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Carrying Your Life in Your Pocket: Portable Electronics in Libraries

By Mary Wise



Gadget lust – where will it end? Smaller, cheaper, faster. That's what we want. And we want it now! But is it feasible for libraries to supply the gadgets or the software for them?

Michael Porter of online community WebJunction led an energetic conference session titled “Carrying Your Life in Your Pocket: Portable Electronics in Libraries.” Porter brought along an array of portable electronic gadgets, and invited the audience to display theirs, too. Many did have gadgets – some had several: cell phones, personal digital assistants, portable games, and digital cameras.

Some people just like gadgets. But Porter thinks of technology as a tool and reminds us to keep in mind how consumer trends will affect libraries. Will we need to purchase every new gadget that comes along? Probably not, but some will be necessary because library patrons will want to use them, or need to use them. Porter urged us not to be intimidated by gadgets. They are, after all, simply computers, no matter what function they have been designed to perform.

When researching new gadgets for the library, people need to be aware of convergence. Does the new software work on preexisting hardware? Does it require the purchase of new expensive hardware to operate the software? Is it compatible with other devices and programs? One example is **iPod**. Since so many people have iPods, it would be logical to think they would work well for audio or electronic books. But iPod isn't a good fit for libraries, because of its proprietary software. Better choices for libraries are **NetLibrary** or **OverDrive**. Libraries need to balance the content they provide with the communities they serve. Technology is an opportunity for libraries to be where the users are.

Porter mentioned Moore's Law, which refers to Intel's co-founder Gordon Moore. In 1965, Moore made a prediction that is currently loosely interpreted to mean that computing power will double approximately every eighteen to twenty-four months. In any case, gadgets are getting more powerful and cheaper. As these devices get more powerful, they need more power. This has led to advances in batteries and battery life.

Here are just a few of the gadgets currently available:

Chumby. It was created using open source software, and is currently in beta testing. Chumby looks like a combination of an alarm clock and a bean bag. It uses tiny programs to display information, music and photos via a wireless Internet connection.

Voice over Internet Protocol. This allows people to use their computers like telephones, using headsets or microphones and speakers. Some systems require users to call only those using the same program, but



Michael Porter holds a few of his “gadgets.”

others can be used to call anyone, with any kind of phone (cell phone, long distance, international, etc.). Some programs let users connect a regular telephone to the computer. Some phone services using VoIP are Vonage and Skype. Customers can purchase a wireless phone to use with VoIP services, so that they don't have to sit in front of the computer to talk.

Apple iLife. Software that helps Apple users create and organize music, movies, photos, and DVDs. It also includes GarageBand, which records and edits podcasts.

iTV. A device from Apple that connects to your television and lets you download movies from iTunes and watch them on TV.

TiVo. This is a digital television recorder. You can program any series of movies or shows, and it will record everything in the selected category, for later viewing.

Slingbox. Allows you to watch TV (from your house) on any computer or mobile device.

Radio frequency identification. Tags come in active and passive varieties. Active tags have their own power source and transmit over a
See **GADGETS** on page 30.

Mary Wise is a catalog librarian at Central Washington University Library.
Photo by Mary Wise.

Martha


Continued from page 5.

definitive answers on the right direction for WLA remain elusive, yet an expanded and engaged membership serves as the president's greatest asset in shaping the future of the organization. While guiding an organization strongly based in the perspectives of the public library, Parsons recognizes the potential for WLA to reach out to academic and special libraries for a more representative association, and views next year's conference in partnership with the Oregon Library Association and its greater academic presence as a chance to make inroads into more specialized libraries in Washington.

Not content to look only one year ahead, Parsons envisions a future WLA with an interactive Web site, a membership database allowing for greater networking and skill sharing, an expanded continuing-education program targeting library employees often overlooked by

their organization's hierarchy. Yet all this depends on the library workers of Washington seeing participation in the association as Parsons does; as a career-changing and life-altering opportunity to shape their own workplace.

In her final words to those library workers who choose to remain uninvolved, Parsons' message of inclusiveness is coupled with a challenge: "This really is their association. It's whatever they want to make of it," she says. "It's a volunteer effort to network, to share, to promote libraries in this state. It doesn't work if people don't get involved."

The new president has spoken. Will you? 

Gadgets

Continued from page 15.

greater range, about a hundred feet. Passive tags rely on the transmitter for power and have a shorter range of about twenty feet. They also cost less. RFIDs are already in use in many retail stores and some libraries, but their use is controversial because of privacy issues.

Electronic book readers. Sony reader. Fujitsu reader. Sony Vaio UX. LG Philips LCD screen (coming soon).

Keyboards for PDAs, smart phones, laptops, and other mobile devices. Small, foldable keyboards from various manufacturers. **Frogpad**, a small keyboard operated by one hand, allows users to hold paperwork in the other hand. The **Virtual Laser Keyboard** is a device that projects a laser image of a keyboard onto a flat surface. The user types on it just like a regular keyboard. It is connected to the mobile device by Bluetooth.

Some gadgets to watch for in the future are:

Plastic Logic, which is a portable electronic reading device. It looks like a plastic protector for a notebook page, with a thin row of buttons down one side. It can be held and read like a magazine or newspaper. **Universal Display Corporation's** flexible organic light emitting device is made from a flexible metal foil, which can be rolled into a tube for storage. This could be used for movie viewing, or as an electronic book reader.

Currently, libraries don't have the infrastructure in place to compete with all of the emerging technologies. In looking at new products or technologies, we should ask ourselves what the product does for the library or for our patrons. Even if there is a positive application, do the technologies interface well with library infrastructure?

One question that needs to be considered is will the library provide devices for electronic and audio books, or will the patrons be required to provide their own devices for downloading? Several companies currently provide electronic and audio software, such as **NetLibrary** and **OverDrive**. **Playaway** produces audio books that need no player. They have a player built into every book.

Porter pointed out that when starting out with new technology such as a PDA or MP3 player, it is a good idea to start small. Buy a less expensive model or one with smaller capacity and try it out.

While libraries struggle to keep up with the latest super gadget, we must keep in mind that consumption and production drive each other. We must also remember that while it is all right to jump on a fad if it is useful, we must concentrate more on practical gadgets, and less on geeky, trendy ones. Is there a balance between cool and practical, fun and educational, trendy and practical? That seems to be our mission now.

What about all the gadgets Porter and the audience displayed? I want them. All. And I want them now.

So look in your pocket, purse or briefcase. What gadgets do you have? Are you truly carrying your life (or your library's life) in your pocket?

Porter reminded us to watch **WebJunction** for ways libraries can use technology and gadgets to help meet the needs of our patrons. WebJunction is an online community, where library staff share ideas and resources <http://webjunction.org>.

Find out more about Porter, alias Libraryman, at www.libraryman.com. 