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This issue is largely devoted to coverage of the 2008 ASIS&T Annual Meeting, which was held in Columbus, Ohio, in late October. The coverage takes various forms from photographs and news about our award winners to reports on the plenary speeches, contributions from award recipients and coverage of pre-conference events. The conference was well attended, particularly considering the current economic environment. Its theme, “People Transforming Information – Information Transforming People,” encouraged an emphasis on the human factors in our profession, an emphasis that is reflected in many of our articles.

In addition to an expanded version of Inside ASIS&T, Steve Hardin has been kind enough to cover both plenary sessions for us. In the first address, Genevieve Bell discussed the Internet as a cultural institution, while in the second Connie Yowell gave the audience a preview of the findings of a MacArthur Foundation-funded three-year ethnographic study on youth and digital media that focused on high and middle school students. The study is now available on the Foundation’s website at www.macfound.org.

Observing the pre-conference action, Kalpana Shankar and Howard Rosenbaum report on the 4th Social Informatics SIG Research Symposium: People, Information and Technology:

The Social Analysis of Computing. They relate the papers presented to three main areas of content: the workplace, the interaction between information and government, and new analytical frameworks, methodologies and theories in the field.

As part of its annual activities ASIS&T presents many awards. We often carry acceptance speeches or other pieces from the recipients. As the first of such contributions over the coming issues we have a reflection about her ASIS&T experience from Elise Lewis, co-winner of the James M. Cretsos Leadership Award, which honors relatively new members (less than seven years) who have demonstrated outstanding leadership within the Society.

Finally, our regular columns are concerned with the relationship between academic journals and the fields they serve. On the one hand we have an exceptionally extensive information architecture (IA) column in which Andres Resmini, Kakrinya Bystrom and Dorte Madsen, who have been involved in the development of the Journal of Information Architecture, discuss their approach to the problem of defining IA. On the other Don Case, in his President’s Page, discusses the desirability of increasing the overlap between the ASIS&T membership that publishes academic research and the body of authors publishing in our journal.
The Society and Its *Journal*

I have been a member of the *JASIST* Editorial Board for more than 16 years—long enough to witness many changes in our Society’s major scholarly publication. The *Journal* has grown in size while maintaining its high ranking among comparable journals. The publication backlog has decreased and time-to-publication reduced.

Yet, like most things, the *Journal* could be improved. One thing editorial board members have noticed is that our competition is getting better. Their impact factors have been rising. In some years, for some journals, the impact factor is superior to that of *JASIST*.

Perhaps the quality of these other journals is why some ASIS&T members submit their manuscripts to them rather than *JASIST*. Or perhaps it is personal connections to other editorial boards and their members that account for this decision. Whatever the reason, it is unfortunate that more of our members do not make *JASIST* their first choice.

Who belongs to ASIS&T is, of course, a related factor. A few years back, with the help of the *JASIST* publisher, I did a longitudinal analysis of *JASIST* authorship from 1990 to 2000, finding that almost two-thirds of the authors were not members of ASIS&T and that there were roughly as many authors from computer science departments as from LIS departments (about 20% came from each discipline). I followed up that analysis with a survey of 131 of those non-member authors. What they told me would not surprise you: Other organizations competed for their attention, time and money, and they chose to join ACM, IEEE, the American Library Association or some other association, rather than ASIS&T. A few of the European and Asian authors cited the North American emphasis of ASIS&T as a reason for not joining. While they lavished praise upon the Society’s *Journal*, they were not as convinced about the value of ASIS&T membership.

So it is that we have many non-members publishing in *JASIST* and a number of members who prefer to send their work elsewhere. The latter circumstance is a shame as it undermines the virtuous circle operating between the Society and its journal: The more that prominent members of the Society publish in *JASIST*, the stronger the *Journal* becomes. And the stronger that *JASIST* becomes, the more visible and financially secure the Society becomes.

My hope for ASIS&T is that we recruit more members. And my wish for the *Journal* is that more of our members will publish there. We need to keep our Society’s primary publication strong. The best way we can do that is to make it the first choice for our own work and that of our students and colleagues.

I believe that under the stewardship of our new editor, Blaise Cronin, *JASIST* will improve. I predict that both the rejection rate and the impact factor will rise, making the *Journal* more prominent than ever. Can we make our Society equally attractive to non-members?
Join us throughout this issue of the Bulletin of the American Society for Information Science and Technology for a look at some of the work and fun that members and guests enjoyed at the 2008 ASIS&T Annual Meeting in Columbus, Ohio. In addition to a photo montage from the meeting, look for full coverage of the presentation of the ASIS&T Annual Awards as well as reports from the plenary sessions and other substantive activities at the meeting.
E ach year at the ASIS&T Annual Meeting, the Society honors the winners of the prestigious ASIS&T Annual Awards. This year’s winners are featured in this section.

**Award of Merit**

Clifford A. Lynch, recipient of the 2008 ASIS&T Award of Merit, thinks quietly and deeply about the big issues of information science and then explains them lucidly and eloquently to his professional colleagues and to the practitioners who benefit from IS developments.

There are few, if any, others who have done so much to make the more arcane aspects of so many different areas of information science comprehensible and approachable to a wide audience. Through interviews, editorials, conference presentations, books and articles in peer-reviewed journals and popular magazines (*Ariadne*, *EDUCAUSE Review*, *First Monday* and *Scientific American*), Cliff has demystified search engines, digital libraries, electronic publishing, open access, preservation and curation, rights management and metadata. Cliff has a knack for gauging the technical level of his audience without being patronizing, whether the audience is an individual in conversation, a packed meeting room or the readership of a publication.

Cliff’s influence and reputation extend to the National Academies of Sciences, and his service includes both the high-profile (e.g., U.S. Office of Technology Assessment) and the unsung (countless visiting review boards, advisory boards and program committees). What matters to Cliff is not whether there is prestige attached to a task, but whether there is a benefit to the organizations and the communities reached.

Not only is Cliff Lynch a prodigious analyst and writer, he is also an accessible colleague, teacher and mentor. Despite his almost continuous travel schedule, Cliff continues to make time for a weekly seminar on advanced information access topics at the UC Berkeley School of Information. The seminar has been a salon for Berkeley alumni, Bay Area colleagues and visitors over the years. He has jointly chaired this “Friday Afternoon Seminar” for the past 35 consecutive semesters.

His casual, unassuming, quietly confident personality, executive competency, good nature and exceptionally broad and up-to-date knowledge of both policy and technical challenges in libraries and higher education make it a true pleasure to present Clifford A. Lynch with the 2008 ASIS&T Award of Merit.
This year’s Watson Davis Award winner truly exemplifies the spirit of the award, and it is an honor to recognize Samantha Hastings as the 2008 recipient. Sam has a long history of service to ASIS&T, and it is easy to see her dedication through her work and her students.

Sam joined ASIS&T in 1989 and immediately stepped into a leadership role. If you want to know what jobs there are in ASIS&T, just look at Sam’s involvement. She has served, chaired or directed the Annual Meeting Program Committee, Executive Committee, Board of Directors, Publications & Scholarly Communication Committee, Awards & Honors Committee, Budget and Finance Committee, Continuing Education Committee, Education Committee, Membership Committee and Nominations Committee; she has directed the ASIS&T SIGs, as well as SIG/ED; served on the ISI Doctoral Dissertation Award jury and the SIG-of-the-Year jury; and, in 2004, was ASIS&T President. There is no question about her willingness to serve the Society.

Sam’s dedication to the Society can be seen through her enthusiasm. She is the first to emphasize the importance of ASIS&T to her students and will find a way to get them to the Annual Meeting. She regularly participates in the New Member Brunch and recognizes the opportunity to welcome and recruit new members. Sam is her own membership committee. She always takes time to network with new members, helping them to find the best place for their service. And everyone knows SIG CON is the most important session.

Throughout the letters nominating Sam for this honor, one finds several constant themes: appreciation for Sam’s support in helping people to get involved in the Society; reference to her infectious energy; and notice that Sam always gives back, not just to ASIS&T, but also in all aspects of her life. She has clearly shown dedication and service to the Society. It is time to thank and recognize Samantha Hastings with the 2008 Watson Davis Award.
valuable applied learning approaches. In addition, Dr. Abels has worked with organizations that affect library institutions as well as institutions outside of libraries demonstrating her out-of-the-box approach to professorship. Her research work is of interest to practitioners, enriching the world of libraries and information science education.

Best Information Science Book Award

Scholarship in the Digital Age: Information, Infrastructure, and the Internet, by Christine L. Borgman and published by MIT Press, is unique in its breadth of disciplines and sources and in the depth to which it investigates these disciplines and sources. The content is remarkably well-integrated and treatise-like and is of interest to many disciplines, while being well grounded in information studies and information science. Thus, it is likely to attract a wide audience. It will prove especially valuable as a teaching text for graduate students at both the master’s and doctoral levels, while also supporting the research of the most accomplished of scholars and the decision making of institutional leaders and national and other policy makers.

Perhaps most valuably, Christine Borgman has, by her individual participation, thorough interviews and very close document analysis, surveyed many if not most of the leading initiatives in digital technologies, in scholarly communication and in scientific and technical societies. The work is a landmark in the study of the process of doing scholarship in the digital age and will remain so for years to come.

Best JASIST Paper Award

The 2008 John Wiley & Sons Best JASIST Paper Award goes to Teresa M. Harrison, University at Albany, SUNY, and Theresa Pardo, J. Ramon Gil-Garcia, Fiona Thompson and Dubravka Juraga, all of the Center for Technology and Government, University at Albany, SUNY, for their article “Geographic Information Technologies, Structuration Theory, and the World Trade Center Crisis,” JASIST, 58(14), pp. 2240-2254.

The article focuses on the important role geographic information technologies (GITs) had in interorganizational responses to the World Trade Center attacks on September 11, 2001. The authors argue that the attacks were a catalyst for change in the use of GITs, moving them from serving as relatively static reference tools to dynamic decision-making tools for emergency situations. The authors support their argument by applying structuration theory to the relations among agents, organizations and technologies using three case studies to show how GITs were applied and adapted preceding, during and following the September 11 attacks.

While noting numerous specific strengths in the article’s presentation of its subject matter, the jury found the article particularly noteworthy for the following reasons:

From left, Christine Borgman accepts the Best Information Science Book Award from Nancy Roderer and Tefko Seracevic, chair of the award jury.
the subtleness of its theoretical review;
- the superb writing in all its constituent parts – theoretical framework, method, results and conclusions;
- the clarity of thought and wisdom in choosing illustrative quotations;
- the ways in which it shows how the project being reported advanced and amplified earlier work;
- the use of well-chosen interviews; and
- the insightful application of theory to actual events.

**JAMES M. CRETSOS LEADERSHIP AWARD**

The James M. Cretsos Leadership Award is presented each year to new ASIS&T members who have demonstrated outstanding leadership qualities in ASIS&T activities. The 2008 Cretsos Leadership Award goes to **Elise Lewis**, University of North Texas, and **Phillip M. Edwards**, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

**Elise Lewis** has been a member of ASIS&T since 2001. Early in her membership, she was instrumental in the formation of the North Texas Student Chapter, contributing her excellent planning and communication skills. Elise has served on the Membership Committee for the past several years, enlivening the New Member Brunch at the Annual Meeting and chairing the Watson Davis Award jury. She has also presented on her research at a number of Annual Meetings. Elise brings creativity, intelligence and humor to all of her ASIS&T endeavors and has shown a natural sense of leadership in her work for the Society.

**Phil Edwards** has contributed in a number of areas since joining ASIS&T in 2002. He was active in both the University of Washington and the University of Michigan student chapters, was a member of the 2006 DASER/Trisociety Symposium program committee and has served in a number of roles within SIG/STI. He also served as a reviewer for both the 2007 and 2008 Annual Meetings and currently is a member of the Constitution and Bylaws Committee. Phil has presented at a number of ASIS&T Annual Meetings and has been published in both the *Bulletin* and in *JASIST*, and he was selected to serve as the student representative to the *Bulletin* Advisory Board. Phil has shown substantial interest in leadership development within ASIS&T and serves as a wonderful example of a leader within our Society.

For these reasons and more, Elise Lewis and Phillip M. Edwards are awarded the 2008 James M. Cretsos Leadership Award.

**PRATT-SEVERN BEST STUDENT RESEARCH PAPER AWARD**

Evaluated by the same rigorous standards as papers submitted for the *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, the best student research paper is judged on technical competence, significance
investigators propose to study author research impact using the number of citers an author’s research is able to attract, as opposed to the more traditional measure of citations. They posit that a focus on citers may provide a more objective measure of an author’s reach or influence in a field, whereas citations, although possibly numerous, may not reflect this reach, particularly if many citations are received from a small number of citers. Among many positive comments, the jurors said the proposal is well-documented; the project is worthwhile and will build on existing work; and the study has the potential to break new ground by further refining our understanding of citation as an activity of authors, rather than as a link between documents.

**Thomson ISI/ASIS&T Doctoral Dissertation Proposal Scholarship**

Christina M. Finneran, Syracuse University, is the winner of the 2008 Doctoral Dissertation Proposal Scholarship for *Factors that Influence Users to Keep and/or Leave Information Items: A Case Study of College Students’ Personal Information Management Behavior*. Christina’s dissertation topic is timely, and she proves her qualification for this award through the depth of the theoretical thinking that she brings to her research. The research area of personal information management is evolving very quickly as a critical, new line of research inquiry, especially with respect to knowledge management and the broader field of information science.
It is our assertion that her findings could provide researchers with a deeper understanding of the motivations and practices of information users. She may also provide information system developers with increased insight and understanding for supporting knowledge and information workers. Christina’s methodology is well designed and thorough, and it demonstrates deep academic insight. Her proposed schedule and budget demonstrate a passion for rigor and self-discipline, which bode well for finishing her investigation.

**ProQuest/ASIS&T Doctoral Dissertation Award**

The 2008 ProQuest/ASIS&T Doctoral Dissertation Award is presented to Eric Meyer for his investigation of observations of 41 scientists working at 13 labs as case studies, and he analyzed the relevant supporting documents and data collected in both quantitative and qualitative analysis. Dr. Meyers presents the research question – what is the relationship between information technologies and social change? – with a social informatics focus. The author points out that “there has been little comparative research that considers both social and technical dimensions of digital photography as an information technology.” He then further describes his research questions, purposes and the significance of social informatics to the information society and information science.

**CHAPTER AWARDS**

**Chapter-of-the-Year**

The 2008 recipient of ASIS&T Chapter-of-the-Year honors is the Los Angeles Chapter of ASIS&T (LACASIS), recognized for its continuing strong programs and membership activities. LACASIS is cited for its strong membership recruitment and retention program, in which every potential, new and non-renewed member is contacted personally. The jury also noted several specific programs, including two for which the chapter collaborated with the local SLA chapter; the chapter’s annual Contributions to Information Science

*Left: Jury chair Prudence Dalrymple, left, presents certificate to Christina Finneran.*

*Right: Eric Meyer accepts his honor from Prudence Dalrymple.*

*Socio-Technical Perspectives on Digital Photography: Scientific Digital Photography Use by Marine Mammal Researchers.* This social informatics research dissertation is well organized and clearly presented. The data was well collected and thorough analyzed. The author studied the intersection between technology and scientific practice for marine mammal scientists using digital photography to identify individual animals, such as whales and dolphins, in the wild. Dr. Meyers used Kling’s socio-technical interaction networks (STIN) strategy to analyze the use of digital photography in this research field and to discover the consequences of this technology for the practice of science. His research methods included interviews and
Award program; and the financially rewarding Annual Program focusing this year on “Tag, You’re It: A Dialog between Social Tagging and Traditional Cataloging.” In other areas, the chapter offers a student scholarship; publishes the award-winning wiki newsletter, OASIS, four times a year; and has set up a business wiki, a private web-based collaboration space for board members to conduct chapter business. Heartly congratulations go to the Los Angeles Chapter for another exemplary year of hard work and tremendous success.

Student Chapter-of-the-Year

Student Chapter-of-the-Year honors go to two worthy units in 2008: University of Washington Information School Student Chapter and the European Student Chapter.

Chapter Member of the Year

Three deserving people from three different chapters receive honors in 2008 for Chapter Member-of-the-Year. In all three cases, these members’ extraordinary activities go beyond the work they do for their chapters and benefit ASIS&T as a whole. The cited members are Rachael Green Clemens (Carolinias Chapter), Christine Quirion (New England) and Bo-Gay Salvador (Los Angeles).

Rachael Green Clemens, who not insignificantly is still a student, was instrumental in seeing that North Carolina and South Carolina were granted an ASIS&T chapter charter in 2007. She utilized her years of extensive experience with ASIS&T to take a leadership role in the formation of the local chapter. Once the chapter was chartered, Rachael led the coordination and promotion of the chapter’s inaugural program entitled, Institutional Repositories: The Great Debate. The April event drew an enthusiastic and diverse audience from the local library and information science community. Reviewers noted her unconditional commitment and ability to juggle so many efforts on behalf of the Carolinias Chapter.

Christine Quirion is a true leader for the New England Chapter. This year she has juggled duties as both program...
chair and chapter chair. Her efforts to keep members involved and engaged in a time of transitional leadership have been a key factor in keeping the New England Chapter active and vibrant. In addition, she experimented with new technologies such as blogs, podcasts and Skype to help keep non-Boston members informed and involved in chapter activities. Reviewers were impressed by both her willingness to jump right in when needed and her innovative approaches to tasks at hand.

Bo-Gay Salvador is an indispensable resource for the Los Angeles Chapter. This year she served as hospitality chair, which means attending every program, greeting members and program speakers, tracking incoming payments for programs and program registrations and maintaining the chapter’s post office box. The reviewers commented on her continuous level of commitment to her chapter over the years, even in her retirement, as well as her key role in making events happen in a chapter that hosts a number of large and small programs each year.

**Chapter Event-of-the-Year**

The 2008 Chapter Event-of-the-Year Award goes to two excellent programs: *Working Together, Working Differently: How Millennials Are Changing the Way Other Generations Learn, Interact and Do Commerce*, hosted by the Potomac Valley Chapter, and *Tag You’re It: A Dialog Between Social Tagging and Traditional Classification*, hosted by the Los Angeles Chapter. Both nominations received nearly identical scores with a common theme of participant engagement. Each event also had its own distinct strengths and benefits to members.

The Potomac Valley Chapter event included a behind-the-scenes docent tour of the Library of Congress, a discussion of local networking opportunities and a two-hour Socratic discussion based on the Pew Research Center’s report, “How Young People View Their Lives, Futures and Politics: A Portrait of Generation Next,” led by Roberta Shaffer, the executive director of FLICC/FEDLINK. The discussion was lively and heated and left everyone
with a clearer picture of different generational concerns on the way people learn, interact and do commerce. The program was offered with a low registration fee for members and was free for students, which resulted in 58 attendees (21 of whom were students). Reviewers were impressed by all that the chapter managed to pack into this single program, the various options for participation and the chapter’s commitment to providing a low- or no-cost program.

The Los Angeles Chapter event gathered speakers from various sectors to present information on social tagging and to open a dialog on its relationship to existing classification practices. Speakers represented public libraries, academic libraries and museums. In addition to facilitating dialog, the event was also a financial success since the chapter was able to secure free facilities and lost-cost catering. All presentations and handouts were made available on the LACASIS website (www.lacasis.org). Reviewers noted the timeliness of the topic, speaker diversity and the opportunity presented to the membership with this interactive program.

**Chapter Innovation-of-the-Year**

The Chapter Innovation-of-the-Year Award goes to the Los Angeles Chapter of ASIS&T (LACASIS) for its wiki (lacasis.wikidot.com), a business tool launched in August 2007 as a private web-based collaboration space for board members to conduct chapter business. The wiki has played a role in nearly all chapter activities, including document archiving, member contacts, program planning/discussion and meeting date/location information. Knowledge-sharing among the board members has been greatly facilitated by this implementation. The board members have also experimented with the survey tool widget to further reduce the need for managing email and alerts to notify members when content has changed. Reviewers viewed the business wiki as an effective and efficient way for members to plan and communicate as well as a powerful means of archiving and documenting the information for future chapter leaders.

**Chapter Publication-of-the-Year**

The Chapter Publication-of-the-Year Award goes to the Los Angeles Chapter’s **Observation of the American Society for Information Science and Technology** (*OASIS*) newsletter (oasisnewsletter.wikispaces.com/). The Los Angeles Chapter has been publishing *OASIS* for over 40 years. As times have changed so too has the format. The chapter migrated from print to electronic in 2004. Electronic delivery over the years has included access to a PDF version, a database driven newsletter and the current wiki format.

Grace Lau, the new editor of *OASIS*, increased the variety and volume of content and encouraged a wider range of contributors by featuring member submissions and by providing students an opportunity to publish articles in this professional forum. As a result, each of the three issues featured at least one student submission from either UCLA or SJSU. Reviewers noted the newsletters’ clean, crisp, concise layout as well as the richness of its content. All were impressed by both the diversity of the authors and the editor’s dedication to seeking fresh perspectives.

**SIG Awards**

**SIG-of-the-Year**

The 2008 SIG-of-the-Year Award is given to two ASIS&T Special Interest Groups: SIG/III and SIG/USE.

As internationalism and global information have become increasingly more important to the academic and corporate environments, SIG/International Information Issues (SIG/III) has demonstrated its strength and importance to the work of ASIS&T. SIG/III consistently produces excellent programs and publications at the Annual Meeting and throughout the year. One key example is the February/March 2008 issue of the *Bulletin of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, in which SIG/III offered a special section that included articles on
Information and Emotion: The Emergent Affective Paradigm in Information Behavior Research and Theory (honored this year as SIG Publication-of-the-Year), SIG/USE managed a trifecta of success: they expanded the available literature in this area, supported the publication activities of their members and created a revenue stream for the SIG and the Society.

SIG/USE members (including Karen Fisher, honored this year as SIG Member-of-the-Year) are also active in supporting recruitment and retention efforts for the SIG and the Society, including hosting their own website, creating a Facebook page and offering “swag” for members at the Annual Meeting. We are pleased to recognize SIG/USE as the 2008 SIG-of-the-Year for its programs, publishing and membership efforts.

example of a special interest group that seeks and finds development opportunities beyond those normally expected of a SIG. The long-standing SIG/USE Symposium not only draws attention to the SIG and the Society, but also helps support other programs of the SIG. Through the publication of

information activities on four continents. The popular International Reception at the Annual Meeting offers an opportunity to celebrate our international – and local – members, and it raises funds to support memberships for professionals in developing countries. SIG/III helps to bring international members to ASIS&T through the InfoShare and Digital Scholars programs and aids many countries in forming and evaluating information policies. As one of the jury members noted, “SIG/III rocks!” In recognition of its work supporting the society at home and abroad (wherever that may be), we are pleased to recognize SIG/III as the 2008 SIG-of-the-Year.

SIG/Information Needs, Seeking and Use (SIG/USE) is an excellent example of a special interest group that seeks and finds development opportunities beyond those normally expected of a SIG. The long-standing SIG/USE Symposium not only draws attention to the SIG and the Society, but also helps support other programs of the SIG. Through the publication of
Karen Fisher accepts SIG Member-of-the-Year on her own behalf and SIG-of-the-Year honors for SIG/USE.

**SIG Member-of-the-Year**

The 2008 SIG Member-of-the-Year honoree, **Karen Fisher**, has been active in many levels of SIG/USE. Now serving as treasurer, Karen has previously served as the SIG’s chair and program organizer. She regularly organizes successful Annual Meeting panel sessions; in 2003 and 2007 she co-organized the annual SIG/USE Symposium. Karen co-edited the proceedings from the 2003 symposium into *Theories of Information Behavior*, a popular ASIS&T publication. Since becoming treasurer of SIG/USE, Karen also initiated an innovative member recruiting project: SIG/USE red suitcase tags for the 2007 Annual Meeting with a printed motto: “How people experience information – Our passion.” Because of her involvement in the leadership, program planning and recruitment activities of SIG/USE, Karen Fisher is named SIG Member-of-the-Year.

**SIG Publication-of-the-Year**

*Information and Emotion: The Emergent Affective Paradigm in Information Behavior Research and Theory*, launched at the 2007 ASIS&T Annual Meeting as a title in the ASIS&T Monograph Series, is the first to bring together work on affective behavior in library and information science. *Information and Emotion* offers a significant new text for SIG/USE members, with contributions by SIG/USE members for the SIG/USE community. The many SIG/USE authors and authors from various fields of study reporting on diverse information behavior research create value in this volume. The book is based on recent theoretical developments and research findings in information science and the cognate fields of cognitive science, psychology, business, education and computer science. Importantly, this book brings together affective and cognitive viewpoints covering both young and adult users’ information behaviors in various contexts and from interdisciplinary perspectives. The book has received excellent reviews from scholars in information science, human-computer interaction and business, among others. This book’s unique contribution to LIS teaching, research and practice qualifies it for the SIG Publication-of-the-Year Award.

The International Calendar of Information Science Conferences ([http://icisc.neasist.org/](http://icisc.neasist.org/)) is a nonprofit collaboration between the Special Interest Group/International Information Issues (SIG/III) and the European (ASIST/EC) and New England (NEASIST) chapters of the American Society for Information Science and Technology, with the additional support of Haworth Press.
The opening plenary session at this year’s ASIS&T Annual Meeting featured Genevieve Bell with a speech that tied directly into the “People Transforming Information – Information Transforming People” theme. Bell, an ethnographer who works for Intel Corporation, was followed by reaction from two more speakers and the audience.

Bell began by noting the Internet is more than just the technology underpinning it. Democracy, transparency and the accessibility of all information are cultural values. URLs, except for those in the United States, contain a reference to their country. This arrangement shows the perception of where the center and the periphery are – views that aren’t necessarily shared globally. Bell says that we are standing at a very interesting and important point in time. What it means to talk about the Internet is about to pivot.

At the first pivot point, the Internet moves off PCs and onto other devices such as phones, TVs, GPSs and gaming consoles. As it does, the types of experiences it affords are transformed. You can’t really think of immersive experiences on a cell phone screen. People will look for specific information rather than just surfing.

Steve Hardin is associate librarian in the Cunningham Memorial Library at Indiana State University, Terre Haute, IN 47809. He can be reached by email at shardin<at>indstate.edu
These changes, she says, are running parallel with people around the world interacting with the web in ways we couldn’t imagine a few years ago. She related a story of a Tanzanian woman who doesn’t have a PC or even electricity, but who is using the Internet through her son who uses an Internet café.

The second pivot point, she says, is the “end of the Anglosphere.” This year, Chinese users of the Internet surpassed the number of American users. Much of the change is occurring in non-English languages. Languages like Mandarin are filled with different shades of meaning than their English equivalents. How will this difference affect searching? And what if the social practice embedded in a language is very different from the social background of your own language?

And then there are different models of connectivity, some with fat pipes and others with narrow pipes. There is more interaction in systems where download speeds are similar to upload speeds. Because it’s getting more expensive to have more services, people may not be able to participate as equals. Experiences and transformations will not always be under our control.

And what about government regulation of the Internet? In 1998, Bell says, Indonesia’s prime minister found there was a higher mosque density than phone density; so he decided to put Internet access in mosques for better coverage. It’s an interesting way to look at access. Also, there are differing governmental agendas for the Internet. Some want to limit access and regulate practices on it.

Bell’s final pivot point involves new and old anxieties. There are concerns about privacy, trust, security, and now, reliability. There are also concerns about access, reputation/image, participation, sustainability, responsibility, authenticity, authorship, ownership, surveillance and control, cultural health (digital literacy), dumbing down and distinctiveness. The list of things we need to worry about, she says, is expanding quickly.

Increasingly, there is no single or fixed notion of “the web.” There are new interfaces, user paradigms and expectations. How do we make sense of non-users and ex-users? Ex-users have tried the Internet and found it not compelling. Disconnection and switching off are also interesting
phenomena. Bell concluded by relating a story of visiting her home town in Australia, where the nearest wireless hot spot is 100 kilometers away. No one had a problem with that.

Reactions

The first reactor was Howard Rheingold, an expert on the social implications of technology and author of *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution*. He teaches at the University of California at Berkeley as well as at Stanford.

Rheingold began by noting that it is possible that the audience had just heard from the one person who’s seen the whole elephant, using the old analogy.

Cultural values are particular, Rheingold said. With things changing as quickly as they are, it’s an interesting challenge to imagine how cultural values will be passed along. A great thing about alphabetic literacy is that it’s simple to teach, and then you have an assumption that you have a group of people that share a medium, if not a shared understanding. Now you have multiple literacies. What used to be a unified literate community is giving way to multiple literacies and multiple communities. He doesn’t know if that’s good or bad.

The accidental coexistence of the cathode ray tube and the computer led to computers with visual interfaces. The merger of the telephone, Internet and PC resulted in the lowering of barriers to collective action, for better or worse. We need to teach people how they can find an answer to a question on the web by posing it properly, and how they can learn whether the answer they get is true.

Rheingold concluded by recommending *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain* by Maryanne Wolf. The years we spend learning to read are a rewiring of our brain. They affect how we see the world. How are our brains being changed by the Internet?

The second reactor was Andrew Keen, a world-renowned critic of
today’s Internet and author of *The Cult of the Amateur*, whose premise is that the public, open nature of the Internet is hurting us by permitting mob rule over expertise.

Keen disagrees with Rheingold’s comment that Bell presented the whole elephant. He maintains she presented only the good-looking half. He agreed with her that the Internet is a philosophical movement. He recommends a book by Fred Turner of Stanford, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*. Keen says Turner suggests the Internet is driven by counter-culture. It’s a series of ideological assumptions about technology being liberating. The idea is that we’re really free on the Internet – an idea especially well articulated on Second Life. We can invent many things about ourselves there. It’s an idealized version of the world.

Keen said his problem is with the other half of the elephant: the Internet is not the real world. The real world is a world of economic exploitation. The individualism of the Internet is incorporated into hostility toward any elephant that looks different, whether seen from the Internet or the real world. So we should beware of digital fascism. Keen says he’s not a Luddite, but he’s concerned we’re not ready for this technology. He’s concerned, he concluded, that the Internet is unable to talk to real life.

Bell responded that she wanted her talk to be a provocation. It seems unlikely to her that this ideology is sustainable. Internet users have very different ideas about what the ideal society looks like. We may have conflicts, but the resolutions will look like the conversations we have offline – how could they not? The conditions that created the Internet, as Keen says, won’t be the conditions that carry it forward.

Keen responded that the idea of the Internet as a global medium, as a place that brings people together, is powerful and seductive. It’s also ideological. There’s clearly very little dialog between left and right – it’s just an echo chamber, he says.

Bell says the Internet is just the latest in a long line of social and technological innovations that have impacted society. Consider the printing press and the bound book.

Rheingold says he’s learned to be careful about deterministic language. The printing press was invented in China several centuries before it appeared in Europe, but various factors determined that it didn’t have as great an impact in China. The Internet was not invented to do what it does; the same goes for the telephone.

The session was opened to audience participation. Jenna Hartel of the University of Toronto told Bell that she seemed to look at the Internet through rose-colored glasses. She added that she thinks it is dangerous because life is bigger than the Internet. Bell answered that people should not leave the session feeling the Internet is the most important thing. It’s not. She’s equally interested in life offline. Keen said when he gives his anti-Internet speeches, teachers come up and thank him. But in reality, for teens, the Internet is becoming their source of information and knowledge. Bell disagreed, saying there are many places where people don’t encounter the Internet until they get to the university, if at all. And many questions,
such as “should I get married on Friday or Tuesday?” don’t have answers on the Internet. Rheingold noted the three speakers were located up on the platform, with most of the audience looking silently up at them. There are some assumptions inherent in that.

Gary Marchionini of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (and ASIS&T president-elect) said he is interested in the speakers’ thoughts about identity. Rheingold says the degree to which we cannot control what’s said about us on the Internet is a problem. Bell says we’ve never had a single identity anyway – who you are at the office is different from who you are with your spouse, children, friends, etc. And Keen notes we’ll have to learn how to manage all this.

Then the session ended, but it’s safe to say the discussion continues!

Genevieve Bell is an ethnographic researcher in Intel’s Digital Home Group. Howard Rheingold is an author, editor and lecturer at the University of California Berlin and Stanford University. His website is http://www.rheingold.com/
Andrew Keen is a Silicon Valley entrepreneur and host of After TV. He blogs at http://andrewkeen.typepad.com/
How are young people using the web? And what does that mean for education? The closing plenary session at the 2008 ASIS&T Annual Meeting featured a woman who’s involved with finding the answers to these questions. Connie Yowell is the director of education at the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation’s Program on Human and Community Development. The Foundation launched its five-year, $50 million digital media and learning initiative in 2006.

Yowell began with a video of eight-year-old Sam, whose favorite activity is Pokémon. It’s both a card game and video game, and since it came out in 1995, it’s become the second most popular video game in history. There are more than 493 different Pokémon. The goal is to capture as many Pokémon as possible. The video showed Sam and his friends playing on Nintendo Wi-Fi so they could all play the same game at once. They also write stories, draw comics and search the web. Yowell says you can imagine what Sam will be like when he goes to college in 10 years.

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Yowell says each day, 60% of U.S. teens use a computer, 50% of young Internet users have created media content and 33% have shared their content on the Internet. But what are they doing with this digital media? The MacArthur Foundation funded a three-year ethnographic study on youth and digital media, focusing on middle and high school kids. [The results of the study, released a few weeks after Yowell’s presentation, are at www.macfound.org.]

Yowell says young people’s participation in digital media isn’t generic. There’s a distinction between friendship-driven and interest-driven participation. Friendship-driven participation most closely resembles the offline world. Its purposes are about the same as in the offline world: dating, friendships, sharing news. Interest-driven practices are “remarkably different,” she says. They are highly social, where participants pursue things in which they are interested. Rather than being isolating, the games are forms of social interaction. Interest-driven networks are also peer-based – with peers defined by shared interest, instead of by age.

Researchers thought digital media would replace TV or books. Instead, Yowell says, the media are converging. For young people, it’s about the content, which they follow across different platforms. Sam doesn’t distinguish much among working on a computer, drawing a comic or writing a story: It’s all about Pokémon to him.

She showed a slide of the communities a 14-year-old girl shares. As she starts at home, goes to school, proceeds to after-school activities and eventually goes home again, there’s ongoing engagement in online activities. She’s using YouTube, MySpace, Pokémon, Galaxy Zoo and Wikipedia, and she is an active member of a Harry Potter fan fiction site. She’s interacting with others all along the way, connecting across local and global communities. Researchers concluded that schools are now just one more node on young people’s networks – they’re no longer the primary learning site for them.

What’s new about all this? First, there’s a rich array of learning opportunities. Second, there are low barriers to participation and production. Third, there’s easy access to expertise and communities of peers. And fourth, there’s the ability to take on different identities, to get
beyond some of the labels we had in high school. Now you can be a jock and a nerd at the same time. There’s not as much social fallout in experimenting with interests in the online world.

Is this good or bad? It’s a tool, Yowell says; it can be used either way. The researchers found young people are also developing expertise in harmful areas. For example, there are networks encouraging anorexic behavior. Creating the new media isn’t intuitive, either. It takes a new set of skills and literacies. Currently we don’t have places for kids to learn these skills. Rather than the digital divide, researchers are becoming more concerned about the participation divide, she said.

What does this mean for our institutions? Henry Jenkins at MIT put out a paper outlining 11 core media skills. (www.digitallearning.macfound.org/att/ef%7E45C7E0-A3E0-4B89-AC9C-E807E1B0AE4E%7D/JENKINS_WHITE_PAPER.PDF) One skill he listed is “performance,” the ability to adopt alternative identities for the purpose of improvisation and discovery. Traditional education teaches students about things. In digital media, students are actually participating in those things. Are we able to shift our learning experiences for young people?

Another skill is “appropriation,” the ability to meaningfully sample and remix media content. Some call it mashups; others call it plagiarism or copyright violation. We’ll probably come up with definitions in the middle.

Then there’s “collective intelligence,” the ability to pool knowledge and compare notes with others in pursuit of a common goal. In these communities the assumption is that everyone knows something, but no one knows everything. Kids with different skill sets play together and try to help each other;

Another skill listed by Jenkins is “transmedia navigation,” the ability to follow the flow of stories and information across multiple modalities and different forms of media. We saw that with Sam’s ability to go across media.

Yowell concluded by describing two projects. The first is “ThinkeringSpace” at the Illinois Institute of Technology (www.id.iit.edu/ThinkeringSpaces). The idea is to create a physical space in the library where students can work with each other and with books. Participants can swipe a book code and see
its content. As a student leaves the space, and leaves her work behind, others can add to it and use it. It becomes part of the social work of the kids as they create. Relevance is obvious to the students, and their engagement is high.

Finally, she talked about the “I Dig Tanzania” virtual summer camp in Teen Second Life (www.holymeatballs.org/second_life/i_dig_tanzania/), a joint project of Global Kids and the Field Museum in Chicago. The kids built a virtual replica of where paleontologists were working in Tanzania. Participants learned what the paleontologists were doing by looking at videos they sent, and by using satellite phones. The teens said it felt like they were working side by side with the scientists. At the end of the project, the group flew to Chicago to meet other teens and share their experience. Yowell said it was obviously an important experience for them.

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Social informatics (SI) researchers are interested and engaged in work that assumes a critical stance towards the notion of mutual shaping – or, as the 2008 ASIS&T Annual Meeting theme might have asked: What is involved in people transforming information and information transforming people? A critical analysis is useful to “bring into question established social assumptions and values regarding information and communication technologies (ICTs) and established understandings of information, particularly as they play themselves out and are institutionalized in social and professional discourses and professional training” [1]. That said, it is inaccurate to suggest that social informatics is unified in content area, analytical framework or methodological approach. Indeed, the variety of research in social informatics reflects the pervasiveness of computing and information in individual, organizational and sociocultural contexts.

The panoply of approaches and subjects of interest was illustrated in the half-day Social Informatics Research Symposium, sponsored by SIG/SI and co-sponsored by SIG/USE, at the Annual Meeting. This event followed up on the extremely successful symposia held prior to the Annual Meetings in 2004, 2006 and 2007. The symposium was well suited to the ASIS&T 2008 Annual Meeting theme because it showcased research on the mutual shaping that occurs between people and information, mediated by technology, that has long been a fundamental assumption of social informatics [2].

For the first time, the symposium was co-sponsored by SIG/USE, with a networking lunch in the middle of the day before the SIG/USE Symposium. Co-sponsorship with the SIG/USE symposium afforded participants a full day of exploration of the transformative relationship between people and information from different but clearly related perspectives. The variety of papers (10 in total and two posters) in the SI symposium exemplified the importance of social informatics research in opening the “black box” of computing to reveal and critique interactions of power, mediation and sociality with information in use. Although the papers were not reviewed and selected for any harmony of theme or approach, a number of underlying problems and questions did emerge, which we explore in the rest of this article.

The role of information in the workplace has always been an important focus of information behavior research and social informatics; indeed, social informatics began as a set of lenses with which to understand how computerization has shaped and been shaped by work and the workplace [3]. Social informatics research has suggested that the very nature of work (and what counts as work and workers) has been reconfigured by the introduction of ICTs. Thus, while ICTs have automated numerous repetitive tasks and enabled asynchronous and geographically dispersed teams to work together, their design and subsequent uses continue to have numerous unintended consequences.

These consequences in the workplace can be marked at multiple levels...
of analysis. For example, Theresa Anderson’s qualitative study of information practices in scholarly work, “Research in Action: Taking an Articulation Approach to Examine the Roles of Information Technologies and Human Interaction in Academic Practice,” went well beyond the traditional “information seeking of scholars” studies to argue that, as much as ICTs support the work practices and rhythms of academic research, their inextricable intertwining with academic life has changed the nature of academic work to make much of it opaque to the outsider, relegating it to what Star and Strauss called “invisible work” [4]. Several of the papers argued that ICTs are not always transformative in positive ways. Emilee Rader’s paper, “Group Information Repositories as Social Systems,” an analysis of the use of an open source collaborative project management system at the University of Michigan by project teams, provided the audience with examples of how the obduracy of work practices, power relationships between faculty and students and decisions around the management of files can profoundly shape the nature of a group’s collaboration, with often maddening effects. Eric Meyer’s paper “The Role of e-Infrastructures in the Transformation of Research Practices and Outcomes” extended this argument to a very large scale by using case studies of e-science infrastructure projects to show that while e-research has transformed some disciplines, significant research work is still being done outside of that under the rubric of e-research – another instantiation of the “invisible work” that became apparent by Meyer’s analysis.

Other papers illustrated the importance of the social analysis of computing to other domain areas. Several papers focused on information and government where a critical and theoretically informed stance is essential to the integration of the two. Frank Lambert applied the social shaping of technology approach to exploring mycommunity.ca, a portal to access nonprofit and government information in municipalities around London, ON, in “The Social Shaping of an Online Community Information Provider.” Lambert demonstrated concrete ways in which interactions among the layers of government that contributed to the project effectively influenced the ways in which users could access and use resources on the portal. Like several other papers at the symposium, he illustrated ways in which theoretically informed social informatics research can and should contribute to the design of information resources and argued for an ongoing dialogue between research and practice.

Kathryn Clodfeldter’s poster, “Innovation, ICTs and Inequality: The U. S. National Information Infrastructure (NII) and Community Networks” illustrated similar themes in understanding and developing community networks. Kristene Unsworth’s paper explored information and government in a different vein: informers and terrorism. In “Information Use, Sharing and Surveillance: The Role of the Citizen-Informer in the War on Terror,” Unsworth used three case studies, including historical ones such as Nazi Germany, to analyze language, power and control in information gathering and use and how information was co-opted to create the concept of the citizen-informer.

A third area of ongoing interest is the development of new analytical frameworks, methodologies and theories for understanding information and computing. While most social informatics research is informed by extant methods in the humanities and social sciences, some researchers are exploring computing with other approaches. For example, Ying Ding’s paper, “Modeling Social Tagging: Upper Tag Ontology (UTO)” used statistical methods and web analytics, both unusual approaches for social informatics, to characterize the Web 2.0 space, which other papers engaged as well. The distributed nature of information networks and user-provided content in Web 2.0 and other environments of interest provide social informatics researchers with opportunities to apply existing theory to new problems and engage new methods as well.

Critical studies is an area of humanistic theory that has significant import for understanding information phenomena, an approach that several papers exemplified. Inna Kouper’s paper, “The Composite Model of Critical Discourse Analysis: Examining Mutual Shaping of People, Information and Technology through Discourse” explored linguistic approaches to understanding ICTs while articulating the difficulties encountered in approaching the often intractable problems posed by those ICTs. Ken
Fleishman’s paper, “Social Analysis of Transparency in Virtual Worlds: Ethical Imperatives for Simulation Design,” also took a critical studies approach to social informatics by exploring virtual reality and simulation, an area of increasing interest for its applications to games, virtual organizations, e-commerce and other arenas, and explored the invisible work of ethics in these environments. Stephen Paling’s paper explored the realm of cultural studies, the creation of the literary and ICTs to posit a framework for understanding art informatics. Michael Tyworth and Steve Sawyer, in “Social Informatics and the Social Analysis of Computing” also used the analysis of computing in a specialized domain, law enforcement, to explore and articulate an organizationally oriented approach to understanding technology, while harkening back to the themes of power, control and invisible work that characterized several other papers in this symposium.

Mark Ackerman of the University of Michigan Ann Arbor’s School of Information provided the symposium with a keynote presentation, “Social Informatics and the Changing Computational Infrastructure,” that illustrated new challenges in large-scale information environments, pervasive computing and new media-facilitated approaches to social life to articulate a “new social informatics” that went well beyond the analysis of computing on desktops, in offices and among knowledge workers. Drawing upon historical analogies of intellectual engagement between critics of technology and their technologies, such as the railroad (critiqued in Frank Norris’s The Octopus) and the modern factory (most famously analyzed by Karl Mark and Friedrich Engels), Ackerman challenged the audience to consider the current moment in time as a kind of transition point before the black box is put around new technology and where its design, uses and shaping are most evident. Ackerman’s paper argued for the blurring of information user and designer and ongoing theoretical engagement with both. For the social informatics researcher, this call was a heartening one.

One of the questions that arose from the symposium was the very provocative one of whether social informatics as a term still has purchase, given that its going concerns have been so seamlessly and effectively integrated into other fields of inquiry (much as computing itself has done so well beyond the workplace): knowledge management, organizational studies, science/technology/society, to name a few. Indeed, the term social informatics has all but disappeared from most information-related conferences, except for ASIS&T. But Ackerman’s paper argued for the ongoing utility and vitality of the term, and suggests enthusiasm for the social informatics pre-conference symposium in future years of ASIS&T Annual Meetings.

Resources Mentioned in the Article

An Intellectual Playground

by Elise Lewis

My intellectual playground – that is what ASIS&T has become to me. It all culminates at our annual meeting. This year, I was honored to receive the 2008 James M. Cretsos Award. I would like to congratulate my co-winner, Phillip Edwards. Winning the Cretsos Award and presenting Sam Hastings the Watson Davis Award are two events that make me look back and reflect on the path that brought me here with much joy. There are many people who have helped me along the way and I am truly grateful for their guidance and support.

In the fall of 2000, I had just started working on my MLS at the University of North Texas. Sam Hastings was running a digital imaging grant project that I was working on as a research fellow. Dr. Sam asked another student and me to present the student perspective of the project. I quickly accepted having no idea what I was doing. All I heard was ASIS&T, Washington DC, conference and something about a panel session.

What an opportunity. I was standing on the shoulder of giants. I presented at my first conference with Sam Hastings, Brian O’Connor, Howard Besser and my colleague Tara Carlisle. I watched in amazement as Howard put together his presentation 20 minutes before our session started. Brian scribbled several remarks on what appeared to be a scratch piece of paper. I spent weeks worrying about the content, theme and delivery of my presentation. The session was a success. After the session I had the opportunity to meet some of the audience members. I remember Barbara Flood told Sam that her students needed to present more often. I remember meeting Bahaa El-Hadidy and starting to realize there is a lineage in our field, and I was now part of it.

The next year I had the opportunity to participate in another panel session. I was looking forward to becoming more involved with the society, for ASIS&T had become my intellectual and professional home. Sam asked if I would be willing to help...
with another special panel presentation at SIG CON. This sounded very important. I had missed SIG CON my first year and saw the great opportunity to present my current research. Lesson learned.

I meet Kris Liberman that year. She was chairing the Membership Committee and encouraged me to come to the meeting. I walked out of that meeting serving on the Watson Davis Committee and in charge of the New Member Brunch with Caryn Anderson. The rest, I guess you could say, is history.

Since then I have continued to serve on the Membership Committee. I also helped launch a student chapter at the University of North Texas, among other things.

ASIS&T has provided me the opportunity to meet people who challenge me to think about things in new and different ways. I always look forward to catching up with old friends at the conferences, to see what research is being generated from the field and finding a way to give back to ASIS&T. I look forward to continuing to grow with ASIS&T. There will undoubtedly be challenges to face in the future, but I am confident that the Society will continue flourish because of the great minds that contribute and serve. I look forward to being a part of ASIS&T in the future and will continue to work to ensure the longevity and success of the Society. I give my sincerest thanks to those who have helped along the way to make this organization such a fulfilling part of my life and career.
Last September a new definition discussion broke out on the Information Architecture Institute (IAI) Members List (ia-members). It was fueled by an initial mail concerning a supposedly deceitful narrowing down of the IAI’s vision, carried out in secret. As with many other similar threads, popular success among list members was huge and led to a number of spin-off threads, calls to arms, calls to reason and a fair share of thought-provoking posts. Then it quietly died down.

The international IA community is now roughly 10 years old, and defining information architecture has been an elusive and maddening task since the beginning. And an enormously intriguing one for information architects worldwide as well, it seems, to the extent that the issue has been awarded its own well-known, fairly successful acronym, DTDT (Defining The Damn Thing).

The debate seems unending, and the most differing positions, opinions and views imaginable have been shared through the years, spanning the gamut from blog post to scientific paper, from slide deck to full-blown nothing-spared mailing list confrontation. Since Peter Morville’s own seminal *Defining Information Architecture* in 2000, the IA community has never ceased to try and define itself, often with a certain morbid indulgence in self-deprecation. Why is that?

Well, for one thing a definition is inescapable if anything has to be communicated. Words represent our view of the world, but even without taking a full leap into cognitive psychology and linguistics, there are simpler, common sense considerations to be taken into account. First, this “define craze” that regularly seems to seize IAs is somewhat a sign of the times and actually fairly common, and it’s a consequence of two different conditions, one internal and the other external: The community is young and somewhat necessarily shallow, and we live in very fast times.

Being young means that different layers are constantly confused in conversation: the self, the role of information architect, information architecture as a practice, information architecture as a discipline. These layers are not the same, but they end very often being considered as interchangeable. IA acts like the lively teenager who does not like to listen to his grandpa saying that there are so many hues of gray in the world and that not everything is black or white: I am an IA, therefore IA is what I do. Or vice-versa. Being shallow translates to a certain uneasiness, self-consciousness and scarce hindsight. Everything is new, but boredom is just around the corner.

In similar fashion, but along another development friction line, it is also common experience that those regarded (or who regard themselves) as founders often relate ambiguously to the growth and change that naturally transforms their initial intuition into a mainstream practice or discipline. Individuals grow out of old clothes, the field changes under the new drive of a thousand other sometimes-colliding views. Indeed, anyone even remotely aware of how free and open source software projects grow knows this transformation is almost always the case once an enterprise – or an idea – matures. But that does not mean the field is dying – quite the contrary. It usually
means new punks are coming along, and they are making all current maître a penser old school. And they redefine. Think of architecture – arts and crafts, modern style, post-modernism. This is the way it works. And in a way it’s also true that every single information architect is entitled to her own personal definition or redefinition. But to have IA change in response to her vision, she has to be influential now and in years to come. Le Corbusier set out to change architecture. Did he manage to do that? Of course, but he himself was first misunderstood, then congratulated, then criticized and then considered largely passé. The discipline of architecture, though, is still there, even if Gehry and Phidias share little resemblance as their buildings.

Then we live in fast times. For the first time in human history, everyone’s definition of a discipline, field or possible venture gets confronted with a thousand other views before it gets through the screening of professional filtering institutions (guilds, unions, committees, scientific peers, publishing houses). Clay Shirky’s publish first, filter second definitely holds true. Following this advice, we find that what is obviously political, the definition of a discipline, is done in public and in front of a potentially enormous audience. That it gets debated from the very start does not surprise anyone, but neither should it surprise anyone that a comfortable settlement is hard to reach. Opinions once heard only verbally move to twits, posts and comments easily and quickly. IAs should be the least surprised of all.

Think for a while of the controversy still engulfing psychoanalysis, under whose umbrella Wikipedia informs us, lie “at least 22 different theoretical orientations regarding the underlying theory of understanding of human mentation and human development,” and imagine a 21st century Freud blogging about his newly conceived ideas on hysteria, neurosis and the subconscious. Then think of the riot that would stir up if Dr. Freud were to be half as successful as he was back in his day: Psychoanalysis 2.0 would make Web 2.0 look like nothing.

On the other hand, though, we definitely do have a phenomenological definition of IA: IA is what has been going on in the self-identified IA community of practice (and related academic oases) in the last 10 years or more. As simplistic as it might sound, this type of definition holds true for most of what we consider settled, often as non-specialists in the field: Someone looked back and drew lines.

In that September discussion, at a certain point the everything is a nail if you have a hammer mantra popped up and an accusation of hubris was spoken loud: IAs see the world as “everything is IA or concerns IA.” Marking the boundaries, expanding them, borrowing from others – that sounds precisely like what any growing field of expertise does all of the time. The point is, the accusation might or might not stand, but the everything is a nail meme is largely the way we codify ideas and make sense of progress.

German architect Peter Behrens was hired by AEG in 1907. He designed their entire corporate identity, from logo to product. Fetch a book on the history of design and you will see he is mentioned as the first-ever industrial designer, which he surely was, though the term itself was coined years later, and applied to Behrens post facto.

We still call Abbot Suger of 11th-12th century Saint-Denis fame, an “architect.” We call Herodotus and Rabanus “historians.” These labels are ones they didn’t choose for themselves, and we mean totally different things by them today than we did when someone first used them. In particular, Herodotus would have had a hard time fitting into the current definition, but we use these labels nonetheless because they allow us to compare, understand and move forward. Our brain is not a computer. People living in the 12th
century didn’t think of themselves as living in the Middle Ages, and Facebook is not really the new AOL.

Is it all that there is? Of course not. But again facts have a certain relevance. Even if someone’s ideas about information architecture are mind-boggling, if they do not discuss them in public, embody them in some communicable artifact and get them to be influential, they are moot. This reality is the main reason behind the upcoming peer-reviewed scientific Journal of Information Architecture, due in Spring 2009. For the discipline to mature, the community needs a corpus, a defining body of knowledge, not a definition.

No doubt this approach may be seen as fuzzy, uncertain and highly controversial in places. Political, even biased.

But again, some overlapping and uncertainty and controversy will always be there: Is the Eiffel Tower architecture or engineering? The answer is that it depends on whom you ask, and why you ask. And did the people who built it consider themselves doing architecture, engineering or what? The elephant is a mighty complex animal, as the blind men in the old Indian story can tell you, and when we look closer, things usually get complex.

The IA community does not need to agree on a “definition” because there is more to do. An analytical approach must be taken on the way the community sees itself, with some critical thinking and some historical perspective. The community needs to grow roots. We hope the Journal will help along the way.

About REG-IA

The REG-IA (Research and Education Group in Information Architecture) is an international volunteer initiative of the Information Architecture Institute (www.iainstitute.org). Started in January 2008, it currently comprises academics from Denmark, Sweden, Italy, Poland and Norway.

The basic premise behind the group is that although IA is a well-established profession and a thriving community of practice, it is not yet a fully recognized academic discipline and it is not, with a few notable exceptions, an acknowledged course of study in most of the EU. That situation means very little communication among institutions, no common perspective(s), no shared understanding(s) and a constant need to reinvent the wheel.

Even though this scenario seems to be slowly changing, we think a little help and perspective is needed to avoid loss of momentum and fragmentation, and the group believes this help and perspective are the responsibility of the people currently researching, teaching and practicing IA. As such, the group’s main purpose is to provide the basis to establish IA as a full-fledged academic discipline and bridge the two camps of professional practice and academia for the common good, as we believe they are both equally needed for the field to grow and mature.

Resources


