On the second day another American, Bob Boiko, provided the keynote talk. Boiko, author of the Content management bible, introduced the terms metator and metatorial. Boiko is on the faculty of the University of Washington Information School and also runs a company, Metatorial Services Inc. http://metatorial.com/. On this website a need for a metator is described in the following way: "Overall, metadata needed a type of person who was a cross between an editor, a librarian, and a database administrator to do a good job creating and maintaining metadata."

Linda White, Digital Projects co-ordinator at the Library of Congress was one of the speakers on the final day. She spoke of the experiences in migrating the traditional skills of librarianship into the online environment. One of her comments that I remember was "we need to think of the library as remote and not the users as remote." Not all speakers were from 'over the pond'. There was a good number of papers from Europe. Ones I particularly found interesting were Wouter Gerritsma and Marc E. Loman on implementing portal functionality at Wageningen library in the Netherlands (particularly as in one of their PowerPoint slides the key book on organic farming given was written by a colleague from Aberystwyth!) and Evelind Hutzler from the University of Regensburg in Germany talking about the Electronic Journals Library/Elektronische Zeitschriftenbibliothek.

In addition to the formal presentations there was a number of discussion or question/answer type sessions. One on searching involved acknowledged experts such as Marydee Ojala (editor of Online), Phil Bradley, Danny Sullivan (SearchEngineWatch), Chris Sherman and Gary Price. The organisers reported that some 800 delegates, from countries as far away as Australia, Bahrain, Canada, China and the Philippines attended sessions at the conference. Seating in the main auditorium was very comfortable although some of the other sessions in much smaller rooms were so well attended that many of us ended up sitting on the floor!

The layout of Olympia means that there is quite a walk from the conference area to the exhibition area and so it is not easy to just 'pop-in' to a few stands in between papers. There was an impressive number of exhibitors– 250 or so in all, and the organisers state that there were 11,000 attendees over the three days. As ever, some of the stands were very big and 'flashy', others were smaller and more subdued. For seasoned Online attendees it is always interesting to note which organisations are NOT exhibiting at Online in any one year, and to ponder the reason, as well as, of course to hear of new products from the exhibitors. An impressive addition this year was the number of free sessions (over 100) many by independent experts (i.e. not describing a specific product from an exhibition stand). These sessions covered Information

Masterclasses (in information literacy, weblogs, managing virtual learning environments, collaborative working, tips and tricks of searching), Career talks, Subject focused sessions (e.g. medicine, law, engineering), and Content management. The one I attended on weblogs by Peter Scott at the University of Saskatchewan was very well attended.

So all in all a lot to see and hear about. As with all conferences and meetings the 'content' is important but also meeting people is important. As ever at Online I met some old friends, some old students as well as new people. In particular, as I am involved in the education of library and information science (LIS) professionals I especially enjoyed 'ad hoc' discussions with Swiss and Swedish colleagues also involved in LIS education who I found myself sitting by at various functions.

Many of you reading this may also have been at Online … and perhaps helping on the ever-present and ever-useful UKOLUG help desk. Your experiences will no doubt be very different from mine… there is so much to see, so many people to meet that all attendees have to work out exactly what they wish to see and all will have a different view of the event. For me, the time was well spent. I learnt a lot about new developments and enjoyed meeting people. The Conference Chair and Vice Chair (Martin (White) and Karen (Blakeman), both of good UKOLUG pedigree, and their various committees are to be congratulated on bringing together an impressive collection of speakers that attracted an interesting collection of delegates.

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Perspectives on Information Architecture

Seminar organised by the UK Online User Group with the support of the Asilomar Institute for Information Architecture

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The main question in my head before the meeting was "What is Information Architecture?". Discussion with other attendees on arrival showed that many others were thinking the same thing. Fortunately, a major theme during the morning was to review and discuss a range of possible answers to this. Martin White, whose idea the meeting was, raised the matter right from the start, and introduced us to AIfIA http://www.aifia.org/. He added another question for us to keep in mind throughout the day: "Is there a role for CILIP and UKOLUG here?".

Alan Gilchrist guided us into the subject along an historical path strewn with acronyms, from Management Information Systems via Knowledge Management to Information Architecture. He reviewed the factors driving promotion of Information Architecture and presented statistics to emphasise the urgent, great need for really effective ways of retrieving information from the rapidly-expanding morass available to us. He put before us several definitions of Information Architecture from the scholarly literature of a range of fields of academic study; another theme of the day emerged - Information Architecture touches on many fields in addition to information science. We were reminded that the information model, with its taxonomies, thesauri and metadata, is just one layer in the structure necessary to link users with information. Alan concluded by stressing the importance of good, controlled metadata, drawing attention to the e-Government Metadata Standard.

Stella Dextre Clarke expanded on the 'metadata' topic. She gave us a memorable image of a Russian doll representing a system where taxonomy and metadata form the innermost layers, which must fit inside and work well with the outer layers - workflow and business objectives. She followed with a useful checklist of issues to consider before setting up such a system. This led on to the question "Who knows about Information Architecture?". Starting where my career began, with a bibliographic database built from hand-written abstracts according to a set of rules that formed the metadata, she demonstrated that one form of Information Architecture began in the publishing industry and has evolved to suit an online world; what was a niche speciality is now "everybody's business, a vital resource". Another important theme emerged: Information Architecture is one of our traditional core skills, but we need to raise our profile and sell it to a wider audience.

David Haynes pursued metadata further. He started with several thought-provoking questions about what it is and why it matters. His examples of non-English information sources illustrated very clearly that metadata must suit its context. The importance of obtaining recognition of relevant information science and librarian skills in the rush for information architecture was highlighted again, with the warning that we cannot let it be taken over by the information technologists! David addressed the 'evidence base' necessary to prove our point. This provoked a lively discussion which ranged over the material presented by all the morning's speakers.

After we had enjoyed a good lunch amidst pleasant surroundings and good company, Mark Everest spoke about web design. He defined the purpose of information architecture from this perspective and went on to demonstrate in some detail how he applies it, using a real-life case study. In particular, he focused on user-centric information architecture, giving us some good ideas on how to apply this.

Roger Evernden talked on "Architecting Information" from a business perspective, demonstrating that 'visual aids' need not equate to PowerPoint (tambourine and juggling balls!). He continued the focus on users and directed our attention to user expectations, mental models and information-handling skills. He asked us to consider the value of a piece of information and the way that changes when a piece of information is linked to others - the "value chain" - and how things look different when viewed from different parts of an organisation. Roger told us to build information architectures for the future in a way that allows them to adapt as needs change.

Shelley Hardcastle picked up many of the themes and issues raised in the earlier talks, using a specific company intranet to show us information architecture in a real-life practical situation. The importance of seeing things from the users' view point was again emphasised, and the need to design systems for busy people with no time for information management. She concluded with some challenging thoughts on the current status of information architecture, a list of wants & actions to improve things, and an embryonic SWOT analysis to stimulate our grey cells.

This allowed us to glide effortlessly into a discussion period, where Karen Blakeman encouraged us to propose how we emerge from the 'mud hut' of Information Architecture, where we are now and how CILIP and UKOLUG can help. As a result, a list was drawn up: case studies; tools; advocacy; training/development; and building a community of interest with other professional bodies.

Around 40 people attended, drawn from library and information services across the whole spectrum and I would be surprised if they had not all gone away with a better understanding of what information architecture can be and how it might apply in their jobs. Many thanks to Karen Blakeman and Martin White for arranging such a stimulating day.

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Book Review

Managing your internet and intranet services
Peter Griffiths. Facet Publishing. London. 2004
ISBN 1-85604-483-1 256pp. £29.95

I hate reviewing books like this. I open the book and scan through for the obvious errors and omissions. There are none. Bother. I'll just have to read the book through line by line and find them. There are just one or two. Something wrong here. Ah. The author is Peter Griffiths. That explains why I can't find many. But of course I'll catch him out on currency, as things change so quickly in Internet Land, and you know what publishers are like. Bother. Failed again. The speed