

The internet

An Aladdin's Cave of information...



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In June I represented ALIA at the American Library Association conference in Washington, DC. There is nothing quite like an ALA summer conference. If you are looking for an intimate gathering, seek elsewhere. These conferences are for those hardy souls who like crowds, queues and controlled confusion.

Nowhere is this more evident than the conference exhibition. Any thoughts of a quick walk around evaporate at the sight of hundred's of booths displaying a diverse range of products and services. It was like an enormous poultry show with familiar backyard breeds as well as exotics ranging from the picturesque to the outlandish. Each exhibitor enclosed in an allotted area which ranged from the palatial to closet-sized cells.

Some exhibits attracted lots of attention with their flashy decor, give-aways and new products. Others were less well patronised due to their location or the arcane nature of their offerings. What does the Western Creationist Union publish?

ALIA had its own booth courtesy of the Australian Government and we attracted our fair share of the interested, weird and curious as well as the professional freebie seekers. It was a wonderful opportunity to promote the Association, Australian publishing and Australia as well as a great way to meet people.

The conference is used to launch new products and there were plenty on offer, many of them internet-related. Wandering through the exhibit hall, I was reminded just how the internet has changed the way libraries operate and how marvellous it is.

Preparatory to attending the conference, I was able to use the internet to identify the sessions I wanted to attend. This saved me a great deal of time and enabled strategic breakfast, lunch and dinner meetings to be arranged well in advance. Hotels were booked through internet-based services at ten per cent less than my travel agent could offer. I also managed to get a seat at a Broadway show which would have been sold out by the time I reached the United States of America. All this achieved at 3 am New York time.

While there is some risk in buying services over the internet, the same can be said of any form of marketing. The old adage — let the buyer beware — holds true. Just because a hotel has an attractive webpage is no

guarantee of accommodation quality. I reduced my risk by checking the hotels on other travel sites and by looking at printed guides. This proved to be effective for the hotels in San Francisco and New York. I'm still wondering about the houseboat I've booked for the IFLA conference in Amsterdam later this year.

The quality of internet sites is providing a rich ground for moral, philosophical and political debate. More than the printing press, radio or television, the internet provides a means of communication which is virtually ungovernable. Its very nature makes content regulation difficult, if not impossible.

The relative cheapness of the technology permits widespread access and the dislocation of time and geography provides opportunities not available with other communication media. It is both a means of communication and an Aladdin's Cave of knowledge.

Like the genii of folklore, there is scope for both malevolent as well as benevolent uses. The future probably relies more with self-regulation than legislation. While acknowledging the need to protect vulnerable members of society and to preserve law and order, I have an enduring concern about allowing governments to control access to knowledge. Even democratically elected governments sometimes forget that they are elected by the people, for the people.

In general, we should be encouraging the creators of websites to self-rate their sites according to content and to use mechanisms which limit the possibility of inappropriate access. Many sites containing sensitive information utilise Metadata tags which prevent access from sites using popular screening software such as Net Nanny. Others require a password issued by a commercial agency which verifies that the person seeking access is an adult. This is not infallible of course as passwords can be transferred, wittingly or otherwise, to others.

There is an onus also on the part of all members of society, particularly parents. This responsibility includes the provision of ethical and moral standards against which appropriate use of knowledge including that accessed via the internet can be made. When all else fails, there may be just reason for eliminating particular sites but this form of censorship should be used carefully and infrequently. ■

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