Putting the 'I' into ALIA

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Librarians have always dealt with the organisation and provision of information. Although the emphasis in the past has been on a custodial role as opposed to an information dissemination role, service provision has still revolved around dealing with information. The chained books in the monasteries of long ago dealt with information as did the monks who produced and used them. There should have always have been an 'I' in ALIA.

As technology rapidly altered libraries and the organisation and dissemination of information, the Australian Library Association changed its name to include 'information' at a time when the association was recognising that there were many other workers apart from librarians who could call themselves information workers. These people included those working with computer and telecommunications technologies as well as those dealing with aspects of information such as records management, archives, museums, writing and publishing. Ensuing activities of ALIA and its sections and special interest groups began to reflect this broader range of information workers encompassing more occupations than librarianship.

The Internet has made information much more widely available and blurred the boundaries between traditional librarianship and other occupations.

Searching the Internet and developing home pages is the province of both librarians and many other workers from a diverse range of disciplines. The often complex telecommunications and networking technologies associated with the Internet mean that librarians now have to draw on the expertise of these other people identified as belonging to the information industry.

Examples of putting the 'I' into ALIA can be seen in many of the professional development activities provided by the special interest groups and sections of ALIA. Past and current activities of the Canberra Online Users Group for example reflect the shift of knowledge and interests that occupy librarians.
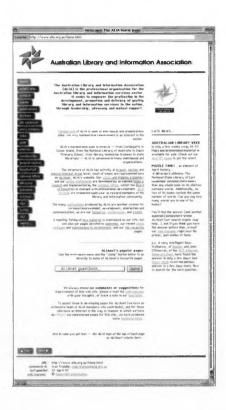
The Canberra Online Users Group was originally established with the advent of MIDAS, a telecommunications 'network' which offered the opportunity to undertake online searching overseas from Australia. This group initially dealt with issues which were relevant to online searching, online databases, and communications technology as it related to online searching, including CD-ROM technology and networking. Gradually the focus moved to any aspect of technology in libraries. Topics for the group's seminars now provide many different aspects of electronic technologies and communications. We draw on expertise outside the world of libraries and librarianship, to offer seminars of relevance to librarians as well as other information workers.

For example, in 1995 we conducted a series of seminars based on the experience of some government organisations which were providing information services through the Internet. We used speakers (not librarians) from the Commonwealth Department of Social Security, from the ACT Department of Urban Services and from the Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs. In all cases we attracted people other than librarians (as well as librarians) to these seminars, partly through promotion of them through the Internet to a diverse group of information workers. We have not however ejected librarians. Some of our more recent seminars have provided excellent presentations by librarians particularly on aspects of the Internet. The shift for us has been the recognition that the provision of the most informative seminar will depend on identifying the most appropriate expertise from a diverse group of information workers.

Recognition that librarians are part of a rapidly growing information industry with a professional association which has placed information in its name can be seen in developments such as the renaming of libraries to reflect their more comprehensive information role, for example, 'information centres'; the provision of educational courses which provide a 'hybrid' graduate skilled in librarianship, records management and information technology; the combination of the functions of computer centres and libraries in organisations such as universities and government departments; the speakers at conferences sponsored by ALIA who represent diverse aspects and functions of the information industry. These are just some of the many other examples which indicate that the 'I' is well-placed in ALIA. ■

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