

# ATTENDING THE ALA CONFERENCE IN NEW ORLEANS, June 1999

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I won the Gale Group International On line Prize ! It was something just incredible to have the chance to attend the American Library Association Conference in New Orleans (USA) from 24th to 30th June 1999.

## ***Some features about the Conference***

- The Opening General Session

Ann Symmons, the ALA President introduced the speakers, the mayor of New Orleans welcomed everybody and encouraged all the librarians to prepare the nation for the year 2000, also by spreading the habit of reading everywhere outside the libraries, and Dr James Billington announced the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Library of Congress on 25th November 2000, reminding us that the 'librarians were the dream-keepers and the sentinels of our history'. ([www.loc.gov/bicentennial](http://www.loc.gov/bicentennial))



General Colin Powell was the key speaker. He was the former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the Department of Defence of the USA. He spoke about his own experience when he went to the library as a student, and how he got the joy of knowledge from the books and from the libraries. He talked about how to lead children to read and to spend more time to gain knowledge to build the country of the future.

- 'Nothing but Net? Understanding the Digital Library User.'

The session consisted of speakers talking about some experiences in the field of the Digital Library User, as well as, a poster session. They focused on the Digital Library, presenting for example how to use a chat room software and web-based tutorials in teaching research skills, using not only the classroom, but also the remote instruction by e-mail, listserv or a website.

Other presentations illustrated how to satisfy the student needs providing equivalent library resources and services to distance learners through electronic databases, on line guides, electronic courses, customised sessions and generally speaking, all the library services available for the remote users including instructions and document delivery.

This is a general evolution in our professional environment to use technology at a distance, to offer services with a focus on the consumer. Some presentations focused on lifelong learning skills, the library role, and 'on-campus' vs. 'off-campus'. Furthermore, the practical consequences for both librarians and users. Referring to reference assistance, service hours, user instruction, user on line help and communication and feedback, were pointed out as well.

Some studies have been carried out, showing that users could try to log in only once or twice, mainly for searching more than for browsing, and that most of the time, the rate of user satisfaction was high. From these studies we learned that the implications for librarians in this context were so important because users needed more tutorials, user friendly interfaces, feedback, training and support and above all, the intermediation between the users and the digital library.

From the students' point of view, they confirmed that the easy access to information at a distance, from home and 24 hours a day, was a huge advantage, as well as, databases providing full text articles and references in PDF format. They also needed training in the use of Boolean search or descriptors to limit the search and if possible telephone support. Some of them encountered difficulties in selecting the best tools for a particular research or in using the appropriate search techniques or in getting information overload. They also focused on the significant role of the Faculty to help point out research topics and help the students evaluate resources. The behaviour was different between undergraduates and graduates.

Some interesting websites :

<http://www.lib.usf.edu/distance/>

<http://staff.lib.utexas.edu/~beth/Presentations/Interact/>

<http://www.west.asu.edu/bdangelo/is.html>

- 'Statistics in the Digital age'

The session focused on the differences between the statistics reported in the past (number of log in, date and time of the day, total connect time, database usage) and those reported now (average session time, total views and total prints, journal retrievals). Librarians presented papers reporting some experience in this field, as well as, the difficulties the librarians have in getting statistics from the providers (reticence to provide statistics, uncertainty of the meaning of the statistics particularly in terms of comparability from a product to another one, or data cumulated in a non useful format for librarians).

The librarians need statistics more and more, to justify the collection development, particularly the journals or databases subscriptions, to improve management decision, or to understand the usage patterns. The session also referred to the guidelines for statistics and measures of usage settled by the ICOLC (International Coalition Of Library Consortia) in November 1998 about statistics per 'browsing', 'printing', and viewing'. ([www.library.yale.edu/consortia/webstats.html](http://www.library.yale.edu/consortia/webstats.html)) .

- 'Managerial competencies'

This session focused on how to manage a successful library organisation and which kind of specific competencies the librarians have to possess to do so. In fact, we have to consider that most of the librarians are now also managers. Our resources are not only collections or technology but also people as well.

That means librarians have to develop abilities to manage people towards effective performance, innovation and team-based organisation. Librarians presented papers on how to implement plans to increase managerial competencies in the libraries, for example, developing a common language or interpersonal skills needed for effectiveness or stimulating creative approaches.

- Some comments concerning the Exhibition.

To be an information professional today means you are able to offer your clients electronic products with full-text and image articles, you are also able to find the appropriate new products with more research functions or new interfaces. This is what we can obtain from a professional exhibition.

The ALA exhibition was great, offering a wide range of resources for librarians and libraries, books, audio-visual materials, periodicals, on-line databases, cd-roms, any kind

of software for automated systems including online search services, OPAC's or Web products, equipment such as furniture or storage systems, and finally services such as associations, consultants, and booksellers. We found everything for every kind of library, from public to academic libraries, for every kind of user, from children to researchers.

More than 800 exhibitors presented their products. The Gale Group, which is a leader in the electronic reference and was a sponsor of this exhibition, provided us with new products to discover. ([www.galegroup.com](http://www.galegroup.com))

### ***About my feelings***

- *As a French person*, I was welcomed by Russell Smith at the Gale Group stand where all the events were announced during the ALA show. It was an American Conference and not an international one, which means it was more exciting for a foreigner, and thanks to R. Smith, I started my tour of the Conference easily. The atmosphere among the librarians was very professional and friendly, as it is in our French Conferences or seminars. The ALA ([www.ala.org](http://www.ala.org)) had put everything on the website related to the Conference ([www.ala.org/events/ac99/index.html](http://www.ala.org/events/ac99/index.html)).

- *As a Librarian*, I discovered how close all the librarians around the world were, and how similar their interests and commitments were. Some of these similarities focused on providing better services to our users, helping them get successful searches from OPAC or from the on-line databases, or even helping them with the techniques for providing more efficiency in searching the web. All of us want to be sure that the students are able to locate the information they need and to evaluate it. The American librarians were also interested in teaching strategies, using remote instructions which is a very innovative way, as well as traditional classrooms.

Some trends appeared particularly American, for example, the use of a corporate credit card to pay for books. American librarians seem to use it more frequently than in France and thus, save delays in purchasing because the sellers are paid rapidly and easily.

- *As a Business Librarian*, I appreciated meeting other business librarians particularly those from ABLD (The Academic Business Library Directors), and attending a BRASS Meeting (The Business Reference And Service Section), where thanks to Judith Nixon, I was introduced as an international guest by the chairman William Taylor. The BRASS consists of around 900 members, and belongs to the RUSA (the Reference and Users Services Association, which itself belongs to the ALA).

I took the opportunity of speaking about French business schools, as well as, about EM Lyon (<http://www.em-lyon.com/english/main.html>) and presenting the EBSLG (European Business Schools Librarians' Group, <http://www.ebslg.org>), as well as, the ACIEGE (Association française des responsables des Centres d'information des Ecoles de gestion). I noticed that all of us were involved in such professional networks or working groups.

### **About the city of New Orleans**

The ALA Conference was an event taking place not only within the Conference Centre, but also within the city. Lectures and sessions were held in different places and hotels located around the Conference Centre and gave us the opportunity to walk along the streets and to meet different people and places.



us when the two French Canadian brothers Le Moyne led the French-sponsored colonisation in the lower Mississippi Valley.

Besides the ALA Conference and in spite of the terrible rain which welcomed all the participants at the beginning of the Conference, reminding us that we were in somehow a tropical place. I also took the opportunity to visit this magical city where so many cultures are still gathered from Acadians, French, Spanish, French Canadians, Creoles to native Americans or Americans and still influence the country. This city is considered to be the birthplace of jazz and we can hear live Jazz bands in the streets, as well as in the clubs. This is also the city where we can eat Cajun food, spicy and flavourful, and have a combination of Old French and Spanish history and colonial architecture, as well

I also refer to the street parade organised for the participants of the Conference, as if we were during the Carnival season. Leading the Mardi-Gras procession, in a very Caribbean New Orleanian musical and lively atmosphere with dancers, musicians, mythological creatures and costumes, we got the chance to attend the Gale Group reception at the Aquarium of the Americas. There the music and typical food from Louisiana were offered. Louisiana celebrated its 300<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1999, reminding

as, American tastes of today or views on the steamboats along the Mississippi River.



Finally, I would like to thank the Gale Group for the opportunity to have met American librarians, for the good professional contacts, for the great time and nice trip, and for all the services given during the Conference.

November 1999