

THE NEW LIBRARIANS' SYMPOSIUM



had the great pleasure of attending the seventh New Librarians' Symposium (NLS7) in Sydney at the end of July. While most of the participants gained their qualifications in the last 10 years, some are still studying. The age range of those attending was quite wide, and for some librarianship is the second, third or fourth career. The symposium had a sense of inclusion, energy, enthusiasm and innovation that is sometimes not so evident at such large events.

The opening speaker was Ruth Bird, an Australian who is now the Bodleian Law Librarian at the University of Oxford. Ruth interwove a narrative of her career with reference to the changes that have occurred in librarianship over the past 30 years. Her recollections of processes such as filing catalogue cards above the rod mystified some. I had a twinge of pity for those who have never known the tactile thrill of searching a card catalogue!

Ruth also talked about other changes that were part of the early process of automating library operations. She evoked my long-lost memories of the distinctive sound of the acoustic couplers essential for searching the online Dialog databases in the 1980s. They were part of a great innovation that changed information services in academic and research libraries.

Later in the symposium we were entertained by Nathan Connors from the City of Melbourne. Nathan leads the Emerging Technologies team at the avant-garde Docklands Library. He and his team members have an eclectic range of qualifications and skills, none of which would traditionally qualify them to be library professionals. Yet they have successfully introduced technology services to the library in ways that are innovative, user focused and that engage the community – all outcomes that are critical to library success.

Nathan traced the changes in technology that have occurred during his lifetime. What a nostalgic journey that proved to be! He was fascinated by, and well endowed with, technology from a very young age. Few in the audience shared his experience with search engines such as Veronica and Archie,

the very models of modern information discovery in the 1990s. His recollections of early Apple computers were either nostalgic or revelatory, depending on the age and experience of the listener.

Innovation in the information environment has accelerated over the past 30 years and will be even more rapid and pervasive in the future. Our profession has generally adopted and adapted to the changes as they occurred. In my experience, libraries have often been the earliest adopters of innovation in management and technology. Australian libraries have been world leaders in innovations such as national bibliographic services, online access to information and client-focused services.

However, many of the innovations we once thought to be revolutionary are now passé or forgotten. Some that we smugly thought to be ultimate solutions have been superseded several times over. Innovation is like a journey that has an oft-forgotten starting point, many stops and sidetracks along the way, but no final destination.

The New Librarians' Symposium convinced me that the future of our profession is assured. I had spent two days surrounded by people committed to the profession and who are enthusiastic, well qualified and receptive to change. If libraries and information services are to thrive as relevant contributors to our communities, we need to sustain a flexible approach to change, be open to adopting technological innovations used in other industries and take calculated risks. We need to continue to find ways of predicting which innovations to adopt and adapt them to the needs of our communities. The success of the Emerging Technologies team at the Docklands Library suggests that we also need to be more flexible in our definition of the qualifications and skills that define an information professional.

JOHN SHIPP FALIA
ALIA President

