

# FRONT LINE



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May I wish you all a Happy and Fulfilling New Year. As we enter a new decade in the long history of our profession, it is fitting that we allocate some time to contemplating the role of libraries in our Australian communities. Two recent experiences have stimulated such analysis in my own mind.

Firstly, I attended the International Records Management Conference in Perth in December 1989. It was a very successful conference attended by many interstate and international visitors. A distinguishing feature of the conference for me was the large number of librarians who registered for the professional program, and the significant number of librarians who gave papers.

The growing appreciation of the interrelatedness of librarians, archivists and records managers is something I would like to see encouraged at both a personal and professional level. The 1990 national presidents of all three professional associations live in Perth so maybe we can explore that issue in the near future.

There is no suggestion of amalgamation here but perhaps we should explore the idea of a Federation of Information Associations? We all share a focus on the management of information in such a way that delivers the appropriate information to meet the clients' needs, either current or future and this sets us apart from those sectors of the information industry which focuses on the technological issues alone.

If we do not address these issues then technological push will be the order of the day rather than technology being used as a tool, only as and when it is appropriate to do so; in other words that it delivers the information to the client more effectively from the client's point of view.

The second experience which has left me musing has been the visit of Dr Vartan Gregorian to Perth in January 1990. It has been my very great privilege to listen to Dr Gregorian. As ex-President of the New York Public Library and now the President of Brown University, he is eminently qualified to speak on the role of the librarian and the educator in the community.

At an inspiring public lecture to mark the launch of Reading 1990 in Western Australia, he outlined some of the major issues for librarians in the wider society. He emphasised the importance of the library and the librarian, together with educators - not as an auxiliary or support service but as the central creators of an informed, knowledgeable and literate society. We are the custodians of what he calls 'the unity of knowledge'.

He spoke of the need for librarians to be aware of the impact of technology on information access. If possession of the appropriate technology or finances becomes a criteria for access to information, then we will be participating in creating a class structure based on those who can afford to be informed and those who cannot. He suggested we might have to have 'poor people's hours', i.e. if you cannot afford to pay for information come to the library from 10 am to 12 noon for your free handout.

Perhaps the most exciting thing Dr Gregorian said was that librarians should cease apologising for themselves and working against each other, and realise the power we possess. For example the days are long gone (if indeed they ever existed) when we can undertake to preserve everything that is published, so we are the final arbiters of what parts of our culture will last.

How do we decide which literature or philosophy or political thought will be preserved for future generations? Which will we condemn to oblivion? That is the kind of argument that will go very much to the heart of authors, thinkers and decision makers when looking at funds for archival work. So, feeling inspired by Dr Gregorian, I can say that I agree that we do not need campaigns to build self-esteem, improve our image or persuade the community that libraries are 'a good thing.' We have more powerful arguments at our disposal.

Gregorian suggests that we enlist the support of our clients or users (whichever you prefer) to persuade the community in general that knowledge creation and preservation is in the interests of a literate society and is an essen-

## *Librarians: custodians of 'the unity of knowledge'*

tial aspect of a civilised society, not a luxury and certainly not a discretionary item.

However, he also spoke about not expecting to be able to do all those things from the public purse, that those informed and enriched (not only financially enriched) members of our society should give back to it what they have received. He does not apologise for insisting on this - this is not charity - it is the responsibility of every caring citizen.

With a conference year ahead of us, our intellectual focus will often be on operational issues, but we must also take the opportunity to re-examine our essential mission and define strategies, which can work in an organisation with so much change at elected officer level every year. Continuity of purpose and adherence to a vision becomes all the more difficult, but we must find a way to do this.

I would like to see us work together more across sections and extend the hand of friendship to the Australian Society of Archivists and the Records Management Association of Australia, to learn from each other and to build closer bonds. Some of us are members of all three and I would encourage you to consider doing this.

Can I conclude by urging you to consider membership drives at each Branch and Territory level. I look forward to meeting and speaking with as many members as possible this year. May I encourage you to write to me and to your other elected representatives to let us know what you think about things, for example what are your hopes and dreams for ALIA in 1990's? We will be formulating some strategic directions for the Association through General Council and we look forward to hearing from you. Please let your General Council know your concerns so they can be addressed.

