

Conference Review: Society for Scholarly Publishing

BY HEATHER HEDDEN

Heather Hedden, principal of Hedden Information Management, provides services in taxonomy and thesaurus creation and in book and web site indexing. She teaches online and onsite workshops on taxonomies and web indexing through the continuing education program of Simmons College Graduate School of Library and Information Science and has also given numerous conference presentations. Heather is the founder-manager of the Taxonomies & Controlled Vocabularies SIG of ASI, past manager of the Web Indexing SIG, and past president of the New England Chapter of ASI.

Although the ASI national conference is a great event for indexers to network and engage in professional development, indexers should not ignore other conferences in related fields, especially if they occur locally. One

such conference is the annual meeting of the Society for Scholarly Publishing (SSP). The most recent of which was the society's 30th anniversary meeting: "Empires of the Mind: Inventing the Future of Scholarly Publishing," held May 28-30 at the Westin Copley Place hotel in Boston. A record number of over 760 people attended this year's event.

The scope of SSP includes both book and periodical publishing, but with a much greater emphasis on periodical publishing, and also the online distribution of articles. "Publishing" is not limited to original publishers but also includes secondary distributors, such as database vendors. Actually, anything having to do with how a scholar gathers information, collaborates, shares information, and publishes is of interest to the SSP and its conference. All academic disciplines are covered by the SSP, but the data-rich science and medical fields dominate the field. Thus "scholarly" in the publishing industry does not mean exactly the same as "scholarly" material for us indexers, emphasizing instead periodicals and articles over books, sciences over the humanities, and informal "publishing" by scholars in blogs, wikis, and other new media.

The conference began with a day of "pre-meeting seminars," a choice of three in the morning and three in the afternoon on the following topics: applying "semantic tagging" in indexing with taxonomies, implementing Web 2.0 concepts, utilizing Microsoft Office 2007, digitally preserving documents, complying with public access mandates for federally funded research articles, and enriching online journal articles with supplemental materials such as multimedia. These "seminars" were in fact panels of four to five speakers, each of whom gave

30-40 minute presentations and allowed ample time for questions. It was an effective and interesting format which held the interest of the audience.

"Say What You Mean: How Semantic Tagging Makes Content More Discoverable, More Useful, and More Valuable" was one of the pre-meeting seminars that I attended. The most interesting presentation of the panel was perhaps Stephen Rhind-Tutt's explanation of how Alexander Street Press has developed highly customized online controlled vocabulary facets for the searching of literature databases. These include a database of over 8000 theatrical plays indexed and searchable by author types, theater types, production types, company information, character characteristics, and scene subject; and an early North American history database that has controlled vocabulary facets for author, source, year, place, environment, flora, fauna, encounter, people, personal event, and cultural event.

Both Thursday morning's keynote and the afternoon plenary sessions had excellent speakers who complemented each other nicely. The keynote was delivered by Alex Wright, an information architect at the *New York Times* and author of *Glut: Mastering Information through the Ages*. Entitled "The Deep History of the Information Age," his presentation gave insightful and sometimes amusing analysis of periods in history when the old information system was disruptively replaced by a new one. But he spoke not merely of information systems, but of the use of hierarchies and taxonomies in particular.

This historical view of information technology was balanced with a more futuristic view as presented in the afternoon plenary by M.I.T. Media Laboratory professor Pattie Maes. With photo slides and videos, she explained M.I.T. inventions such as Reachmedia whereby a user wearing an electronic wrist band with wireless access, when picking up a product with embedded electronic ID tag could then obtain information about the product over a cell

phone. Another invention was electronic sticky notes that can send handwritten messages to electronic media.

The balance of past and future was reflected in comments of the SSP president Susan Nayer Kesner, saying a record number of people attended this conference to “hear sessions focused on the possibilities afforded by new technologies while learning lessons from our past.” By offering discounts to both students and retirees, SSP is indeed honoring both past and future knowledge. Additionally, five student and five early career members attended the conference on travel grant awards made by conference sponsors.

The conference also featured four breakout sessions lasting an hour and a half, each with four simultaneous sessions. These were panels of three to four speakers on a common theme. One of the breakout sessions I attended was also on taxonomies and the first speaker was ASI past-president *Seth Maislin*.

An exhibit hall at the conference was open all three days and was also the venue for continental breakfasts, refreshment breaks, and the Wednesday

evening reception. The 38 exhibit booths included representatives from all kinds of publishing service companies, with an emphasis on digital and electronic services, along with some database vendors. One exhibitor commented that the activity on the exhibit floor was much livelier than the exhibit of the conference of the Professional Scholarly Publishing division of the Association of American Publishers that he had attended early this spring. Of interest to indexers is that some of these exhibiting companies are what we call “packagers” and do indeed contract out indexing services. Some of them were interested to hear that I was a freelance indexer, and we exchanged cards.

If you are fortunate to live near one of the venue cities for the SSP conference, I highly recommend that ASI members (whether book indexers, periodical indexers, taxonomists, editors, or librarians) attend at least the exhibits and, if possible, at least one day of the conference. While the SSP conference costs more than the ASI conferences, it does offer certain discounts including to “librarians” who paid only \$300 for this year’s conference. For additional discount tips see the sidebar article. ●

Society for Scholarly Publishing

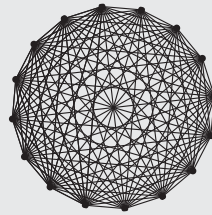
The Society for Scholarly Publishing (SSP) includes members from companies, educational institutions, and other non-profit organizations involved in publishing, printing, online products and services, technical services, editorial services, and library/information services. As SSP president Susan Kesner explained: “SSP is perhaps unique among organizations in that it caters to the interests of all those involved in the many facets of scholarly communication.”

SSP was established in 1978 and has steadily grown over the years to reach 882 members on the eve of this spring’s conference: 825 in the United States and 57 internationally (primarily in the United Kingdom). Thus, despite conferences much larger than ASI’s its membership is actually smaller. SSP does have a significant number of organizational members, though, which can include up to either 5 or 20 employee members depending on whether they are a “supporting” or “sustaining” organization. Of SSP’s 882 members, 363 are through the organizational membership of their employer. There are currently 41 organizational members which include various types of publishers, literature retrieval database vendors, and companies that serve publishers. Publishers include both the traditional scholarly publishers of university presses and also specialized nonprofit organizations that engage in publishing, such as the American Medical Association and the American Psychological Association. Database vendors include EBSCO, Gale (Cengage Learning), and ScholarOne (Thomson).

Membership is quite unevenly distributed geographically, depending on where scholarly publishers are located. The regions with the most members are the Washington, DC, area (with 79 members in the District of Columbia, 77 in Maryland, and 61 in Virginia), the New York area (with 101 in New York and 30 in New Jersey), 103 in Massachusetts, 76 in Pennsylvania, 76 in California, and 73 in Illinois. The conferences therefore rotate among only three venues: Boston, Washington DC/Baltimore, and San Francisco. The next conference will be in Baltimore, May 27-29, 2009.

The SSP has a very informative web site: www.sspnet.org. The site includes a lengthy and up-to-date job listing and a member services directory. Indexing is listed as one of the member services, but as of this writing there were only two members listed in this category.

Of particular interest to ASI members is that SSP is also a client of the Resource Center for Associations in Wheat Ridge, CO. In other words, our two associations share the same staff and the same executive director, *Francine Butler*, who will be a familiar face at either association’s conference.



Getting into Conferences for Less or Free

- Attend the exhibit only, where you will do the most job networking. This is usually free or for a nominal fee, but you might have to state that you are a professional in the field, and not just anyone off the street.
- Get a one-day-only pass, register early enough for the early-bird rate, and/or look into any possible discount categories, such as being new to the career or being retired (both of which are SSP categories).
- Be a speaker, while also promoting yourself and indexing. Unlike ASI, many conferences offer free or discount registration for speakers. Note that speaking proposals usually need to be submitted 6-9 months in advance.
- If you are a freelance writer, find out if a local newspaper will get you a press pass (since you are a local expert writer on the subject), or if a national trade journal will get you a press pass, also because you are a local expert on the subject.
- If you have any connections with an exhibitor, you might be able to hang out as an affiliate at their booth.