

NLN FEATURE

Key Sources for Politics Factchecking

BY ANGIE DROBNIC HOLAN

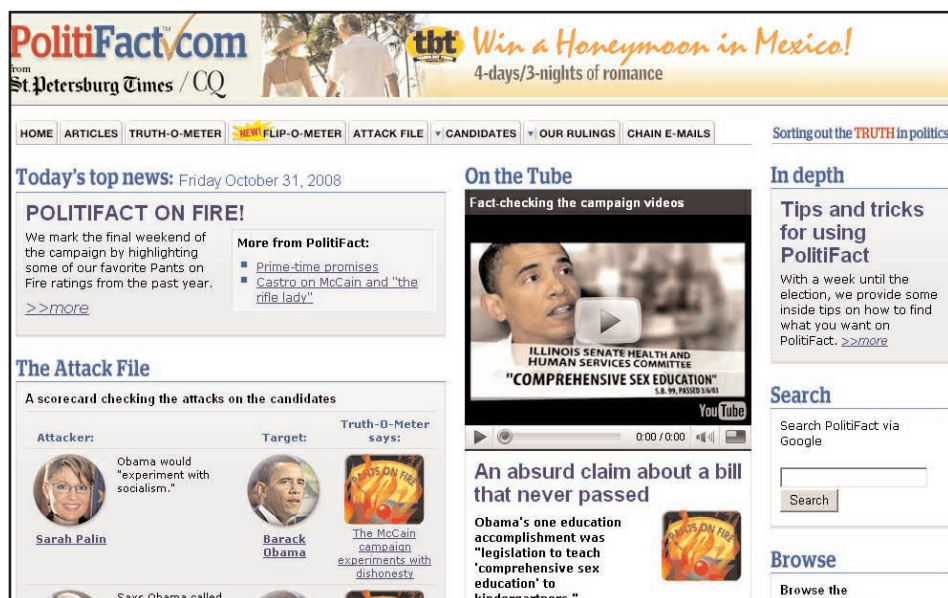
ST. PETERSBURG TIMES

Back in 2007, our Washington bureau chief at the *St. Petersburg Times* was brainstorming new ideas for covering the 2008 election. The idea he came up with was a fact-checking Web site, but with a twist: This web site would be a hyperlinked database, allowing readers to easily browse by candidate or by issue.

The project became PolitiFact.com, a joint project of the *St. Petersburg Times* and *Congressional Quarterly*. I began doing research and checking items for PolitiFact in the middle of 2007, along with other research duties for the newsroom. By spring of 2008, the Democratic nomination process was continuing longer than anyone thought it would, and I began factchecking and writing for PolitiFact.com full time. As I write this, we are about a week away from Election Day, and I've learned a few things worth sharing with researchers new to political factchecking.

Who Said What When

Many of the candidates' attacks on each other involved taking remarks out of context or portraying comments in a negative light. To check these kinds of attacks, we



This screenshot of the homepage of PolitiFact.com from the final weekend of the campaign shows some of the features of the site.

did a lot of intensive searching on news transcripts in the [Nexis](#) database. "Meet the Press" was a particularly frequent source. We also often consulted debate transcripts; [The New York Times](#) debate transcript analyzer was a handy tool. We also utilized [YouTube](#), which had a lot of posted recordings of town halls and cable news coverage, though searching YouTube remains more art than science. Finally, [EBooks.com](#) is a

wonderful source for purchasing books when you need to quickly search the entire text of a political memoir.

Tracking Federal Legislation

You might think all federal legislation and votes are easily found on a .gov Web site somewhere, but you would be wrong. We used a combination of [Congressional Quarterly's](#) subscription site along with the

Continued on page 7

THE INSIDE STORY

NOTES FROM THE CHAIR / 4

Justin Scroggs pens a nostalgic farewell as the News Division Chair hands reins over to Ron Larson.

TAKE A TRIP TO MALAYSIA / 5

Hannah Sommers discovers the diversity of Singapore Press Holdings in her Library Profile of the *Straits Times*.

PEOPLE / 9

Jennifer O'Neill covers the careers and legacy of several retiring News Division champions.

FINDING NEEDLES IN HAYSTACKS / 8

Derek Willis discusses APIs, application programming interface, and how they might benefit the news researcher.

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BY JULIE DOMEL

Fall in Texas is a different experience than Autumn in New England. An occasional cold front (and by cold, I mean the mid-60s) may make us run for our coats for a day or two, but we're usually still wearing shorts on Thanksgiving. The live oaks so prevalent here don't drop their leaves until early Spring, so they still look as green as in summer.

By the time this edition reaches you, we will already know who our next president is (we hope!) after what seems like an election cycle that was never going to end. PolitiFact, an online product from the *St. Petersburg Times*, helped voters make educated decisions by wading through candidate claims and counter-claims. I hope you enjoy the cover story by **Angie Drobnić Holan**, a news researcher at the *Times* who is on the staff of PolitiFact.

I just returned from Dallas where I attended the Fall Meeting of the Texas Chapter of SLA. I was the only news researcher present, but the sessions were still highly relevant. I must admit, I felt very hip when presenters talked about the usefulness of social networks, such as Facebook, LinkedIn (if you haven't joined the News Division group on either yet, please do) and Twitter.

Our newsroom just began a push for reporters to join Twitter, a microblogging site, because editors want to create a local community via "tweets." Reporters post tidbits not even worth a blog entry, but which might still be interesting in short bursts. I am still trying to figure out how news research fits into this scheme, but if you are interested in following me to see how the experiment bears out, I tweet under "askresearcher." For more about managing the ever-present flow of social networking information, read this issue's Tech Tip from **Derek Willis**.

Back to the Texas Chapter meeting: the most interesting part of the day, and sadly relevant to us in the news industry, was **Pat Wagner's** session on "How to Stay

Employable in the 21st Century." A former actress, she tells great stories, is incredibly funny and irreverent and inspires you without diverting into maudlin territory. She is tentatively scheduled to be at SLA in D.C., so I recommend you seek her out.

Her session covered many topics, but I leave you with some of her skill sets to keep you employable, and any news librarian worth his or her archive should have these in spades:

- ❖ Technological literacy (who else do reporters ask about problems with their spreadsheets, to scan their documents, to open their email attachments. . .)
- ❖ Written communication skills (how else can we weed a five-page document down to a four-bullet point infobox?)
- ❖ Mathematical and financial literacy (if you know the formula for percent change, you will be seen as a genius, trust me.)
- ❖ Teaching skills (who handles the newsroom brown bags?)



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NOTES FROM THE CHAIR



By JUSTIN SCROGGS

In the early 1990s I had the privilege of working for several years at the *News & Observer* in Raleigh, N.C. At the time, Computer Assisted Reporting was the latest rage. One of the CAR rock stars at the time was an N&O reporter named **Pat Stith**. Many of you know Pat from the presentations he's given over the years at IRE, NICAR, Poynter and other venues. Recently, I learned Pat had accepted a voluntary buyout and would retire.

I'm not overly given to nostalgia, but the news of Pat's retirement, coupled with an email today from my pal **Linda Paschal** that another long-time News Division stalwart was taking a buyout, has me in a reflective mood.

So instead of tidying up the editing of a column I wrote last week on the future of news libraries, I'm going to write about Pat.

I learned a lot working with Pat. For example, it's a bad idea to bet on your own weight loss. That lesson cost me \$32.

Luckily most of Professor Pat's lessons were free. You'd be walking to lunch at Cooper's BBQ or the cafeteria at Belk's and he'd say or do something that was unbelievably funny at the time that would keep popping to your mind years later.

One night I stayed late to help print and stuff envelopes for a long-forgotten IRE event. It was 2 a.m. and the newsroom was empty except for Pat, me and a couple of folks on the desk. While we were waiting for the last batch of envelopes to print, Pat told me about his rules.

As I remember it, his theory is that we conduct our lives based on a set of rules. We may not even know that we live by these rules, but we have them. We learn/develop our rules over time. Some we come up with on our own. Others we adapt from listening to and observing others — parents, bosses, coworkers and folks on the street.

While I nursed the cranky envelope feeder, Pat went to his cubicle and came back with his rules which he had posted in his cubicle. He'd added to them over the years, some with a typewriter and some by hand.

I haven't worked with Pat in well over ten years. By the time you read this he will have taken down his rules and moved on to other ventures, but I kept the copy of his rules he gave me that night. Recently that copy has gone missing. Maybe I'll run across it when I next clean out that desk drawer I never use.

But if I don't, that's probably OK. In serving our newsrooms and participating in the News Division we share our stories. To say it another way, we share the rules we live by. Ever since the night I battled the envelope printer, I've been working on my own list of rules.

I started with four rules. Almost twenty years later, I'm up to eight. I may be a slow learner, but I like to think of it as being patient as life's lessons unfold.

Some of my rules are things learned from my parents, e.g., #1 on my list: "If you're going to be dumb you'd better be tough." I've heard that several times over the years.

Other rules I adopted; OK, stole. One of Pat's rules is also on my list. My #4 is his "Sooner or later you get known for what you are."

Continued on page 10



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Discovering diversity in many forms at Singapore Press Holdings, home of the *Straits Times*



By HANNAH SOMMERS

Located at the tip of the Malay Peninsula, the island of Singapore occupies almost 700 sq. km and is home to 4.6 million people. Its diverse population is ranked among the densest in the world, with relatively high rates of literacy and education. Singapore Press Holdings (SPH), the nation's largest newspaper publisher, estimates that 81 percent of the population over 15 years of age reads one of its 14 newspapers every day. The newspaper with the largest circulation is the English-language *Straits Times*, which has been published continuously since 1845, except when the Japanese occupied the island during World War II.

I visited SPH on a day in late September when the main headlines were the global financial crisis, the Chinese milk scandal, the U.S. presidential race and heavy morning rains deluging the city. Comments about rush hour trouble spots were streaming in to STOMP, the *Straits Times* interactive citizen journalism portal. "We are getting bombarded with posts about the weather this morning," exclaimed an online editor as we were introduced.

SPH was formed through the merger of three publishing concerns in 1984, and is a significant media presence in Singapore. Merging the Information Resource staffs of the existing publications was a gradual process after SPH was established. Today SPH's Information Resource Centre staff support all 14 newspapers and many more magazines online and other digital products in Singapore's four languages: Malay, English, Tamil and Mandarin.

Most Information Resource Centre staff members are bilingual, with proficiency in English and one other language.



The reference desk at Singapore Press Holdings is staffed to provide service in English, Malay, and Chinese during open hours.



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Continued on page 9

PEOPLE



BY JENNIFER O'NEILL

Let me start by reiterating a sentiment from **Mike Meiners** at the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, that getting the news of both **Barbara Semonche** and **Linda Henderson's** retirements on the same day is a body blow to the profession. I will add that learning **Ron Larson** was also retiring added to the beating that our group has recently taken.

It is true that Barbara Semonche has announced that her retirement date will be February 15, 2009.

She and her husband, Jack will remain in Durham, N.C., where she will be active in various volunteer activities in the community. They look forward to traveling and hope to find time for friends and colleagues on their trips.

Barbara laments there is not enough time to reveal the depth of her admiration for everyone in this profession. She feels truly indebted for our friendship, wit and wisdom, and all the extraordinary experiences she has enjoyed for three decades in special libraries. She believes we are all champions. She salutes the veteran news librarians/researchers (those on duty now as well as those in and/or facing retirement) and toasts the next generation of info pros entering this field. She throws verbal bouquets to us all.

After 22 years at the *Providence Journal* (with 17 of them as librarydirector), Linda Henderson's position was eliminated in October in a newsroom-wide downsizing. Only one staffer remains to carry on the library's work. Linda is currently looking for another library/research opportunity and happily enjoying some downtime.

Linda has been a News Division member since 1980 and has held most positions in the Division, including NLN editor, secretary and chair.

As **Steve Gietschier** so aptly put it, Linda is a great news researcher, great contributor to the division and great advocate

for the profession, even as the waters continue to rise. She is also great with a smile, a laugh, a kind word and, when necessary, a comforting hug.

Ron Larson accepted a buyout package from the *Wisconsin State Journal*. He had just celebrated his 30th anniversary in June. He says it was not an easy decision, but since he is way too young to retire, he has already begun his search for a new job.

According to Barbara Semonche, Ron has served News Division as Professional Development Chair, Bulletin Editor, Seattle conference planner and currently as the News Division's Chair-Elect.

Debra Bade's Henebry presentation remarks in 2005 to Ron included this statement: "He worked hard to integrate the library into the newsroom and was part of numerous newsroom reporting teams. The work of those teams has been honored over the years with several awards, among them the Milwaukee Press Club award, the Inland Press Association award, the James K. Batten award, and most recently, the Lee President's Award for Excellence in News in 2004."

Ron assures us he will not be leaving NewsLib or the News Division and fully intends to assume his duties as News Division chair this coming January. He will also be in Washington, D.C., for the annual SLA conference in June. He can be reached at rlarson@wishistory.com and 608-838-4279.

Division member **Victoria McCargar**, a preservation consultant and former *L.A. Times* senior editor, was a panelist for a symposium called "On the Record: A Forum on Electronic Media and the Preservation of News," held at the New York Public Library on Oct. 23-24. To an audience that was primarily academic librarians with extensive newspaper collections, she presented a paper from the publisher's perspective titled "Archiving the

Continued on page 10

Key Sources for Politics Factchecking

Continued from page 1

publicly available [Thomas](#) and [Senate](#) votes Web sites. Thomas is particularly tricky when you want to link; its temporary sessions make it difficult to permanently link to items as you browse. You have to find a link that includes the Congress number and the bill number in the url. It is also very difficult to find active legislation — legislation that is being drafted and passed as you research it — on public Web sites.

Taxes, Taxes and more Taxes

One group stood out head and shoulders above the rest for its information on federal tax policy: the [Tax Policy Center](#), a joint project of the Urban Institute and the Brookings Institution. Their experts have created detailed analyses of the candidates' policies and proposals, e.g., which income groups get tax cuts or increases under a particular candidate's plan. Whenever they offer the option of downloading data as an Excel file, do it, because sometimes there's additional data there. This group was so helpful; I just can't say enough good things about them.

Follow the (Campaign) Money

[The Center for Responsive Politics](#) is an "oldie but goodie" for most of us news researchers. It debuted many new features during the campaign for tracking campaign contributions. We also found its detailed databases on lobbyists and candidate financial disclosures to be consistently useful. [The Federal Election Commission](#) also unveiled new mapping features during this election cycle. The FEC allows you to download zip files of contributions and expenditures. Our CAR experts here showed me that bringing these files into Excel, cleaning up the data, and then moving them into Access was the best way to go.

Polling

The candidates regularly cited polls to make their points — "We're ahead of where Bill Clinton was in 1992," for example — and my favorite Web sites for polling information were [PollingReport.com](#), [Pollster.com](#), and [FiveThirtyEight.com](#). PollingReport.com lists polls by subject, like Iraq or health care, and this came in handy many times.

Live Checking













This is more a method than a subject. We checked the major debates live, which was like research on steroids. We listened to the debates and used [CQ TranscriptsWire](#) to get rapid transcripts. For the final debates, we used Twitter to send out instant updates on what we were checking. We would send our PolitiFact url's through TinyUrl (to make them tiny) so we could message out our stories with a quick line of description.

Looking ahead to four years from now...

A significant chunk of new Web sites and information sources exist in 2008 that simply weren't around in 2004. I expect the same thing will be true when we get to 2012 and look back to this year. The Internet makes timely fact-checking possible, but is ever-evolving. So clip n' saves of source lists can only be yesterday's jumping-off point.

This is where it pays off for us to keep honing our skills as super searchers who look for information clues and track things back to the original sources. The Web sites may change, but our researcher fact-finding skills will never go out of style.

The latest issues we've reviewed

	On which team he's rooting for in the World Series. Barack Obama >>> Details	
	On whether the government should bail out insurance giant AIG: John McCain >>> Details	
	On whether global warming is man-made. Sarah Palin >>> Details	
	On support for the Bridge to Nowhere. Sarah Palin >>> Details	
	On whether he wants to be vice president. Joe Biden >>> Details	
	On torture. John McCain >>> Details	

PolitiFact.com recently introduced the Flip-O-Meter, which shows whether or not the candidates have changed their opinions on the issues.

The Attack File

A scorecard checking the attacks on the candidates

Attacker:	Target:	Truth-O-Meter says:
 Sarah Palin	Obama would "experiment with socialism."	 The McCain campaign experiments with dishonesty
 John McCain	Says Obama called Sarah Palin a pig.	 If there's lipstick on a pig, it's this McCain ad
 Barack Obama	"And 100 percent, John, of your ads . . . 100 percent of them have been negative."	 No, McCain's ads haven't all been negative
 Barack Obama	Obama ad contends that John McCain endorses Rush Limbaugh's comments about immigration.	 Limbaugh's not a McCain spokesman

The Attack File on PolitiFact.com verifies the truthfulness of attacks on the candidates on a scale of "True" to "Pants on Fire."

Finding Needles in Bigger Haystacks

BY DEREK WILLIS
THE NEW YORK TIMES

If the plethora of social networking applications reminds you of Tom Lehrer's parody "The Elements" - go ahead and Google it, I'll wait - you're not alone. For news librarians, there are obvious benefits to this outpouring of social sharing: increased access to details that otherwise might remain beyond our grasp. This "ambient awareness," as scientists call it, was the subject of a September article in the *New York Times Magazine* by Clive Thompson (1). Thompson wrote: "Each little update - each individual bit of social information - is insignificant on its own, even supremely mundane. But taken together, over time, the little snippets coalesce into a surprisingly sophisticated portrait of your friends' and family members' lives, like thousands of dots making a pointillist painting."

You may recognize this idea in the stream of Facebook status updates, Twitter "tweets" and the many other "microblogging" services out there. However, that river of updates, friends and photos comes with a challenge: keeping track of it all. Hitting "refresh" on your browser is ok for a little while, but if you're trying to track a person's various updates, it is not ideal at all. Luckily, nearly all of these services offer us ways to specifically request the information we're interested in.

Start with Twitter, the 140-character craze. While you're not likely to get fine literature from such small messages, you can use Twitter to find out if, for example, a person has just mentioned being at or near a news event. If you have local folks who are prolific Twitterers, keeping track of them can be quite a chore. Twitter provides an RSS feed for each account; you'll need to go to that account's profile page, e.g.,

<http://twitter.com/nytimes>, and look in the lower left corner. RSS is just a variant of XML, so if you don't feel like subscribing, you can use Google Spreadsheets' GoogleReader(URL) function (2) to import any RSS feed. Twitter also recently purchased a company that offers a search function that makes combing through tweets a lot easier (3). The search engine also has a feed for every search result, too.

Let's move on to Facebook. Notice how you can see a random selection of your friends on the left side of your Facebook home page? You can get a list of all of their

cases. Web sites offer APIs that are mirrors of the content they present to browsers (most RSS feeds fit in this category). Others, like the Facebook API, give you a way to essentially query the underlying Facebook database. If you've ever looked at SQL, the language for querying databases like Microsoft Access, then you'll find some similarities in FQL, the language which queries Facebook information (6).

Even if you never plan on making the leap into APIs, there is a lesson for people who have a role in how content is managed by news organizations. Our own archives

are usually only accessible via a search form, often one that's not of our making. While you can't anticipate every way you need to search a database, having some flexibility can make the difference between being able to find those needles and not. As more news organizations are trying to make better

"APIs allow users to tap into data on the Web in a way that doesn't require a browser and isn't limited by the constraints of browsers."

Facebook IDs (the number after `profile.php?id=` in a url), and more, from Facebook's developer site (4). On that page, try the API Test Console by clicking the "Call Method" button. The default result is a list, in XML format, of the user IDs of all your friends. By changing the selection of the Method drop-down box, you can see your groups, events and more. Some of the actions require some additional information, but there are plenty of guides and how-tos on the Developer Wiki (5)...and yes, if you've ever wondered about how Facebook applications are made, this step is the first in the process.

Both RSS feeds and Facebook's developer tools are examples of an API, or application programming interface. APIs allow users to tap into data on the Web in a way that doesn't require a browser and isn't limited by the constraints of browsers. In many

(and more profitable) use of their archives, providing access to them in just one way limits our options. Learning how social networking applications organize and distribute their information can help us think about how we manage our own collections. Then, when it comes time for new ideas and thinking on how news organizations use their information, news researchers can provide a critical voice to that discussion.

1. <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/07/magazine/07awareness-t.html>
2. <http://docs.google.com/support/spreadsheets/bin/answer.py?answer=75507&topic=11318>
3. <http://search.twitter.com/>
4. <http://developers.facebook.com/tools.php>
5. http://wiki.developers.facebook.com/index.php/Main_Page
6. <http://wiki.developers.facebook.com/index.php/FQL>

Discovering diversity in many forms at Singapore Press Holdings, home of the *Straits Times*

Continued from page 5

In 2002, the entire company relocated to a new facility that brought all editorial staff under one roof. The Centre occupies a spacious area that accommodates print collections, archival materials in multiple formats, current periodicals, desk and lounge space for researchers and work space for a staff of more than 40, led by Head Librarian Idris Rashid Khan Surattee and Senior Librarian Tay Sok Cheng. "And we just hired two more staff," reference librarian Zarinah Mohamed explained. "For us, new media and the archives are really growing."

SPH's Information Resource Centre provides services delivered by a reference team, archive team, webmaster, book team and corporate archives. Reference librarians staff the reference desk in three shifts, seven days a week from morning until 1 a.m. Monday-Saturday, and midnight on Sunday. Staffers are scheduled so that Mandarin, Malay and English-language services are provided during every shift.

Librarians have access to commercial databases including LexisNexis and Factiva, and Resource Centre staff are proactive in building local resources to supplement subscription database access. Internally-developed resources include a Who's Who of Singapore online database, historical timelines of national events, local election data and a database of content licensing information used to answer questions about content usage. Besides reacting to deadline information requests, the reference team also puts together resource packages on requested topics, and provides article alert services to staff.

In addition to hosting its own research resources, the Information Resource Centre intranet site hosts the editorial department training portal, which features style guides, error fixes and guidance on reporting techniques.

The archive team archives the Chinese, Malay and English print publications and new media products. The Tamil newspaper is not archived electronically, but is retained in hard copy. To archive web content, a snapshot of the subscription-based site is captured several times throughout the day at prescribed intervals. The archive team uses NICA as an integrated media archive to manage text, graphics, images and pdfs. Additionally, efforts are underway to digitize historical negatives and the back archive of the *Straits Times*. The latter project is being conducted in cooperation with the National Library of Singapore.

The Information Resource Centre boasts a sizable collection of print materials, which are acquisitioned and cataloged by the book team. This team also coordinates ILL and document delivery



Top Left: Hannah Sommers and SPH Reference Librarian Zarinah Mohamed (right) on the set of the recently-launched RazorTV web channel.

activities and contributes to digital resources.

After introducing the Information Resources Centre, Mohamed took me onto the set of SPH's web TV channel,

Continued on page 10



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Notes from the Chair

Continued from page 4

I'll close with the most recent rule added to my list. Rule #8, added August 31, 2001, was advice Lany McDonald had given me a week earlier. She said, and I quote "Say what you have to say, then sit down and shut up." Since this is my final NLN column as chair of the division, I'll do just that.

Thanks to everyone who encouraged me to take on the position of chair, especially our Czarina Linda Henderson. Sincere thanks to Dan Jones, Chuck Palsho and my other NewsBank colleagues for their support and guidance. And thanks to everyone in the Division for advice and input during what has been an interesting and challenging 2008.

Best wishes to Ron Larson, our chair for 2009, Amy Disch who will follow Ron in 2010, and those who follow thereafter. Slainte Mhath!

Discovering diversity in many forms at Singapore Press Holdings, home of the *Straits Times*

Continued from page 9

RazorTV, then in its second month of production. Like media companies in most parts of the world, SPH is supporting a number of new media ventures in the belief that real journalistic fundamentals translate, no matter what the platform. And with each new venture, the Information Resource Centre is positioned to answer more research questions, and embrace new archiving challenges.



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People

Continued from page 6

Daily Miracle: Preservation and the Digital Newsroom." Other participants from news and publishing included **Valerie Komor**, corporate archivist of Associated Press, **Andrew Madden** of Google and **John Carroll**, former editor of the **L.A. Times**.

Leslie Norman alerts us to the fact that the *Wall Street Journal* Library has moved to One World Financial Center in New York City.

Leslie's phone number is now: 212-416-3373 and the Library has a new dedicated phone line: 212-416-3900. The new address is: *Wall Street Journal* Library, 200 Liberty Street, 9th Floor, New York, NY 10281.

Longtime *New York Daily News* Head Librarian **Faigi Rosenthal** has retired after a 22-year career at the News. She and two other staff members were among the 25 who took company-offered buyouts. Faigi's last day was October 17.

Assistant Head Librarian **Ellen Locker** was appointed Head Librarian and 32-year veteran News Librarian **Scott Browne** was named Assistant Head Librarian.

It is with sadness that I leave the *Florida Times-Union* after more than eight years as a result of corporate-wide layoffs. I had a great deal of fun and learned a lot. I enjoyed working with a great bunch of people at the paper. My staff is dedicated and professional and I will miss them tremendously. I believe that God has a plan for me and I will work on being open to it.

When I started as library director the former director, **Laura Soto-Barra**, had already left for her new job in Syracuse. My new boss told me he wasn't sure what I was supposed to do. I walked into my new office and Laura had left a pile of *News Library News* issues for me. I closed my door and read them cover-to-cover. From there, I signed on to the listserv. What a valuable tool! That is the true story of my entree into the field. The News Division prepared me for my future at least as well as my MLS had.

Since that first day I've met many of you at the conference, emailed with you for my column and shared friendships over the miles. I just want to say thank you. I don't know what the future holds for any of us, but I am grateful that we had the opportunity to share this space and time together. It was a joy. I can be reached at joneillamy@comcast.net.