Communication highway or communication bypass – the rural perspective

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One of the highlights of my trip to Melbourne to attend ALIA's Biennial conference as a representative of the Northern Territory Library, was the opportunity to attend a two-day forum held in Ballarat and organised by ALIA's Rural and Isolated Libraries Special Interest Group. The forum's aim was to provide leadership and guidance to the section's membership scattered throughout Australia and Oceania, by focusing on the improvement of library and information services in rural, remote and isolated areas.

The forum was officially opened by the group's national president, Felicity Williams. Felicity acknowledged that the forum provided an ideal opportunity to learn more about the section's strengths, the problems it faced and the future challenges it must meet. Thelma Rungkat, secretary, took the opportunity to both welcome and thank another local, George Fong, manager of Ballarat Netconnect who as a major sponsor and participant, provided Internet access, technological advice and support throughout the forum.

Felicity also lead the opening panel discussion, 'Defining rurality and isolation. What are the advantages, what are the problems, what do we hope for?' and invited each of the delegates to outline his or her professional background and the type of library or information service administered. Although the group was a small one, consisting of twelve delegates, the range of professional levels, areas of expertise, interest and types of service delivery were quite diverse.

Kay Cleary's keynote address outlined the most significant global developments and issues in the current and future electronic networking area, and related them to the national and, more particularly, the local environment. Kay firmly established as her theme 'The rural perspective' and returned to it again and again as she urged librarians in rural areas to carefully ascertain the needs of the local community. She advised against being 'driven by the technology' at the cost of fulfilling local needs and stressed the importance of taking into consideration such matters as computer familiarity, computer literacy levels, the suitability and appropriateness of the technology, the 'user friendliness' of software programs and the feasibility of training for staff as well as users. As well as her wealth of theoretical knowledge, Kay also shared with the

group her practical expertise. For example, she gave some tips as to how the local library might set up its own home page on the Internet, providing the library and some of its key targeted groups, such as the local craft guild, with new and interesting opportunities for promotion and marketing.

On day two, delegates formed groups to address 'The micro-view: improving library and information services through electronic access in our libraries', within the contexts of economics, management and technology. Throughout the forum, a consensus emerged that residents in non-metropolitan regions including the very isolated areas, should have access to the Internet and related networks either through their local library or at home. Interestingly, as the groups gathered to report back, identify, and document strategies to present to the section, one of the issues that continued to be emphasised was the problem of security of access — the need for people in rural areas to have physically secure telephone lines and links to the microwave satellite.

As access to basic telecommunication services is still a major problem in many isolated areas of the Northern Territory, Felicity Williams and myself suggested that interested delegates draft an attachment on behalf of the section to ALIA's submission to 'The standard telephone review group' commissioned by Senator Richard Alston. Lead by Jeanette Regan the group set about to respond to the STS Review group's terms of reference, drawing particular attention to the poor standard or lack of basic telecommunication services to a large number of people living in non-metropolitan areas.

For my part, as manager of a rural library service, the forum was one of the most relevant of all the conference activities I attended. Indeed, as delegates gathered to enjoy a delicious candlelight dinner held at Jem's Restaurant all agreed that the smallness and informality of the forum had allowed, not only for very enthusiastic yet informed discussion, but for valuable networks, both personal and professional, to be formed. Moreover, due to the hard work and commitment of all who participated, strategies had been formulated to lend strong and very practical support for the section as it pursues its vision to provide 'Equal access to, and services for, library and information users across the country.'■