CNI meeting features the future

By William Miller

In revolutionary times, the past may not predict the future

On December 6–7, 1996, I was one of 330 people attending the Coalition for Networked Information (CNI) meeting in San Francisco, along with ACRL executive director Althea Jenkins. ACRL is one of several hundred members of CNI, which focuses on collaborative efforts to enhance access to networked information. Members include individual libraries, vendors, and higher education associations. CNI packed more than 30 programs and events into its two-day program this year, and although it was possible for the serious attendee to take most of it in, the several hundred in attendance were kept very busy imbibing so much information in so short a time. The focus, of course, was on networked information. Most of the ground was very familiar for academic librarians, though the meeting differed from typical library programs by being centered more on the future than on the present.

The "regulation-proof" Net

The three plenary sessions offered much food for thought. EDUCOM president Robert Heterick discussed the Internet from an historical perspective, declaring it to be "management proof," and stating that ISDN is too little, too late, and too expensive a method of providing high bandwidth to be the solution of choice. He discussed the proposed Internet II and its probable successor, Internet III, and warned about extrapolation, which he defined as interpreting the future based on the assumption that it will be like the past. While usually reliable, extrapolation does not work in a time of revolution or paradigm shift. Legislators are extrapo-

lating when they try to regulate the Net, which Heterick declared to be "regulation proof." He opined that microcash and secure transactions will soon predominate on the Net, and that the current effort to hold intermediary transmission points responsible for Internet content is ridiculous and will not work.

Paul Mockapetris, director of engineering at a company called "@Home," discussed his firm's plans to hook the nation's homes to the Internet via cable TV. Mockapetris, one of the creators of the Internet, made a very cogent case for cable as the medium of choice for the home market. He stated that there are 100 million homes available in the U.S., and cable is already installed in most of these. Cable is always "up," and has a bandwidth capacity right now that far exceeds what other Internet carriers are likely to offer for some time.

Simulations of reality

Professor Sherry Turkle of MIT worried about high school students who are excellent at using simulation programs such as SIM City, but who see these simulations merely as games they cannot change, and about which they have no real insight (she discussed one young girl, an "expert" at the game, who attributed her success to principles such as "raising taxes always leads to riots"). She worries that young people are more interested in simulations of reality than in reality itself, and argues that it is dangerous to be creating a generation that does not see reality as inherently more interesting than simulation, especially because simulation games are just models, complex but often unrealistic. Turkle pointed out that the definition of "computer literacy" used to include being able to program a computer or understand its inner workings; it now means the ability to use software and surf the Net. This shift of definition is

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another dimension of the same problem: progressive alienation from direct experience.

How we *plan* to do it good
The 20 "Project Briefings" were much more focused, on topics such as "Overview and Discussion of Meta Content Format (MCF): A Proposed Open Standard for a Format Representing a Wide Range of Information about Content." One constant in these sessions was in the one marked difference between them and most sessions at library conferences: instead of being about "How We Did It Good," they were about "How We *Plan* to Do It Good." The line between vaporware and reality was hard to see at times, but the air was thick with plans for on-demand publishing and immediate electronic access to pretty much everything.

Many projects described in the briefings are still on the drawing board but will undoubtedly come to fruition in one way or another because they are funded by private foundations or government agencies. The "Getty-RLG Distributed Database Initiative," for instance, will combine the Getty art research databases with RLG's network infrastructure, enabling remote data entry and decentralized editorial functions. "University of Virginia Library to Explore Internet Future of Rare Books" will be a two-year, $400,000 study underwritten by the Mellon Foundation to determine if rare research materials can be made available at reasonable cost on the Web. The "National Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations" is a project with support from the government and other groups.

Internet II: Creating "gigapops"
"The Internet II Project: Focusing on a New Generation of Internet Applications," perhaps the most fashionable session, was presented by William H. Graves, UNC-Chapel Hill, and M. Stuart Lynn, University of California. This Internet II, still some years away, will not replace the current Internet. Graves and Lynn see the development of new and more powerful versions of the Internet as a continuing evolutionary process. This next version, now in the capital intensive phase, will be funded by contributing schools (probably limited to 200) with the University of California and other large institutions taking the lead. The creators hope for some government support also. The Internet II depends on the creation of "gigapops" which do not yet exist, but which Graves and Lynn are confident can be built eventually.

The confluence of libraries
Not all of the project briefings were so futuristic; many simply described current projects, vendor activities, or trends. For instance, Swets described its new subscription service for electronic serials, and Dartmouth College (represented by Malcolm Brown) described its "Enterprise-Wide Information System." (In addition to its continuing goals, CNI has announced a new goal: Enter-prisewide Information Strategies.) The confluence of libraries and computing at institutions large and small was a common theme at this meeting, as it was at the CAUSE meeting which preceded CNI in San Francisco.

The "presence" of Paul Evan Peters
A pall hung over this meeting because of the shocking, untimely death of Paul Evan Peters, CNI's executive director and guiding spirit, just weeks before the conference was held. Peters personified CNI for many years, and his death was a visible blow to many at the meeting. But his presence was everywhere, not only in the memorial service held in his honor, but at so many sessions where his influence was palpable. An occasional award is being established at CNI in Peters's memory. ■