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CONFERENCE AS THEATER:
Testing a new way of presenting
technical information in a library program
By Edward J. Valauskas

Imagine the most horrific explanation of computers during a conference or workshop. Monotonous presentations filled with an increasingly arcane foreign vocabulary of technical terms. Speakers who have never heard of the phrase “eye contact” and seem frozen before a podium, hanging on out of sheer fear of the floor falling away, in a mode of reading from a thick sheaf of oddly sized pages. Flashing on a screen in a corner, out of focus illustrations of either a) the innards of a DC-10 engine, b) the stratigraphy of the Martian moon Phobos, or c) the arrangement, in 3-D, of a large local area network. And the apex is an overhead of one hundred lines of code that could be an excerpt from James Joyce or a futile attempt at humor in C, the language (the humor of which titillates the rostrum and one member of the audience).

How could it be improved? An absence of technospeak (the lack of acronyms and the use of nouns as verbs). Live demonstrations on hardware of utilitarian software. Humor. Visual gags. Handouts, including a bibliography and a diskette or two of programs for use back in the library. Audience participation, with questions and answers. Costumes. A well-focused screen.

A few years ago, I started to work with a group of colleagues on implementing this sort of approach, a version of theater on the library conference dais. We—Bill Vaccaro of Chicago’s Sulzer Regional Library, Jean Polly then of the Liverpool (N.Y.) Public Library (now of NYSERnet), and Monica Ertel of the Library of Apple Computer—realized that there was a real need for practical information for librarians on computer viruses. We all knew of libraries, or had experienced firsthand, the destructiveness of rogue programs in laboratories on computers for the public. We realized that we could best present information on computer viruses by real-time demonstrations, with basic, non-technical explanations. It would also provide us with a perfect test our ideas about changing the way in which presentations were made at library conferences and workshops.

With trepidation, we submitted an outline for a program on computer viruses to the organizers of the third national conference of the Library Information and Technology Association (LITA), a division of the American Library Association. Labeled as a practical approach to a complicated topic, we were elated to be accepted into the formal program. Now the real work begun.
Electronic mail flew back and forth, as we worked out a structure for our play. We enlisted into the program an additional speaker, Avi Rappoport, a programmer and librarian of Niles & Associates in Berkeley, creators of several programs most notably the bibliography maker EndNote. We decided the core of the program would be a live demonstration of a computer virus actually attacking a computer, with the use of vaccine to actually eradicate it. Sandwichted around this visual show would be a history and explanation of viruses, along with practical advice on preventive measures, based on real experiences in networks, libraries, and user groups. A bibliography of recent articles and books on the topic would be available for free distribution to the audience along with diskettes of freeware and shareware vaccines for IBM Pcs and Apple Macintoshes.

But how would we really make an impact? With costumes. We decided that surgery scrubs were most appropriate to the session, along with masks and head gear. The stage itself would be decorated with a yellow warning tape, warding off the curious. A computer and a projection device allowed for the live demonstration of a virus at work. Other illustrations were basic, and easily digestible.

We warned only a few of our attempt at theater at the Third National LITA Conference, held in Denver Sept. 13-16, 1992. We tested our costumes in a full dress rehearsal in a hotel room. We surveyed our stage, a large room in the city’s conference center. We met a few minutes before the start of our program at 3:30 p.m. and looked at our scattered audience. We crossed the corridor to a prep room for speakers and changed into our costumes, as medical doctors fresh for an operation on the podium of Room C207-209. As we walked into the hall, we were greeted by a mixture of laughter, gasps, and the full and undivided attention of every member of the audience. For the next hour, amidst camera flashes and gravitational draw from the corridor of the curious, we spoke on computer viruses.

On the screen—when not in use for illustrations or demonstrations—an x-ray of the inside of a Macintosh was on display. The pace was lively, starting off with a history of computer viruses, an attack by the WDEF virus on a computer and its subsequent elimination with a vaccine, and several detailed descriptions of prescriptive measures. The audience asked questions and gladly took copies of diskettes and a bibliography.
Perhaps the best measure of the success of the program was lingering questions, the requests for more details, and for repeats of the entire event in the near future.

Our next event? Well, you’ve heard of pirated software....

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