



Reading the future

Report of the Australian Library and Information Association Conference, held in Melbourne, 6-11 October 1996.

The Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) biennial conference marked the centenary of the First Australasian Library Conference held in Melbourne in 1896.

Warren Horton (Director General, National Library of Australia) warned the audience that diminishing levels of public funding are endangering the role of libraries in defending Australian culture from the homogeneity of mass culture. Although it is widely acknowledged that libraries must find alternative sources of revenue, there had been little public debate over how this might affect their goals. For example, there has been no discussion of the business initiatives undertaken by the State Library of NSW's Alison Crook. Horton urged rigorous debate about the nature of the business in which libraries are involved and highlighted the need for libraries to co-operate with information creators and other cultural institutions.

Advocacy

Charles Landry (Comedia, UK) offered librarians the choice of reinventing libraries or managing decline. The latter is somewhat akin to growing old - it can feel comfortable, reassuring and easy, and one can be nostalgic for the past without having to plan for the future. It is more challenging, though, to consider how to create a process of renewal. Toward this end, Landry urged librarians not to confuse technique with purpose. He argued that the library needs to re-situate itself as part of the grand plan of a citizenship agenda and asked the audience to imagine an environment devoid of libraries in order to focus on their

present and future roles. In his view, libraries offer:

- a space for learning new skills in an era of 'life long learning' ;
- a space of social cohesion that addresses the need for empathy between different cultures and generations;
- a solution to the 'information rich/poor' divide that addresses the need for people to be informed and competent if they are to be participatory citizens;
- a 'public space of the mind' - an opportunity for chance encounters with knowledge, to explore and browse and to be a private person in a public space;
- an environment of active participation, unlike other institutions which involve consumption not creation; and
- wealth creation.

Landry argued that libraries should adopt a five year 'advocacy plan' that adopts active - not reactive - strategies focussing on the future rather than the past. In a borderless world, librarians' visions draw back to known limitations and impede their ability to develop news models. For this reason, non-librarians may prove to be the most effective library advocates.

Neil MacLean (Macquarie University Library) distinguished between access to technology and access to information, noting the dangerous tendency of libraries to regard technology as a panacea for all ills arising from declining budgets and increasing costs. A further distinction, he said, should be made between freedom of access and 'free' access. Changes to the 'knowledge economy' arising from innovations such as the Internet have resulted in a less 'linear' learning process which involves a

number of sources of information. This has enormous potential to challenge the organisation and access policies of libraries.

At one end of the market, 'infotainment' is replacing information and the creation and provision of content is merging through vertical integration; while at the other end niche services are proliferating. Landry queried who would pay for this information in the long run? When governments look after vested interests, he argued, its role is compromised and the public interest becomes blurred. At the same time, the public sphere is under threat from privatisation and technology. How will libraries add value and who will receive it?

Libraries must be repositioned as a centre of service excellence if they are to survive in the new economy of knowledge. They must accept that technologies will continue to proliferate, that competition is a way of life, that the rate of change will be difficult to predict and that costing and financing are increasingly important.

Copywrongs

At a session entitled 'Should Information be Free? Copyright and Copywrong' Jannette Wright (Waverley Council, previously State Library of NSW) spoke about her former library's approach to copyright issues, particularly in relation to its commercial activities such as the Image Library. This is a service similar to commercial graphics libraries, whereby the library searches for and provides a copy of a desired image from within a standing collection. The Image Library charges users of the service using a scale of fees set



according to the status of the person or organisation.

The Public Libraries Network, which shares bibliographic information electronically amongst 95 libraries, successfully balanced the rights of library users with those of information creators by negotiating special licences for electronic journals. It is important to remember, Wright noted, that library users are often both creators and users of copyright material.

Order from chaos

John Neuwenhuisan (editor of 24 Hours magazine) sought to debunk the often-stated platitude that copyright encourages creativity. Rather, it curtails it, for as money markets shape the types of work protected by intellectual property regimes, researchers are channelled into undertaking only protectable types of work, rather than work that, though unprotected, may serve the wider good. For example, current copyright provisions protect the products of chemical companies but not traditional natural remedies. Copyright laws often restrict the flow of knowledge (for instance, when letters are protected from biographers).

Knowledge does not obey normal economic laws of scarcity - if given away it is not lost, it is expensive to create and cheap to copy.

The selection and ordering of information is becoming a crucial aspect of accessibility in an age of information proliferation

The argument that people value things more when they pay for them does not hold for intellectual prop-

erty. Who adds more value to knowledge - publishers or libraries? Whereas publishers can add value to a work by selecting it for publication, libraries may be adding the ultimate value by making the work accessible through the process of information categorisation. The selection and ordering of information is becoming a crucial aspect of accessibility in an age of information proliferation; and on this point, Neuwenhuisan recalled Borges' library, whose chaos he compared with the Internet's.

Indigenous issues

Marcia Langton (Northern Territory University) spoke about the specific requirements of Aborigines and



Torres Strait Islanders as users and depositors of materials in public libraries and archives. She identified areas where the inappropriate use of sacred material had discouraged Aborigines from contributing materials, and described difficulties experienced in accessing the work of some anthropologists. In cases where children had been stolen from their parents, records were often censored by authorities in a misguided and patronising attempt to 'protect' people from the truth.

The future

Tim Jacobs (Director, Arts Victoria) reported on the work of the Libraries Working Group of the Cultural Ministers' Council. He presented several 'snapshots' of the Working Group, including one of 'The Technology Thing'. Although it is predicted that libraries internationally will offer public access to the Internet by about 2003, in Australia this date is closer to this year or next year. Jacobs believes that the results of the Working Group will only be apparent ten years from now. The major danger to its success is that librarians may not accept the challenge of leadership.

Several papers struggled with the idea of valuing the economic costs and benefits of public libraries. Of these, Ainslie Dewe's (Lincoln University New Zealand) described a study which had aimed to produce a valuing methodology. Accounting firm Coopers & Lybrand managed the project, which seemed to indicate that the measurement of the value of libraries depended on the methodology used.

The conference signalled a moment of rupture in the continuation of library practice. Librarians are simultaneously fearful and excited by the future as they read it. As Derek Whitehead put it, 'it is not technology we feel insecure about, but social and organisational change'. The conference read a future where electronic technologies, economic management, and changed learning strategies will mark the boundaries of librarianship. □

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