

# UNDER CURRENTS

by Katie Blake

## What's in a name? — or life after librarianship

Increasingly, librarians prefer to call themselves 'information managers', believing that it gives them higher status, more prestige, and is more descriptive of their activities. According to many, both inside and outside the profession, the term 'librarian' has negative, passive, feminine connotations which must be shucked off so that we can assume our rightful place in the world of information technology. Librarians are exhorted to become more aggressive in marketing their services, to push for more and more responsibility within their organisations, to adopt a higher profile, to be 'proactive' rather than reactive (with its passive connotations), and to move out from behind their desks and upwards into the higher reaches of the high-tech hierarchy.

Like many in the information profession, (am I still a librarian?), I read many computer magazines and newspapers, and it is natural for me to check out the job advertisements. I am naturally drawn to those with 'Information' in their titles, but regularly find that the job is not really concerned with what I call information. Somewhere I seem to be out of sync — what I mean by information is obviously not the same thing. A Manager of Information Systems is definitely not the same as a librarian. The trouble lies with the modern definition of information. It is bandied about with gay abandon — we live in the Information Age, we are told. In Naisbit's *Megatrends* we were told that one third of the workforce works in the information profession. Information has become one of those catch-all words. To understand what is meant by it, we must have a clear understanding of how the word is being used, and its different contexts. The *Macquarie Dictionary* gives us the key. Its definitions include the following:

1. Knowledge communicated or received concerning some fact of the circumstance; news.
2. Knowledge on various subjects, however acquired.
3. The act of informing.
4. The state of being informed.

These first four definitions all have something in common. At their heart is content — someone is being informed, knowledge is being transferred. My definition of librarianship fits within this scope — a librarian helps to facilitate the transfer of information, getting it to the right person at the right time, in order that that person may turn it into knowledge.

However, there is another definition given by the *Macquarie*, and there is a crucial difference between it and the preceding definitions:

6. (in communication theory) a quantitative measure of the contents of a message.

This definition is a technical one. It does not concern itself with quality, indeed there is no

concern with content at all. Theodore Roszak, in his book *The Cult of Information: the folklore of computers and the true art of thinking* (Cambridge, Lutterworth, 1986) has this to say: 'in the past, the word has always denoted a sensible statement that conveyed a recognizable, verbal meaning, usually what we would call a fact . . . These days, information has become a purely quantitative measure of communicative exchanges, especially as these take place through some mechanical channel which requires that message to be encoded and then decoded, say, into electronic impulses. Most people would have assumed that information had to do with what happened in the understanding of a speaker and a listener in the course of a conversation. In its new technical sense, information has come to denote whatever can be coded for transmission through a channel that connects a source with a receiver, regardless of semantic content.'

An information manager, therefore, is not at all the same sort of person as an 'informer', as a librarian. Roszak points out that librarians have a healthy sense of the hierarchical relationship between data and ideas, facts and knowledge. His chapter on the role of libraries in the information age is illuminating. He is at pains to insist that information, even when it moves at the speed of light, is no more than it has ever been; discrete little bundles of fact, sometimes useful, sometimes trivial, and never the substance of thought.

In September 1987, *Computerworld* (New Zealand) ran a special report on DP/MIS Professionals, with one article entitled 'Librarians reclaim information territory'. It talked about how librarians ought to be claiming a broader and higher status job definition — that of the Chief Information Officer. A couple of quotations will give the gist of it: 'There is a growing awareness that information management is more than just hardware and software'. 'Information technology has long put the technology first. Now, at last, there are moves to restore the information itself to the throne, with a strong emphasis on service.' 'Unlike DP managers, whose view of information is centred on the machine, librarians relate it to people and their needs.' The point is made quite clearly that MIS managers are only responsible for internally generated

information, while librarians are also concerned with the broader world of external information. The article foresees a time when the two roles will merge, at a higher executive level than either of the two now, and that librarians are poised to leap in to take those positions.

While I agree with many of these views, and urge librarians to do whatever they can to improve the image of our profession, I cannot help but mourn the passing of the term librarian. Rather than cast aside the term in favour of something more 'high tech', it may be preferable to work on improving the image of the term itself, capitalising on its positive aspects. While it may have some negative and undesirable connotations, its emphasis is clearly and unmistakably centred on the message, on content, on real knowledge and wisdom. 'Information manager' to me has more negative connotations, with its emphasis on the technology, on the medium rather than the message.

Let us not lose sight of the forest in the trees, but keep ever mindful that the role of a librarian is to organise information, into something which informs the right person at the right time. I believe that the term 'librarian' can be a positive one, and should never be used interchangeably with 'information manager'. The profession should think carefully before turning away from librarianship towards information technology.

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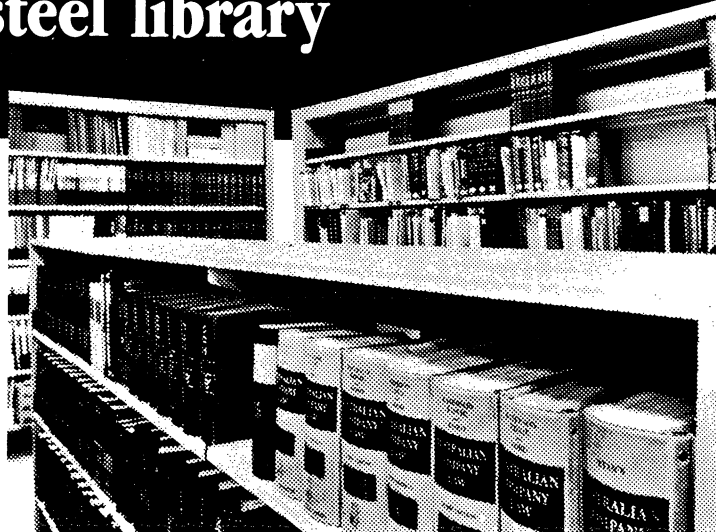
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