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Librarians in the 'new world order'

Mairéad Brown, University of Technology, Sydney, ALIA president-elect 1999

If you are anything like me you probably experience an urge to 'turn off' when you hear the hackneyed phrase 'we live in a time of change'. This is probably because we have been hearing and using this phrase all of our professional lives.

But 'turn off' is the last thing we should do. It is true that some information people have managed to survive the turbulence of the 80s and early 90s without having to do much about changing attitudes or professional practices. But there are qualitative differences in our professional situation now which were not present in those times. These factors are so substantial that it is imperative we perk-up, pay attention and think long and hard about the information profession and how we will position ourselves collectively and as individuals in the future.

So what do we need to think about? Firstly, we have to consider the phenomenon referred to as the 'information society'. This phrase means many different things, but at its core is the fact that social, cultural and economic changes facilitated by the exponential spread of IT has made our society a global society which depends on information transfer across national borders.

Information has escaped from the library and become all pervasive, a bedrock for the functioning of today's society. We bump into this reality when we listen to the financial reports on the radio and realise the extent of flows of money (or information about money) across the globe and the effects of stock markets in New York on those of Sydney, Tokyo and London, for example. When we hear that the *Straits Times* is produced in Sydney and merely printed in Singapore we are reminded again of the way IT is fuelling global information transfer in a way we could not have dreamed of a few years ago.

We have to tease out what this global information flow means for us and the new generation of librarians and information professionals. Are we preparing ourselves for practice as global information professionals? How much do we understand of the so-called 'new world order' and the fundamental place of information in holding this together? Do we have the insights with which we can influence policy makers in the information society?

I fear that the answer has to be that we are ill-equipped, as a group, for practice in a global information society. It

may be that the older generation of our Association members can coast, but it is critical that we tackle the question of preparation of information workers at all levels to work effectively in this new environment. This is something I would very much like to engage the Association in during my time as a senior office bearer at national level. I hope you will join me in the debates and discussion we must have to unravel the implications of globalisation for our profession.

We also need to attract the brightest and best to our field of professional practice. It is surely the greatest paradox in the history of library and information services that in a time when information has become so crucial to the functioning of society and the economy that the potential recruits to library and information services are staying away in droves.

Many schools of library and information studies across the country are in crisis as they struggle to maintain students and staff in the face of falling demand. At the same time, other academic units in the universities teaching courses in 'internetworking', 'interactive multimedia' and 'competitive intelligence' are booming. What is most frustrating is that 'our' schools are already teaching in these areas, but have not found the language to communicate and excite enough young people to study these subjects in the context of library and information studies. This becomes a double-bind if the schools re-invent themselves and cut their ties with the library sector which is distinctly lacking in charisma, as far as the majority of the younger generation is concerned. How will the libraries of the future be sustained? Who will be there to maintain the record of the human intellectual endeavour for future users? This is a serious matter which ALIA needs to address. I hope the Association will directly take up this matter to provide national leadership in working through the issues in preparation for the new millennium.

I am honoured to be coming into the position of vice-president for 1999. I can not pretend there was much opposition to beat to achieve the position — there was the usual abundance of modest shyness which is to be found among potential candidates during the nomination period! I shall do my best for the Association and work to ensure a strong profession for (dare I say it?) the coming time of change. ■

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