

Observations of an Olympics survivor

What happens when information and human beings collide in a big event like the Olympics? I was part of a team who ran a specialist telephone inquiry service funded by the Olympic Co-ordinating Authority. We were based in the Disability Access Service of the State Library of New South Wales. Our purpose was to provide information to visitors, athletes and locals with a disability who were attending the Olympics and Paralympics. Here are some observations I gleaned from this experience.

On paper vs online

There is still a place for paper based products and I am not talking about tissues here. The official Olympics websites

should have been all we needed to answer our client's inquiries, but sadly no. We relied on the old paper based products of yesteryear: newspapers and books. The *Sydney 2000 access guide* and the *Official spectator guide* were the two publications that had the answers to most questions. The *Sydney 2000 access guide* was particularly useful. For reasons beyond our comprehension this publication did not leave the printers till a few days before the Olympics opening ceremony. It was then scanned onto the website. We have the technology, but it is still being operated by cave people.

Humans vs self-serve vending machines

There is still a place for human beings as well, strange as that may sound. We

spoke to many people who had the same resources as we did, but they wanted to talk to a person. Some people had the *Official spectator guide* sitting by the phone with them, but they had never turned to the lift-out map on page 34 and followed the green arrow. Other people wanted to chew over their options with a good listener.

Government information vs cold hard facts

We wanted to give our clients accurate information. At the same time we could only give our clients what was available. We were officially told that there would be a wheelchair accessible spectator bus on every route running at half-hourly intervals. People wanted to see a timetable. We could not get a timetable from anywhere including ORTA and SOCOG. It soon became apparent that the half-hourly wheelchair accessible bus was an imaginary beast. The official line never changed, but lots of people were inconvenienced. We chose our words carefully when answering these questions and prayed that nobody would shoot the messenger.

Information rich vs information poor

Many people were asking about how to get to an Olympic venue from their suburb. This meant we were privy to the real estate buying power of our clients. An interesting pattern emerged. The more affluent the person the more they expected. For example, courtesy wheelchairs were available, but they could not be booked. You had to wait around till a volunteer fetched one. For those in the low-income brackets this sounded fine. They were much relieved that they would not have to carry grandpa piggy-back style from the bus stop to the venue. For those in the high-income brackets this was not good enough. They wanted chauffeur driven golf carts that would be waiting for them when they arrived. Again we chose our words carefully and wondered about Australia the classless society.

Target client group vs passing trade

We expected our clients to be people with a disability who were interested in sport. As it turned out the majority of our callers were able-bodied people who could not walk long distances due to old age, late stages of pregnancy or temporary injury. They were interested in sport though. I am not interested in sport, but I do like to watch when people go looking for information.

Laura Molino

State Library of New South Wales

University librarians meet in Brisbane

The 21st conference of IATUL (the International Association of Technological University Libraries) was organised by the Queensland University of Technology Library, and held at its Gardens Point Campus in July. The conference theme 'Virtual libraries: virtual communities' attracted more than 200 delegates from nineteen countries.

A number of keynote and invited speakers presented papers outlining the challenges facing university libraries in the 21st century. Jim Neal, Dean of University Libraries, Johns Hopkins University and former president of ARL, discussed the technical revolution surrounding our universities and the need for effective responses to these by university libraries. Colin Steele, university librarian at the Australian National University discussed the development of online learning and the role of libraries in maximising knowledge management. Dr Patricia Senn-Breivik, dean, university library, San José State University and chair of the National Forum on Information Literacy (United States), argued for libraries becoming key players in enhancing undergraduate learning. Two panel debates of Australian and overseas experts focussed on library/publisher relationships and new ways of purchasing, and on the politics of information literacy.



Conference chair, Gaynor Austin; Uncle Bob Anderson, who welcomed the delegates; Dr Nancy Fjallbrant, outgoing IATUL president; QUT vice-chancellor Professor Dennis Gibson, and incoming IATUL president, Michael Breaks

The conference provided the opportunity to showcase the best in Australian university libraries through presentations from a number of university librarians and through visits to a selection of university libraries in South-East Queensland. It also provided international visitors with the opportunity to share Australian lifestyle and natural surroundings — the kangaroos and lorikeets at Currumbin Sanctuary were a particular hit with overseas delegates.

Conference evaluation indicated that the organisation and program were an outstanding success and will provide a benchmark for the next IATUL conference which is to be held in 2001 in Delft, the Netherlands. ■