

SLA on NIP

The US Special Libraries Association (SLA) has just issued a report calling for a National Information Policy in the USA, based on its recent high-level discussions

THE REPORT *National Information Policies: Strategies for the Future* started life in three SLA-sponsored meetings with a list of participants that reads like a *Who's Who* of US information policy. Its opening statement on National Information Goals is worth quoting at length, because of the parallels we may be able to draw with our own national objectives. Every (American) citizen, it says, should be assured:

- continuation of the democratic principles that govern the nation through his or her participation in the democratic process;
- the availability and accessibility of information not restricted by law or national security, through a free press, a quality education system, an available library and information structure, a national telecommunications infrastructure, a respected information industry, and laws that guarantee such access;
- the protection of his or her personal information through law and practice, protection from the abuse of power based on information collected by any organisation...

Some elements of motherhood there maybe, but these goals need restating often if they are to be secured.

The SLA identifies two basic principles of National Information Policy (NIP): that information is essential to the growth of a democratic society, and that access is guaranteed to all, except where law and human rights prohibit its further distribution. A dozen more detailed 'Federal' principles require Government to ensure that its information is accessible, so that government is accountable to its citizens; and to accept responsibility for providing this information, from a diversity of sources, of high quality, accurate, and unrestricted by copyright or monopolies. 'Information is a national resource to be developed, shared and protected'.

The authors examine the history of US NIP, from the 1958 President's Science Advisory Commission report on Scientific and Technical Information (a knee-jerk reaction to Sputnik) to the 1991 second White House Conference on Library and Information Services. They list fifteen proposals from 1972 to 1989 for different kinds of NIP organisation and ask why none of these organisations has ever been set up. Their response strikes a chill: 'Some feel that there is no real constituency for information policies, and in the world of politics this is enough to prevent serious consideration of such a body.'

The 'strategies' of the title are approached at two levels: one for the SLA itself (mainly analysis, support and cooperation), and a second for all other bodies. These 'other' strategies include setting up an NIP organisation ('an institute, academy or center'), to provide governance and oversight for research, study, monitoring and recommendations, a forum for discussion and coordination. Along the way the authors deal with the familiar issues of transborder data flow, access by the less developed nations, intellectual property, preservation and archives, privacy, public access, the public/private sector, STI, telecommunications and networking, and user fees.

The report's title may imply an international perspective, but understandably it focuses primarily on the US scene and the role of the SLA. However, many of the principles it expounds and the issues it discusses are quite generally applicable. This report provides a timely insight into a field that involves us all.

Bender, David R; Kadee, Sarah T; and Morton, Sandy I. *National Information Policies: Strategies for the Future*. SLA Occasional Papers Series No 2. Washington: Special Libraries Association, 1991. iv + 62 pp. Paperback ISBN 0-87111-381-3

Peter Judge □

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