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The issue of equity on the information superhighway has generated renewed interest in the role that libraries perform. In last month's *Direct Line*, I reproduced Democrat leader Cheryl Kernot's letter of support for ALIA's *Lobby for Libraries* program. We have also received letters of support from Coalition Leader, John Howard; Shadow Minister for Communications and the Arts, Richard Alston; Minister for Housing and Regional Development, Brian Howe; the Member for Werriwa, Mark Latham and Australian Broadcasting Authority Managing Director, Brian Johns.

Political support for libraries is also evident in the United States. Newt Gingrich, Speaker in the United States House of Representatives, recently said: 'We will strive for every child in America, no matter how rural, no matter how poor, to have electronic access to the world of knowledge. The work done at libraries across the country is the most cost effective investment in learning we can make'. Betty Turrock, the 1995-96 President of the American Library Association, has nominated her presidential focus as getting libraries onto the superhighway. In her inaugural address as ALA President she said: 'Together we must make support for libraries irresistible by demonstrating the dynamic role that libraries can play in helping our nation and the nations of the world reap the benefits of the electronic twenty-first century.'

One interesting aspect of the debate surrounding the role of libraries in the world of information technology, and one that is central to winning the argument that libraries should be funded to provide online access to information, concerns the image of libraries as adaptable organisations. In a paper written in 1993 by Liz Greenhalgh from Griffith University, the relationship between meaning and form for public institutions in the twenty first

century was explored. She notes that the way in which libraries have been constructed and managed reflects the contemporary view of knowledge. In the nineteenth century, for example, this was in part based on classification. The current view of knowledge is based on computers and digital technology and she asks 'how do libraries represent a contemporary view of knowledge?' Library watchers will be aware that there have been many different responses and most would agree that we are in a period of transition. The design of library buildings today reflects not only the current demands of new information technologies but often tries to make provision for future technologies even though we can only guess what these might demand in terms of layout and fittings.

But building design may only be of marginal importance in providing access to networked information. The nature of the services provided in our libraries and the skills required to provide those services is being revolutionised. Do our policy makers have an image of libraries and the library profession which gives them the confidence to support libraries as playing a critical role in providing access to digitised information? Many of us will be familiar with the argument that computer specialists are better placed than librarians to manage the information superhighway. We also know that this argument embodies a poor appreciation of what is involved in organising, accessing and navigating the 'economy of knowledge'. Perhaps our greatest challenge lies in forcefully promoting the professional image of the library sector — one of the key objectives of our Association.

This week I received an IFLA publication *The image of the library and information profession — How we see ourselves: an investigation*. This report summarises the results of an international survey undertaken in the early 1990s. The study has so many

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limitations that it would be dangerous to draw too much from the survey data but it is instrumental in appreciating the image of the profession in broad terms. Since the survey population was limited to librarians and the sampling techniques involved little in the way of ensuring a representative array of views, the conclusions are necessarily biased and introspective. The following observations are drawn from the text:

- *the education is not good enough: programs are outdated, the students and the teaching staff are second rate*
- *a significant proportion of librarians have been asleep while other professional groups have been picking up the torch*
- *there is an impending schism between traditional librarians schooled in conventional library science and flexible, widely deployable information brokers*
- *librarians have adhered too rigidly to western ideas*
- *professional uncertainty: there are all sorts of options about what the profession does and does not involve*
- *the library is too often seen as a book repository rather than as a place where knowledge and information is transferred*
- *the social and economic role of librarians and information specialists is unclear*
- *the profession is unable to project itself as a profession*
- *the public, users of services, authorities and potential LIS students have a false image of 'the profession' — if they have any image at all.*

We know from recent survey work undertaken here in Australia that libraries and library and information professionals have a generally positive image among users but that non users have little understanding of the scope of library services. We know that we have to do more to promote the image of the sector — and this will be the ongoing focus of ALIA's activities. The IFLA survey can only encourage us to do so. ■