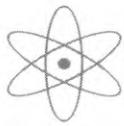


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Newsletter of the Australian Library & Information Association



The electronic library Bringing tomorrow closer

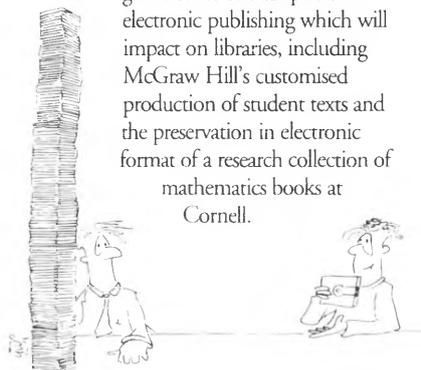
The 'E-Library', or electronic library, is the library whose services and collections are increasingly based on electronic, machine readable information rather than on paper or microform formats. A highly successful seminar on this concept was held in Canberra on 2 May. Sponsored jointly by the Committee of Australian University Librarians (CAUL), the University, College and Research Libraries Section of ALIA, and the Australian National University Library, it was held on the ANU campus on a perfect late autumn day. Because a feature of the seminar was a series of demonstrations of current technological applications, attendance was limited to 100. Perhaps because of the multiple sponsorship — and certainly because the seminar was held the day after a CAUL meeting — it was sold out: good news for the organisers, not so good for those who missed out.

Dr Peter Lyman, Executive Director of the Centre for Scholarly Technology at the University of Southern California (USC) and recently appointed as USC University Librarian, was the keynote speaker. He proved an ideal choice. He'd attended a meeting on the E-Library concept in Washington, CD, just 48 hours earlier, and was right up to date with the very latest US developments. Examples quoted came from an impressive variety of sites. An enthusiastic, committed speaker, Lyman seemed well aware his audience had a great range of technological competence. Starting from the point that 'We all underestimate the pace and usefulness of technological innovation', he considered its social impact, the differential advantages of various information formats, the importance of browsing, and the need for information literacy to be a 'core skill' for every undergraduate — at least at USC.

The American library computer network is currently a 'Tower of Babel' because of the various protocols employed. Individual library systems will move from incorporating journal citations, to abstracts, to full text, while payment for access will shift the financial burden from

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libraries to end users, but at the same time ensure copyright holders receive more equitable recompense than at present. Lyman then gave a series of examples of electronic publishing which will impact on libraries, including McGraw Hill's customised production of student texts and the preservation in electronic format of a research collection of mathematics books at Cornell.



In some areas, knowledge now cannot be adequately represented in print format. Overall, an outstanding overview of a complex and rapidly changing area.

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Peter Lyman's paper was followed by five simultaneous demonstrations, each repeated three times, in a largely successful endeavour to ensure everyone could see *something*. Those I attended achieved this, and were by and large lucky with their electronic connections, always a risk with a demonstration (the 'It was working yesterday/this morning/some other time' syndrome).

In retrospect, the organisers attempted to cover too much in the afternoon session: six speakers, one after another, followed by a panel discussion, and all without a break. It was a tribute to the quality of the speakers and the thoroughness of their preparation that it almost came off. Geoff Huston talked about the dramatically increasing use of AARNet; Don Schauder and Jeff Leeuwenburg about their work on document imaging at RMIT; and Rob Brian explored the issue of electronic copyright. He observed that copyright law has been 'only moderately successful at protecting the very rights it confers'; the electronic library will require cooperation between the parties involved, but we will have facts about the actual usage of copyright material. Tony Barry and Warwick Cathro then managed to lose most of us in what Tony referred to as 'the incredible alphabet soup' of standards for data transfer and user interfaces.

Given the crowded program, it's not surprising the final panel session was pressed for time. I was particularly sorry that there was no opportunity for Peter Lyman to attempt to pull all the themes together at the end. In chairing it, Eric Wainwright raised the questions 'What does it all mean?', and 'What are we going to do about it?' Neal McLean, in a provocative contribution, suggested we should really have been talking about the T (for Technological) Library, or perhaps the F-Library (this last, perhaps wisely, not explained!). He questioned the value judgements implicit in patterns of library expenditure on OPACs, online searching and CD-ROM. Like computer centres, libraries must increasingly become facilitating organisations.

Fortunately, several papers from this seminar will appear in an issue of *Australian Academic & Research Libraries* devoted to it, to appear later this year, including those by Peter Lyman, Don Schauder, Rob Brian and Warwick Cathro. To judge from the seminar, all of these will be necessary reading. It seems clear the electronic library concept will be part of our future: the real question is not if, but when.

inside this issue...

Registered by Australia Post Publication N° NBG 1263

News and Articles

- With a bit of luck...* 5
- Book Exhibitions* 10

Regular Features

- Front Line* 2
- Direct Line* 4
- Feedback* 6

- In the News* 8
- Letters* 12
- Events* 15