The Second International m-Libraries Conference

Journal Article

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At the Event

The Second International m-Libraries Conference

Keren Mills reports on a two-day conference exploring and sharing delivery of services and resources to users 'on the move,' via mobile and hand-held devices, held at UBC in Vancouver, BC, Canada, from 23 - 24 June 2009.

Introduction

Jointly hosted by the University of British Columbia (UBC), Athabasca University, the UK Open University (OU) and Thomson Rivers University, the conference [1] was held on UBC's beautiful campus in Vancouver and covered a broad range of topics, from SMS reference to using QR codes. The conference aims were to explore and share work carried out in libraries around the world to deliver services and resources to users 'on the move', via a growing plethora of mobile and hand-held devices, as well as to bring together researchers, technical developers, managers and library practitioners to exchange experience and expertise and generate ideas for future developments.

Rose garden on the campus of the University of British Columbia

Preconference Workshops

The four preconference workshops, run by staff from Athabasca University and the UK Open University were well attended and well received. They offered delegates the opportunity to try creating a mobile learning object, to learn about designing interactive multimedia for mobiles, reflect on technical development for m-libraries or consider research methods for developing and evaluating m-libraries.

Keynote: Concentration, Connection, Diffusion: Mobilizing Library Services

Lorcan Dempsey, Vice President and Chief Strategist, Online Computer Library Center (OCLC)

Lorcan gave an excellent overview of the types of interaction with information that can be leveraged through mobile devices, citing their use in the 2008 Obama presidential campaign as one example. He also highlighted the fact that there is now greater investment and innovation in the consumer/retail space than in education. For example, applications such as Snaptell [2] might previously have come from education initially. Lorcan pointed out that, as many of us are now using multiple devices with multiple network points, moving towards cloud computing is a natural progression. This means that an exclusive focus on the institutional Web site as the primary delivery mechanism and the browser as the primary consumption environment is no longer practical. Similarly the demand for private spaces is shifting to a demand for social, networked spaces. He also encouraged us to take the "BBC view of the world", saying that content should be syndicated, allowing the audience to collect it and consume it in a variety of environments. Libraries are traditionally an articulation of space, collections, expertise (to organise and help access the collections) and systems and services. These aspects are now moving apart in a networked environment and the types of expertise required of librarians is changing. Libraries can still provide access to scarce resources, but those resources are now people, equipment, specialist advice, exhibition space and space for *ad hoc* rendezvous.

Making the Case for Innovation

Both **Carie Page** of the EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative and **Joan Lippincott**, Coalition for Networked Information, gave delegates an overview of the evidence in favour of developing mobile services in order to help them persuade their senior managers of the value of such innovation. Carie spoke about reaching the 'always-on' generation through mobility, summarising the results of the Speak Up project [3]. She concluded that young students do want to work in their own spaces, but also want support from their educators. Joan similarly highlighted reports and research which provided evidence for changing user requirements that can be supported by services to mobile devices. For instance, as of 2008, 86% of people in the UK and 75% of people in the USA owned a mobile phone or PDA. Yet the EDUCAUSE Center for Applied Research (ECAR) reports that 66% of students own an Internet-capable phone but most do not use it because of the expense [4]. Joan emphasised the importance of understanding your own user population before developing new services.

Several delegates in sessions I attended asked the presenters how they had persuaded their library managers to fund their mobile work and they similarly responded that they had used research reports to demonstrate the potential value of the new services.

Having recently undertaken a short project to ascertain user requirements for mobile information provision at both the University of Cambridge and the Open University, I can attest to the value of researching the needs of your own user population – the requirements at a campus-based university are very different to those at a distance-learning institution such as the OU, and can be affected by a variety of different environmental, cultural and economic factors [5].

Using the Humble SMS

Ken Banks of kiwanja.net [6] gave an inspiring presentation on the role of mobile phones in the developing world and how open source tools such as FrontlineSMS [7], which he developed, can enable not-for-profit organisations to reach geographically dispersed communities. Ken commented he was inspired to develop FrontlineSMS because he was frustrated by the failure of NGOs to report on the tools they had used to do valuable innovative work, thereby making it difficult for other organisations to imitate or build on their work. Perhaps this observation is just as valuable as knowing that this software is available for libraries to use for delivering information to their users. In these difficult economic times* sharing practice and collaborating on development of tools and services can save time and money.

SMS reference services are also taking off – two papers reported on pilot services at universities in the USA which were taking very different approaches. UCLA and Yale worked together to experiment with providing SMS reference through a vendor platform, Text a Librarian [8], allowing integration with their reference desk rota, whereas NYU simply bought a Blackberry and gave students the phone number, with staff taking it in turns to respond to queries that came in by SMS. The Text a Librarian platform allowed staff to receive and respond to enquiries through Microsoft Outlook as well as through a mobile phone. Both projects found that their expectations about the types of enquiries they received were challenged and that library users did not expect an immediate response and were willing to engage in a reference interview by SMS. They also found that Library staff required support and training to be able to respond to enquiries within the 160 character limit of an SMS and to become accustomed to using common 'Txt Spk' abbreviations to do so. In common with findings of libraries evaluating their Web chat services, transcript analysis showed that some SMS enquiries were coming from within the library building.

Mobile Information Delivery

There were several papers on the topic of mobile information delivery, from different parts of the world. **Jose Luis Andrade** of Swets North America spoke about the role of subscription agents in delivering e-journal and e-book content to mobile devices that support javascript or Web browsing.

Representatives from Athabasca University described the development of their Digital Reading Room, which allows library users to access both internally and externally produced content through their mobile devices using Auto Detect and Reformat technology.

Another method of delivering content to mobile devices is podcasting, as demonstrated by UBC's Science and Engineering Library, whose staff reported on their use of podcasting as an outreach tool. Many mobile phones, as well as dedicated MP3 players and handheld game consoles, are capable of playing podcasts.

A delegate taking a moment to reflect on the Conference in the rose garden

Linking the Physical to the Virtual

One of the most popular talks on the first afternoon was the presentation by **Kate Robinson** of the University of Bath (UK) on QR codes and their applications for libraries.

'QR codes are two-dimensional bar codes that can contain any alphanumeric text and that often feature URLs that direct users to sites where they can learn about an object or place (a practice known as "mobile tagging")' [9].

Kate's presentation was based on a survey undertaken at the University of Bath to ascertain whether students are aware of QR codes [10]. It was found that currently 12-15% are aware of them, but only 2% use them, although this could be influenced by the limited number of camera phones capable of reading QR codes. Ideas for using them in the library included linking floorplans to podcasts, linking Subject Librarians' offices/business cards to Web pages, and sending catalogue records/class numbers to users' phones. However, the paper concluded that students are not sufficiently aware of QR codes to make use of them without encouragement and support.

A collaborative project between the University of Limerick (Republic of Ireland) and the University of Plovdiv (Bulgaria) is also working to link the library catalogue to an interactive map of the library using wifi and Bluetooth [11]. Their system architecture is too complex to detail here, but is likely to allow them to provide extensive mobile services within the library.

Libraries Leading Mobile Development

A noticeable theme was that several speakers found that the libraries are ahead of their institutions in investigating, developing or implementing mobile services. **Will Reid** and **Vicky Owen** of Liverpool John Moores University reported on a project which began as an investigation of ways the library could support Mobile Learning within the institution. They eventually found that they had to expand the project to include development of best practice guidelines for the University. Similarly the majority of mobile development undertaken so far at Athabasca and the OU has been led by their libraries.

Conclusion

This was a fascinating and valuable conference which provided an excellent opportunity to meet fellow innovators from around the world and to learn more about the ways m-library services have been implemented.

At least two of the projects presented at this conference were reported by the speakers to have been inspired by attendance at the first m-libraries conference in 2007, so I hope delegates will once again take inspiration from the conference for useful developments to their library services.

For anyone interested in following these topics further, many of the presentations are available on the conference Web site [1]. There was an active Twitter backchannel [12] during the conference and several delegates have blogged their impressions [13].

* Editor's note: In an attempt to future-proof this report, I have created a snapshot of the global economy for the benefit of readers unacquainted with the summer months of 2009.

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Article Title: "The Second International m-Libraries Conference"
Author: Keren Mills
Publication Date: 30-July-2009 Publication: Ariadne Issue 60
Originating URL: http://www.ariadne.ac.uk/issue60/m-libraries-2009-rpt/
Copyright and citation information File last modified: Thursday, 06-Aug-2009 15:20:50 UTC