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Someone else's ideas

If you don't get along to many conferences, particularly the ones abroad, it's good to know you can have a virtual experience by looking at online papers or downloading presentations to watch on your own computer. Two recent conferences have put up the majority of their papers. The first is ALIA's 2001 TAFE Libraries Conference, the theme of which was *Passion Power People — TAFE Librarians Leading the Way* [<http://www.moreton.tafe.net/alia/program2.htm>]. Visit the site to get downloadable versions of the conference papers, which covered issues such as online learning, information literacy, partnerships and career directions for librarians. Also up in cyberspace are some of the proceedings of *Internet Librarian International 2002* [<http://www.internet-librarian.com/presentations/>], held in London in March this year. This looked like an information-packed event with many Net experts such as Gary Price in attendance. There are Powerpoint presentations or papers from many sessions, which covered diverse topics such as 'Online reference: strategy for the future?', 'Digital libraries, digital communities: case studies writing for the wired world', 'Designing a database for an internet resource catalogue' and 'How to ensure that corporate intranets are useful and usable'.

How usable is your library?

If you're wondering how usable your online service is, then it is worth looking at 'Usage and usability assessment: library practices and concerns', a new 99-page report (in PDF) from the US Digital Library Federation [<http://www.clir.org/pubs/abstract/pub105abst.html>]. The report tries to establish what are the best management and design strategies for digital library services. The author, Denise Troll Covey, a librarian at Carnegie Mellon University in the US, has used interviews with staff at a range of different institutions to survey the methods used by these leading digital libraries to assess both the use and usability of their online collections and services. The report covers information-gathering strategies such as focus groups, transaction log analysis and surveys, and details the difficulties and drawbacks of each one. This is only one of many reports compiled by the DLF, so scout around and see what else catches your eye while you're downloading this one.

Sci/tech freebie

It's always nice to get something for free

from publishers these days and this database of more than 180 000 scientific and technical acronyms, symbols and abbreviations is a freebie from Wiley, so bookmark it for your virtual reference collection [<http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/stasa/>]. In addition to the acronyms database, you can use reference tables as well. These include the Greek alphabet, Roman numerals, prefixes, base quantities and units for the SI system, mathematical symbols and signs, symbols, atomic numbers and atomic weights for chemical elements, the periodic table of the elements, biological, botanical and chemical symbols and signs and ASCII codes. Much of that material is online elsewhere, but it's pleasing to have it all together at one site.

Settling down

If the Pew Center's Internet & American Life Project is to be believed, Americans are spending less time aimlessly surfing the Net and more time using it wisely. The Project's new report, 'Getting serious online' [<http://www.pewinternet.org/reports/toc.asp?Report=55>], outlines this more purposeful behaviour which involves using the Net to conduct business of all kinds, from banking to investing to paying bills and buying online. While the report is about Americans, Australians will find it worth reading as a way of getting some idea of what sophisticated Net users want and how they prefer to interact online. Predictably, the quality of online services and resources as well as fast access and reliable connectivity are all important issues for serious surfers. The Project has also released a report about use of the Web for US government information, 'The rise of the e-citizen: how people use government agencies' web sites' [<http://www.pewinternet.org/reports/toc.asp?Report=57>]. What is surprising is that most users of government information end up at government sites by accident, having started at a portal like Yahoo or a gateway site such as FirstGov (<http://www.firstgov.gov/>). Purposeful seeking of specific government sites is rare. Given that, government information sites need to establish quickly what they do so that users who stumble across them can get what they want without frustration.

Under one umbrella

There are hundreds of them and they are banding together in a community near you. What is it? It's the Public Libraries Australia

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project, which aims to establish a body to represent and promote the interests of all public libraries in Australia, and act as an advocate to both government and business. The project's site, hosted by the National Library of Australia, provides project reports and links to related resources. Public libraries as a network have a strong product to offer to both government and business users, but have not been spectacularly successful as yet in articulating their product in those forums. Working together might help solve this problem. Find out more at <http://www.nla.gov.au/apln/>.

Image problem

The creation of sites such as Google Answers is proof-positive that libraries have both an image and a marketing problem, as many of the questions to be answered by this newly launched commercial Q&A service could be answered for free by most libraries. Google Answers has not been going long but has sparked a lot of introspection among US librarians. As one librarian said on Gary Price's Virtual Acquisition Shelf and News Desk [<http://resourceshelf.freepint.com/>]: 'For information professionals and libraries, Google Answers says something, and could say even more in the future, about how we market our skills, our services, and the tools we offer. We must do better. Think about it. Google Answers already exists and it's called the library. Virtual and telephone reference services, 'Ask A' sites, remotely accessible databases, which many public libraries here in the US offer patrons at no charge, books, and most importantly our skills and knowledge at finding, accessing, and making choices, transcend any answer service that a web search could offer.' Have a look at Google Answers at <https://answers.google.com/answers/main>. Moonlighting librarians can also register to become paid researchers for the service.

Before they vanish altogether...

For many people, trade unions are something that belongs to the past. With union membership at an all-time Australian low, unions are not seen as relevant by many people in these days of enterprise bargaining, workplace contracts and the free market. For those who still subscribe or for those who want to know what it's all about, the launch of the Australian Trade Union Archives [<http://www.atua.org.au/atua.htm>]

is good news. The site, created by the University of Melbourne, and funded by the Australian Research Council, is an online gateway to archival resources on Australian labour history, and includes published material and both historical and current information about Australian industrial organisations, including trade unions and employer bodies. The site provides a handy timeline of labour history, broken up into specific periods, such as 1788–1850, 1951–1975, and 1976 onwards.

Buildings can vanish to

If you want plans and views of the vanished World Trade Centre towers, or if you'd like to check out the Pentagon, then the Great Buildings Collection [<http://www.greatbuildings.com/>] is the place to go. This is a wonderful site, not just for architects, but for anyone with an interest in buildings and architecture. You can get information on around one thousand buildings in the database, which provides 3D models as well as searchable access to specific buildings, architects and places. There is information by type of structure, for example, airport terminals, factories and theatres, and also by style, for example, Gothic. There is a lot here, including photographs, drawings, plans and bibliographies on particular architects/designers and buildings.

The Hybrid life

We're mostly working in hybrid libraries these days, libraries that offer more than traditional print resources for loan and reference. Given that is the case, the HyLiFe Hybrid Library Toolkit [<http://hylife.unn.ac.uk/toolkit/>] has probably come along at just the right time. (It needs a better name though.) The site defines a hybrid library as one 'where 'new' electronic information resources and 'traditional' hardcopy resources co-exist and are brought together in an integrated information service, accessed via electronic gateways available both on-site, like a traditional library, and remotely via the internet or local computer networks.' Sounds like most of us. Still, we can always use more guidance, so this practical guide and information resource is worth a look, especially as it goes beyond mere definitions to wrestle with such issues as the need to focus and interpret the whole service for a particular group of users in a scalable fashion. Not easy. In this world, local collections are just one small part of the information provision brew. ■

This column
[with URL links]
can be found at:



<http://www.alia.org.au/incite>

Contributions and suggestions for this column are always welcome. Please contact Belinda Weaver via e-mail.

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