

SECOND PACIFIC CONFERENCE ON NEW INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY
held in Singapore from 29-31 May, 1989

The Second Pacific Conference on New Information Technology attracted well over 200 participants from 17 countries, including Australia, Canada, China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, The Netherlands, South Africa, the USA and ASEAN countries.

As the conference title set out, the major focus was on new information technology. More than 70 papers, presented in 26 meetings in three days, revolved around applications of optical discs and hypertext in library and information services.

The keynote address was delivered by Richard De Gennaro, Director of the New York Public Library. He began with a historical perspective on the effect that new information technologies have had on libraries and their services to users in the last thirty years. He noted that the developments of microphotography in the 1950s, xerography and computers in the 1960s, online computer systems, telecommunications and networking in the 1970s, and microcomputers and optical disc systems in the 1980s, have brought about a revolution in access to library resources by users. In short, technology is making the resources within the library available beyond its walls, and the resources beyond its walls available within the library. He concludes that information technology is making our industrial age management concepts and organisational structures obsolete. The business world is adapting itself to innovation at a frenetic pace. The library world must become more entrepreneurial and innovative and develop more flexible and responsive structures and services if it is to keep pace with the competition and demands of our society.

The highlight of the Conference was the demonstration of the PROJECT EMPEROR-I in hypercard environment given by Dr Ching-chih Chen. She provided a quick summary of the historical development of the hypertext/hypermedia. The effect of recent developments on hypermedia application and potential problems was also discussed.

Hypertext refers to non-sequential reading and writing. By using computer technology, a hypertext system connects text, data, graphics, video, animations and voice together.

PROJECT EMPEROR-I, a hypermedia R & D project experimented on all major delivery system platforms, was demonstrated to show the potential of this type of application for librarians, information professionals, and education media specialists.

Dr David Raitt, Chairman of the International Online Information Meetings in London, reviewed some recent technological advances and developments in such areas as input devices, storage devices, display/output devices and multi-media systems. Described were a number of new devices useful in the library, publishing and information world, including the Electronic Tablet, the Smart Book, Digital Paper and DynaBook.

The Dean of the Graduate School of Library and Information of Simmons College, Professor Robert D. Stueart, discussed the curricular needs for educating information professionals for the 21st century. He emphasised that understanding the philosophical concept of access to information is the foremost consideration rather than those skills and techniques which easily become obsolete in a post-industrial society. So the objective of the school is "educating" professionals, rather than "training" technicians.

As well, there was a report on the development of an electronic library, the model developed by B. Butler and R. Goodram for the new Bond University in Australia. The major components of an electronic library include: index and abstract databases; finding and locating databases; electronic document conversion workstations; and mass optical storage and distribution systems.

Other sessions worth mentioning include Information Economy & Policy; Online Information Retrieval; and Impact of New Information Technology on the Users: an engineer's view.

EXHIBITION

The trade exhibition, with about 20 stands, provided various displays as well as demonstrating a number of new products and services, encompassing library supplies, computer equipment and software, online databases and integrated library systems. The main attractions of the exhibition were CD-ROM products used for electronic publishing (e.g. Oxford English Dictionary on CD-ROM and other reference tools), and for making available the expensive and large databases to library (e.g., BiblioFile, WLN-Laser cat, OCLC CD450 and DIALOG'S CD-ROM database retrieval services).

LIBRARY AUTOMATION IN SINGAPORE

With the Government's encouragement and support, library automation started in Singapore libraries in 1980. In 1982, the Library Association of Singapore proposed the creation of the Singapore Integrated Library Automation Services (SILAS). Based on WLN software, SILAS runs an online shared cataloguing service for Singapore libraries on a national basis. It became operational in April 1987 and the National Library was the first member library. By the end of 1988, there were 35 libraries cataloguing online onto the SILAS database. Member libraries contributed their holdings information to the SILAS database and formed a national union bibliographic database which had reached more than half a million by March 1989. It provides instant holdings information to scholars and researchers and has greatly enhanced library co-operation in Singapore. SILAS set up a stand at the Conference exhibition which provided delegates with hands-on experience. Using the same software as the Australian Bibliographic Network (ABN), SILAS operates in basically the same way as ABN. However, SILAS has made a few improvements. For example, an interim record is used as a base record to be upgraded to a full cataloguing record. Also, a close record/copy can be edited and used as an original cataloguing record for a different edition.

A post-conference library tour was organised for overseas delegates to visit libraries of the Nanyang Technological Institute (NTI) and the National University of Singapore (NUS). NTI Library introduced automation for its various operations from the beginning. SILAS is now used for the online cataloguing operation. An online integrated turnkey system (ATLAS) was installed in 1988 for in-house management. Library users may now search the library catalogue by using any of the 700 personal computers linked to the campus network, called NTInet.

The NUS Library is also a participating member of SILAS. However, it has adopted the MINISIS software for acquisitions, periodical indexing and information retrieval. The Library is upgrading its system and is about to install an online public access catalogue (OPAC), where users can access the Library's catalogue from remote terminals.

SOME EVALUATING REMARKS

Compared with Singapore, library automation in Hong Kong appears less developed and urgently in need of updating. The problem here is the lack of an organisation to promote and co-ordinate developments in various libraries. An enormous amount of resources in terms of money and energy has been wasted in a number of duplicated efforts. This is probably due to the fact that the authorities in Hong Kong do not seem to have a substantial and sustained interest in the matter, and none of the established libraries here appear to be prepared to play a more active role in improving the situation.

On the whole, the conference was professionally organised and provided a satisfactory programme. The participants enjoyed the opportunity to meet colleagues from various countries to exchange views and experiences on the conference theme, and to visit local facilities and developments.

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