

Services to Remote Users and Maintenance of Remote Site Libraries

Report on the “Birds of a Feather” Session at LISA-II

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Remote-site library collections may be few in number but are critically important to the technological progress of the work attempted at such locations. For the instrumentation staff, up-to-date information on methods and materials is necessary, just as access to the latest astronomical data is needed by the observatory’s astronomers whether resident or visiting.

The constraints of funding make it a challenge to provide both service and literature to all users. The remote user needs to have as timely an access to all desired information as is available to the main library user.

The education of users poses more problems. Due to distance, the librarian must either travel, usually permitted as seldom as practicable, or tie-in electronically. How frequently this travel should be scheduled depends on the size of the remote site’s staff, both technical (engineers, instrument builders, etc.) and scientific (in our case, astronomers). Visiting astronomers are likely to either bring their information requirements with them from their home sites, or to have obtained what they needed from the main library prior to departure for the observatory outback. This is likely, but not certain. Changes in observing plans can make it necessary to accumulate substantial amounts of data on short deadlines.

Whether the remote site users do their own online searching, or whether they ask for assistance from their librarian, the question remains, “how should the item be supplied”? Some remote site libraries are fortunate enough to have current issues of the main journals, while others only receive their journals after binding. The latter cannot be considered “current”, but are useful for supplying backsearch requests. Other sites must depend on the main library to fax all requested materials. Lacking the fax, the postal mail is often faster than shipping items up along with travelling personnel.

Remote site clientele are sometimes up to the minute on internet connectivity; otherwise, it is the librarian who must provide the training to enable the connectivity. Specialised library automation programs need to be taught both verbally and passively. A personal training session can be reinforced with very detailed, fool-proof instruction (with examples) left behind on paper. This paper instruction is invaluable to the visitor who requires searches at odd hours. For this reason instructions must be detailed enough to presuppose that the user has no background experience whatsoever.

Online services are fine (while they are accessible) but paper copies are still needed, and pose some difficulties of their own: temperature, humidity and infestation are insidious and seemingly unconquerable predators of our library collections. The remote site librarian must be schooled in the elementary aspects of conservation and preservation. Learning such awareness is not difficult. Funding the solutions is usually the bigger problem, for which there appears to be no immediate solution.

Perhaps we can look forward to the day when all information is online and all of our remote site clientele are Web-wise, and everyone is well-supplied, if not woefully satiated, with information. Until the phone lines are down, the power goes out, or the 'net crashes .. but that will be the topic for another session.