

Information rights – the bottom line



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Monday 14 May is Australia's first Information Rights Day — an ALIA initiative to commence Library and Information Week 2001. Why such an initiative? It is about:

- ALIA's first object:
To promote the free flow of information and ideas in the interest of all Australians and a thriving culture, economy and democracy;
- how librarianship can contribute to the information rights of all Australians;
- broadening the public understanding of a profession that contributes so much more to society than just information management;
- providing an annual national focus for debate over coming years about just what should be the information rights of all citizens in a 21st century democracy.

There will be no shortage of issues for this debate. They include civil liberties, freedom of information, intellectual freedom, access to government and corporate information, copyright, privacy, intellectual property, media bias, censorship, the internet and the information divide.

However, information rights will have limited outcomes for individuals and society in 21st century Australia without a literate population able to recognise its need for information, and with the capacity to identify, locate, evaluate, synthesise and use effectively the needed information — in other words, to be *information literate*. Information literacy itself is now a fundamental information right. It, not information technology, is the critical issue of the so-called information age.

Australia is well up with countries such as the United States, Canada, Singapore, Finland and Sweden in information literacy promotion and initiatives. The evidence?: the work of many teacher librarians over the last decade; four national information literacy conferences since 1992 — the fifth this year, *Information literacy: the social action agenda*, is co-sponsored by ALIA; the research, writing and promotional efforts of Margaret Appleton, Christine Bruce, Philip Candy, Irene Doskatsch, Joyce Kirk, Linda Langford, Prue Mercer, Ross Todd and many others; the January 2001 publication of the CAUL *Information literacy standards*; the ALIA-led first national roundtable on information literacy on 18 February 2001; the March 2001 adoption of the ALIA *Statement on information literacy* for all Australians; the commencement this year of the Australian and New Zealand Institute for Information Literacy (ANZILL); work soon to commence on the world's first assessment tool to identify the information literate individual.

The *Information literacy standards* at <http://www.caul.edu.au/> demonstrate that information literacy is not, as one commentator suggested in 1990, a passing fad. Nor is it an es-

oteric academic concept, although academics will appropriately continue to critique, research and refine its meaning, application and utility. Professor Philip Candy has described it well as the *Zeitgeist* of the 21st century — a prerequisite for addressing its challenges which, as the ALIA *Statement on information literacy* for all Australians [<http://www.alia.org.au/policies/>] notes, include: participative citizenship, social inclusion, the creation of new knowledge, personal empowerment and learning for life.

In his recent Allen & Unwin book *What did you learn today?* Mark Latham asserts that 'We need to set bold national targets for all aspects of lifelong learning'. Futurist Richard Neville, in arguing for creativity over knowledge, may be right in his conclusion that 'If knowledge was power, librarians would rule the world'.

However, librarianship is in a special position to drive the case for information literacy for all Australians as the most important of those bold national targets. It is ours not to own, but it is ours to advance and to further our unique commitment to 'the free flow of information and ideas' — a commitment that links educational, public and special libraries, librarians and library technicians. Information literacy is a whole-of-profession responsibility. It is also an opportunity to lead at a higher political level, and promote it as the core — as have our New Zealand colleagues [<http://www.lianza.org.nz/nis/>] — of a national information strategy.

The ALIA statement asserts that we 'embrace a responsibility to develop the information literacy of our clients' and that 'we will support governments at all levels and the corporate, community, professional, educational and trade union sectors in promoting and facilitating the development of information literacy for all Australians as a high priority during the 21st century'.

During my presidential term I will address as many ALIA groups and conferences as possible, and seek your ideas about how the rhetoric of information literacy can be made real — because all of the information rights in the world are not, ultimately, worth much without information literacy — *that* is the bottom line. Our renewed Association has a strengthened mindset to grapple with such a major national challenge, among others. This is thanks in large measure to the leadership and unstinting contribution of the 1999 president Craig Anderson and the 2000/2001 president Mairéad Browne. Both complete their terms on the ALIA Board of Directors this month. We are in their debt.

A *Frontline* theme for the next 12 months will be information rights and information literacy. If you think you have a *Frontline* contribution to make in these areas, do let me know. ■

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