Conference Circuit

Building the digital library

By Robert Renaud

Valuable insights from "Digital Libraries '95"

Over one hundred librarians, computer scientists, and researchers met in Austin, Texas, July 11–13, to attend "Digital Libraries '95, The Second International Conference on the Theory and Practice of Digital Libraries." The majority of the 21 papers presented at the conference drew lessons from actual efforts to build digital libraries. Among the topics addressed were financial payment mechanisms, collection development, interface design, and access to spatial data. The conference's practical orientation, combined with a diverse group of speakers, produced valuable insights. Although all the papers met a high standard, I thought that several stood out.

Judgment needed to scan documents

William T. Crocca and William L. Anderson of Xerox provided a vendor perspective on the challenges of building digital libraries. They described their involvement in the CLASS project at Cornell University and the experiment in electronic reserves at Indiana University Purdue University at Indianapolis (IUPUI). Without backgrounds in library science, Crocca and Anderson approached these assignments with a clean slate. What they found frequently surprised them. In one part of their paper, Crocca and Anderson list and discuss the assumptions that they brought to these assignments. Their experience led them to question statements that many librarians would readily accept such as "searching is a high-priority capability" and "automation is about simplifying work."[1] One such assumption interested me because it related to work being done at my library. Crocca and Anderson thought at the outset of the project that the process of scanning documents would be simple, low-level work. They found, to the contrary, that scanning archival documents required a high degree of skill and judgment.

Researchers want answers not just access

Nancy A. Van House of the University of California (UC), Berkeley, described her research into user needs and assessment for the UC-Berkeley Electronic Environmental Library Project. A multidisciplinary project funded under the NSF/NASA/ARPA Digital Libraries Initiative, this library supports decision makers in the area of environmental planning. These individuals represent a diverse community of stockholders. Van House's findings point to the problematic nature of measuring use among diverse users, how new forms of information influence the nature of work, and the perplexing nature of information searches. Her comments on the search process may hit a nerve in librarians dedicated to using cataloging tools. "Their [users'] behavior can perhaps better be described as information trolling than information search. When something relevant floats past, they snag it: a mention in a conversation, a paper sent to them to review, something stumbled across on

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the Web. When they do search for information, they are likely to simply call an expert. When they do formal literature searching, their attention to detail is surprisingly low."[2] Van House relates this behavior to the fact that decision-makers want answers to questions, not just access to documents. The design of digital libraries therefore needs to fit into the dynamic, messy, and real world that her research describes.

In defense of catalogers

While the majority of papers focused on practical experiences, others addressed broader themes. David M. Levy of the Xerox Palo Alto Research Center discussed "Cataloging in the Digital Order." As a computer scientist, Levy has worked to understand the nature of cataloging and its role in providing access to digitized information. In the course of his paper, Levy manages to describe cataloging in a lucid and thoughtful way that spans both print and electronic libraries. He also undertakes a spirited defense of cataloging as part of an "'invisible' social infrastructure by which most things, not just library collections, are maintained."[3] For beleaguered technical services librarians, Levy's fresh appreciation of the role of cataloging as "order-making" helping scholars to "engage in a dialogue across communities and disciplines" is welcome and gratifying.[4]

Libraries or computer-based services?

Perhaps the most challenging speaker does not appear in the conference proceedings. Clifford Lynch of the University of California gave a keynote speech that turned assumptions basic to the conference upside down. He questioned whether digital libraries were libraries at all, or simply computer-based services. He also asked us to look into the future and consider whether the openness of the Internet, which underpins so much of the access offered by digital libraries, would continue once the commercial potential of online services is realized. Lynch reminded us that digital libraries are developing against a backdrop of the increasing consolidation of the computing and telecommunications industries into a small set of dominant players.

After two-and-a-half days of intense paper sessions and expert forums, I felt a little dazed. Nevertheless, I left the conference with several clear impressions. First, the projects discussed at Digital Libraries '95 focus on relatively narrow clienteles and, most commonly, niches within the scientific and technical community. Second, computer scientists are frequently taking the lead in designing and implementing digital libraries, even when that role involves rediscovering the library science literature. Third, most digital libraries remain at an early stage of development that leaves many important issues unanswered. Finally, since they are almost always based on the Internet, digital libraries rest on a foundation that will be subject to increasing levels of regulation and commercialization. As Lynch pointed out, these trends may, in the future, place into question basic assumptions about libraries and the intellectual freedom that they have come to represent.

The full conference proceedings for Digital Libraries '95 are available over the World Wide Web at the following URL: http://csdl.tamu.edu/DL95/. This site also contains information for ordering the paper version of the proceedings.

Notes

1. William T. Crocca and William L. Anderson, "Delivering Technology for Digital Libraries: Experiences as Vendors," in *Proceedings of Digital Libraries '95: The Second Annual Conference on the Theory and Practice of Digital Libraries:* 4–6.

2. Nancy A. Van House, "User Needs Assessment and Evaluation for the UC Berkeley Electronic Environmental Library Project," in *Proceedings of Digital Libraries '95,* 75.

3. David M. Levy, "Cataloging in the Digital Order," in *Proceedings of Digital Libraries '95,* 35.

4. Ibid., 36. ■

Corrections

• The affiliation for Rochelle Amores, a reporter for the ACRL National Conference review published in the June 1995 issue, was incorrectly noted. She is affiliated with California State University, San Marcos.

• The "Internet resources for conservatism" article in the July/August 1995 issue listed an incorrect address for the Rush Home Page. The correct address is http://www.well.com/user/srhodes/rush.html.

The editors regret both these errors.