hierarchies and authoritative received wisdom; Levy's would not necessarily have these features at all, but rather would involve the individual's thoughtful communion with and contemplation of the ever-changing and tremendously

complex external world of information. Levy doesn't want us to reject chaos and complexity, but rather to navigate it wisely in order to take from it that which is genuinely useful to us.

I think there's a lot of wisdom in what Levy said—as professionals and people, we need to do a better job of sorting through all the wild and overwhelming possibilities of gee-whiz technology for those things that actually *help* us wade through a very complex world of information, rather than technologies that merely open up the floodgates to more and more information that we don't know how to make use of or even process. The fundamental flaw in Gorman's reasoning is that (unlike Levy) he fails to acknowledge that the world is much, much more complicated than Dewey and LC will ever admit. A system of classification will always have a limited viewpoint (that of its creators), and because of those entirely necessary limits, it will cut out the perspectives of those outside of the mainstream of ideas as conceived by whoever creates the classification system, and thus will give a distorted and inaccurate picture of the world. I sometimes get the feeling that what Gorman and a lot of librarians really want is a return to a time when the information world seemed much less complicated—when classification systems were entirely coherent and capable because they reflected little beyond the very limited points of view of the almost exclusively white and Western men who wrote the books that made up most of the library holdings that the classification systems described. But I think this viewpoint is no longer tenable, and the chaos of the web is only a vivid example of the ways in which we have come to realize that both the world and human expressions of information about it are far too irreducibly complex to be tamed by neat and systematic hierarchies of ideas. Ultimately, I find a vision somewhere between Levy's and boyd's the most compelling: rather than trying to force the web into the image of conventional library systems of organization, we ought to be concentrating on using technological tools—and our own brainpower and wisdom—to guide ourselves and our patrons about valuable information, without getting lost in the chaos of information overload. And I think “guide” is definitely a better metaphor here than “gatekeeper”—instead of building walls and locking gates, we ought to seize the opportunity that Googlezon-like technologies afford in order to better serve our patrons. We ought to listen to what our patrons say they want and need, and then help them find and use the best information for their purposes—whether it's a neatly classified book written by an expert or a folksonomy-tagged chat transcript brought out of the chaos and into light by a search engine.

In the end, I found the LITA Forum most valuable not for the fresh ideas it gave me about RSS feeds, but instead because of the keynote speakers' provocative lectures, which delved into issues that I feel touch on the values and mission at the heart of our profession. Here's hoping I can keep all of that in mind while I toy with the code and try out the new gizmos for our library's website.