

Obligatory disclaimer: Before proceeding, I want to state very clearly that—as with anything I write in this space that is not explicitly attributed to someone other than myself—the reflections that follow are my own thoughts and views. They in no way are intended to represent the views either official or personal of LITA or ALA officials or employees.

While I am writing these lines just a week or so after the end of the American Library Association (ALA) Midwinter Meeting, by the time you see them the ALA Annual Conference in Chicago will be just days away. I've been reflecting (stewing?) for some time now about the question of ALA conferences: Why do I attend, and what do I get from these gatherings? Is the vendor/exhibitor "tail" wagging the ALA/attendee "dog"? Is attendance responsible in a time of straitened budgets? And, most recently, what is the environmental cost of attendance?

For the moment, I'd like to consider only one of these. We all know that flying is, from an environmental perspective, enormously wasteful and destructive. Yet, for attendance at ALA and most other professional conferences, air travel is the only practical means, unless either one is fortunate enough to live in the area or ALA holds the event in a place such as New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, or Washington, each of which can boast credible commuter rail service. Sadly, in most other places trains are really not an option; how many of us can imagine being able to take a long-distance Amtrak train to an ALA conference?

So I wondered what it costs the environment for all of us to go to an ALA conference. The following admittedly broad-side-of-barn figures for the recently completed Midwinter Meeting in Denver are real eye-openers (you may not like my assumptions, but we have to assume some things, and after all, I'm only trying to get an order-of-magnitude number):

- A. Number of paid attendees at Midwinter Meeting 2009: 9,850¹
- B. "Fudge" figure for those who didn't fly (local attendees or those close enough to use other means of transport): 1,000
- C. Total number of attendees who flew (A-B): 8,850
- D. Average distance to Denver (round trip, in metric tons of CO₂ produced): .3635²
- E. Total metric tons of CO₂—the "carbon footprint"—for all attendees who flew to Denver (C x D): 3,217

I'm guessing this is a conservative number; still, the total "carbon footprint" of all who flew to the Midwinter

Meeting was more than 3,000 metric tons of CO₂.³ That seems to me to be a giant's footprint indeed for what we are told is primarily a "business meeting." And this, of course, represents only that portion of the footprint that one identifies with air travel . . . enumerating the actual footprint would require taking into account many other sources of waste, with the resulting total being far larger.

Is it just me, or does this seem to be an extravagance these days? Given that the vast majority of our "business meetings" can be transacted through video conference, teleconference, e-mail, or similar technological means, how do we continue to justify the indulgence of attending such conferences as the planet warms to temperature levels not observed in thousands of years?

At a minimum, I would suggest that it's high time we—individually or as a profession—began to think hard about compensating for our excess by purchasing carbon credits. I personally think of them as "bleeding heart environmentalism," that is, little more than a means for we "haves" to assuage our guilt about our profligate ways. But even offset payments would be better than nothing. The obvious way to handle this would be for ALA to add a modest (\$5–10) surcharge to the meeting registration fee, with the resulting proceeds dedicated to an approved beneficiary.

Let's see . . . my "carbon footprint" for flying to Midwinter Meeting 2009 is .38 metric tons. I can purchase an "offset" for about \$5 and apply it to any of several worthy causes shown on the carbonfootprint.com website. Ah, I feel better already . . .

. . . or not.

More Midwinter Meeting Fallout

One of the more interesting sessions I attended at the Midwinter Meeting was a sleeper bearing the title "Redefining Technical Services Workflows with OCLC." Led by Karen Calhoun, OCLC's vice president of WorldCat and Metadata Services, a panel that included Robin Fradenburgh of the University of Texas and my University of Alberta colleagues Kathy Carter and Sharon Marshall described several innovative OCLC services aimed at "improv[ing] efficiency and enhanc[ing] access to library materials."⁴ Calhoun's overview, "Reinventing Technical Services," nicely summarized many of the issues facing technical services (TS) operations today,

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including declining staff counts and the desire by library administrators to reclaim for patron use the space currently occupied by TS operations. She then reviewed recent studies about our patrons' changing preferences for research tools—i.e., the question that has often been cast as “Google versus the catalog.” Precisely how workflow and organizational efficiencies (whether or not they come from OCLC) in TS can alter our users' research habits is a bit beyond me, but I'll leave it to you to decide. The presentations are available to view at http://www.oclc.org/us/en/multimedia/2009/ALA_MW_Redefining_Technical_Services.htm; do listen to the presentations and decide for yourself.

In any case, Calhoun's talk, and an earlier comment made by a colleague and long-time friend of mine, got me to thinking again about “the catalog.” My friend, when asked at another program held just before the Midwinter Meeting, had said that the TS efficiency she would like most to institute would be “to stop cataloguing new (trade) books.” Instead, we should put our limited cataloging resources where they might best be used, that is, in making rare and unique local resources discoverable. Whoa!, I thought at the time. How might we do this?

As Calhoun talked about our users' preference for discovery outside of the catalog, my mind wandered back to my friend's comment. WorldCat Local? Probably not, since it would still involve “cataloging” books, and doesn't seem likely to be any more appealing to the Google and Amazon-focused user than are our OPACs already. But what about Amazon? I can envision a “catalog” search that begins at Amazon's already metadata-rich site, enhanced with links to local holdings of all the things listed there—AmazonCat Local, if you will.

Blue-skying a bit more, I can imagine Amazon's business model for offering this kind of service. Not only would there be even more eyeballs on its site than there are now, but a library considering such a service might offer in return that some or all of its acquisitions be sourced to Amazon. Conceivably, Amazon could even offer a shelf-ready service, in which it provided

the materials already barcoded, marked, and ready to park on our shelves. Hmmm . . . open the box, shelve the already-in-the-“catalog” books, and pay the invoice. Sounds pretty simple, no?

Things are rarely that simple, and I know that. There would be complexities aplenty, but who knows? Am I serious? I make this proposal because I come from a background that respects and values the work of catalogers and other TS staff. Part of me wants the idea to be tried and found wanting, that some of those who argue that library cataloging is “dead” might then come to a different view. But, either way, what we'd need would be a sizable institution willing to try it and see. Who wants to be the pilot site? AmazonCat Local, anyone?

References and notes

1. Library Journal.com, “With Economy Sputtering, ALA Midwinter Attendance Dips Sharply,” www.libraryjournal.com/index.asp?layout=talkbackCommentsFull&talk_back_header_id=6582196&articleid=CA6632569#129349 (accessed Feb. 5, 2009). According to LibraryJournal.com, the count on Saturday, January 24, was 9,850, including 7,689 registrants (of whom 498 were on-site registrants) and 2,161 exhibitors.

2. I used the Carbon Footprint Calculator at www.carbonfootprint.com/calculator.aspx (accessed Feb. 5, 2009) to compute the CO₂ footprint in metric tons for one round-trip flight between Denver and each of the following cities: Atlanta (.40), Boston (.58), Chicago (.30), Dallas (.22), Houston (.29), Los Angeles (.27), Miami (.57), Minneapolis (.23), New York–JFK (.54), Philadelphia (.52), Phoenix (.19), Pittsburgh (.43), Salt Lake City (.23), San Diego (.27), San Francisco (.31), Seattle (.34), and Washington, D.C. (.49). I then averaged these for an “average trip” production of .3635 metric tons.

3. According to Wikipedia, one metric ton equals 2,204.6226 lbs. or 1.102 U.S. tons. Thus, 3,217 metric tons equals approximately 3,545 U.S. tons. Wikipedia, “Tonne,” <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tonne> (accessed Feb. 5, 2009).

4. OCLC, Redefining Technical Services Workflows with OCLC, www.oclc.org/us/en/multimedia/2009/ALA_MW_Redefining_Technical_Services.htm (accessed Feb. 25, 2009).