Summer June 28, 2007

Closing Panel Summary: "Interactive Futures."
ALCTS 50th Anniversary Conference, June 20-21, 2007

Karen S Calhoun
“Interactive Futures: A National Conference on the Transformation of Library Collections and Technical Services”
ALCTS 50th Anniversary Conference
June 20-21, 2007

CLOSING PANEL SUMMARY – Karen Calhoun

With Nancy Gwinn, Brian Schottlaender, and Peggy Johnson, I served on a panel to close the day-and-a-half conference. Olivia Madison moderated the panel discussion. I provide this summary of my remarks at the request of Jane Treadwell, chair of the conference committee.

I spent this conference time feeling surprised, enlightened, and enlivened. As far as surprises go, I enjoyed several during Richard Lanham’s elucidation of his book the Economics of Attention. With respect to Lanham’s “attention economy” and conventional wisdom in library land, there is much that may defy our professional intuition. In fact, listening to professor Lanham, I found myself thinking of downright counterintuitive approaches to change, as in the latest Pirates of the Caribbean movie, when the crew rescues Captain Jack Sparrow (Johnny Depp) by rocking the boat so much that it capsizes. (Not to worry, the capsizing ends well: instead of drowning, the crew succeeds in rescuing Jack.)

Professor Lanham, quoting from Shakespeare’s Richard II (Act II, Scene 2), compared libraries’ situation in the attention economy—in which “eyeballs,” style, and brand are everything—to the Duke of York’s plight when, caught between his king and his kinsman, the duke cannot stay on the sidelines but must act, sighing “somewhat we must do.” In other words, libraries must act. Prof. Lanham also called our attention to the “Café Voltaire,” in which Dada artists provoked one another into interacting. Similarly, in the massive scale conversational world Lanham describes, libraries must command speaking parts, because in the attention economy, those who stop talking, stop existing.

For me, the Café Voltaire comparison spurred thoughts of how libraries’ might embrace the conversational idiom of the Web. On the occasion of ALCTS’ fiftieth anniversary, I reflected on the relatively stable conditions within which libraries have flourished. The relative stability of the library service model has yielded a large contribution to the public good, but also somewhat inward-facing, library-defined services and methods. Librarians need to figure out how we might repackage and reorient ourselves and our content. As someone in one of the conference breakout groups said, “it goes back to being respectful of what our users want and how they want it. We should start here, not with the products and services currently in place in libraries.”

David Lankes of the Syracuse University School of Information Studies (and author of “Participatory Networks: the Library as Conversation”) spoke fervently of what he called a “massive scale” world of information, for which libraries are wholly unprepared. (Alternatively, David might have called his talk “Ingest yottabytes, you will.”) David sketched four options for libraries: (1) ignore the issues and retreat to the position of a
niche player; (2) limit the role of the library to synthesis and knowledge organization; (3) try to catalog it all; and (4) embrace the massive scale world and begin to hire “terascale librarians” next year.

While David presented these as discrete options, I suggest that libraries might approach them as re-mixable alternatives for redefining their roles in their communities, provided the central focus is what David calls “participatory librarianship”—that is, investing with their communities in the dynamic, interactive process of knowledge creation and dissemination. In my own talks, I have called participatory librarianship by another name, “outward integration.” To me this means pushing both library staff and library content out to the Web and into the community, wherever our users are or prefer to be—and in so doing, as David put it, “exposing our brilliance.”

Stephen Abram, VP of Innovation at Sirsi/Dynix, spoke last on “social libraries.” When Stephen speaks, I inevitably think of songs. One of Stephen’s themes today was “Are you ready?” and I mentally appended “to fall in love.” The second song—introduced toward the end of his talk—was “Love the one you’re with.” Another sound bite from this talk was “How many whacks on the head do you need?” When I think of whacks on the head, I’m reminded of Roger Van Ock, author of A Whack on the Side of the Head, a spur to creativity and innovation. A desire for more creative workplaces came up consistently in the conference breakout sessions, where several attendees advocated setting aside work space and time for experimenting with new ideas.

Stephen encouraged the audience to move from our present level of comfort with inventory control to creating an environment that is fully aligned with user preferences for discovery, navigation, interaction, and how they learn. Libraries need to focus on the social context of users’ and libraries’ interactions, and not on how upset we might feel about the current situation. I boil this down to one piece of advice—going social, not postal.

What does it all mean for us and for ALCTS members? First, let’s consider how we as a profession will organize data and “conversations” on a massive scale (terabytes today and soon, yottabytes). The way we organize information today simply does not scale. Second, how can we make our libraries more relevant by making them more interactive and more social? There is much to be said for becoming trusted, highly visible, relevant participants in Prof. Lanham’s “revolution in cultural expression” through the outward integration of library people, services, and content into physical and virtual communities.

Stephen presented a Letterman-style top ten list of what libraries need to do to “go social.” I suggest that the first few items—for example, “understand JSR 168” (a Java specification: http://jcp.org/en/jsr/detail?id=168); “adopt XML, APIs, AJAX …”; “learn GPS …”—may not be actionable at the individual library level. To truly integrate libraries into the conversational Web will require collaboration on a brand new scale, and not just among libraries but among many information industry organizations. The rest of Stephen’s list involves, in one way or another, being much more friendly, collegial and yes, playful than we have been as a profession and as organizations.
Stephen urged libraries to join the ranks of advanced social networks and focus locally, where our user communities live (this is where “love the one you’re with” comes in). To Stephen’s advice to libraries, I’d add “we cannot win if we do not play.”

* Song title adapted from Steve Forbert’s *Alive on Arrival* album...