

Open Forum on Optimizing Communication Amongst Astronomy Librarians in the Digital Age

Jeanette Regan

*Australian National University, Astronomy Branch Library, MSSSO,
Australia*

Abstract. Conferences are held to enhance communication between colleagues. This final session of LISA III was presented as the opportunity for participants, as well as those unable to attend, to express their concerns and to make comments or suggestions regarding future communication amongst astronomy librarians, publishers and researchers.

A list of discussion topics was distributed both at the conference and by email (on Astrolib) so that responses could be made either in person or in written form.

1. Introduction

The final session of the conference was introduced by a list of topics (statements and questions) distributed to participants on the first day of the conference and posted on Astrolib, which was unfortunately delayed due to some unexpected technical problems. A copy of the distributed list of topics can be found as an appendix.

The following summary is not only from the conference discussion, but also includes responses from four participants who submitted their suggestions in writing at the conference and 10 responses that were received by email. Three of the latter were from Chinese librarians who also sent messages of support to the conference.

2. Topic 1

Direct publishing of LISA conference proceedings on the Web

The response of the audience was definitely in favour of traditionally published proceedings rather than exclusively electronic format. The reasons given were:

- LISA conference proceedings have been published on paper in the past. This factor is appreciated by both scientists and our peers and so helps us to be recognized by them.
- Finding a funding source for LISA III was very difficult as the International Astronomical Union did not offer the support it had provided in the past. We are fortunate to have the support of the European Union this time but there is no guarantee for future support. It is important to have the proceedings published for future reference.

- Books are still more accessible, easier to use and to read than works on computer screens.
- At this stage electronic archiving is too uncertain and a paper copy is still the most permanent format.
- For an academic librarian, a hard copy carries more weight and a paper publication is better for inclusion in a resume. Also, people like to see their names in print.
- Hard copy requires a more finished presentation and this is worthwhile.

The question was asked as to how many of the audience had referred to previous LISA proceedings recently. A large number of the audience raised their hands.

3. Topic 2

Who will be the safe keepers of information and knowledge in the global astronomical community?

The topic was not discussed during the Open Forum because it had been fully discussed during the conference, although with no definite answers. The views of a number of delegates are expressed with the following extracts from written contributions:

- Today's students are the future knowledge holders. Information/knowledge sources will become even more varied, but the needs of the users will still determine how we manage these sources. Flexibility is all important – in how organisations work, manage their information and the role of the librarian within these premises. If flexibility is not retained, then it can lead to the demise of whole institutions.
- The safe keeping of information requires uniform standards for the information sources, otherwise control will be lost in the processing of the information.
- Ideally, libraries in every country would provide the print backup of one copy for each paper item pertinent to their geographic area. Items of global “value” would be housed in the larger repositories of the world as well. Problems of future accessibility still remain with the use of other formats, especially electronic formats. The question still remains of who would co-ordinate the listings of any international holdings.

4. Topic 3

Communication between astronomy librarians

All participants and written responses were very much in favour of future LISA meetings, with a consensus of a three or four year interval between meetings and a suggestion to hold LISA IV in the Pacific area.

The development of discussion groups initiated with papers or comments posted on the Web was more controversial. All written responses commended this suggestion on either an annual or biannual basis. These views are summarised by the following statement.

- Interpersonal contact is very important for all human endeavours. In such a small community as ours, chance encounters are quite rare and exceptional. (In the USA and UK this may be easier.) LISA meetings should occur about every four years with a virtual meeting approximately one year later to serve as a forum to follow-up on action taken or action pending. I think that alternative forms of communication only work well between established contacts.

However, this was not the general opinion expressed by those who were able to attend the conference and so a summary of their responses now follows.

- It seems that some people are not ready for virtual meetings which are taken less seriously and are subject to distractions and interruptions. The difference in time zones was seen as an almost impossible problem by some delegates.
- The mixture of astronomers, librarians, computer people and publishers is perceived as a positive attribute, adding to the depth of experience and understanding gained. The interactions at these meetings are rewarding and encourage further communication, but this lessens over time, especially if there is not the necessary impetus provided by further meetings.
- If Astrolib is used as the forum for “virtual meetings” there is concern that people will not take as much time to write papers for it as they do for LISA conferences and so the quality may be lost. Many librarians are too busy with their daily tasks to take the time to read Web postings, newsletters or other information. However, “meeting in person” enhances the opportunities for closer co-operation. In this regard, LISA I was exceptional as it was held at the time e-mail began and so boosted our ability to communicate in a fast and effective method.

The session was closed with applause for the last comment made by an astronomer: “I see this as a very useful conference because it establishes more cooperation. At other conferences, it is mostly competition; here, it is mostly collaboration. This is a good conference and it would be a pity to see it substituted.”

Acknowledgments. My sincere thanks to Suzanne Laloë for her guidance and patience in the preparation and co-chairing of the Open Forum and also with the editing of this document. At the time the conference took place, Suzanne was in the midst of changing her career from librarianship and is now involved with the updating and data control of the SIMBAD database at the Centre de Données Astronomiques de Strasbourg. My good wishes go with her.

5. Appendix

OPEN FORUM ON OPTIMIZING COMMUNICATION AMONGST
ASTRONOMY LIBRARIANS IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Chairs: Jeanette Regan and Suzanne Laloë
DISCUSSION TOPICS

5.1. Direct publishing on the Web

Most people agree that “proceedings” are not “real” books and that the ratios information/price and information/shelf-space are rather low. The short time that proceedings remain current is also of concern.

- a) Why should we publish future LISA proceedings in the form of a book?
- b) Would a posting on the Web not be sufficient?
- c) Should librarians not give the good example?

5.2. Who will be the safe keepers of information and knowledge in the global astronomical community?

a) What is the *raison d’être* of a librarian in this digital age, given that we also have pre-digital information (books, journals, etc)? Is it only the free circulation of hard copy material, facilitated no doubt by electronic communications, or will it be the use of electronic communications to direct people to digital sources?

Research institutions are attempting to exist within the confines of smaller budgets and changing political regimes. These, and other factors, have led to dramatic changes in institutions in Eastern European countries and also the closure of renowned institutions such as RGO.

- b) How can we ensure the safe keeping of information sources?
- c) Do we need to ensure that there are copies of all paper items within defined regions world wide?
- d) How should these be managed?
- e) It would require an enormous level of co-operation. Is it feasible?
- f) Can we, or should we, also rely on deposit sets held in National Libraries?

5.3. Communication amongst astronomy librarians

The changes in international communication channels that have been made since LISA I have been astounding. Astrolib and other relevant discussion lists assist most of us with our daily tasks. However, the overall costs of holding conferences are high – too high for some institutions.

- a) In this isolated subject area of astronomy, how important is face-to-face contact?
- b) Other organisations are organising regular Internet meetings. Could we also use this as an alternative method?
- c) If so, how often should ‘virtual’ meetings be held, and how often face-to-face meetings, e.g. annually, or every 2, 3 or 5 years?
- d) Are there other methods of communication we should be developing?