

Dinosaur or phoenix?

The profession of librarianship



Colin Steele

University Librarian,
Australian National
University

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The profession of librarianship is an ancient and honourable one dating back to the earliest years of civilisation. The librarian's role, put somewhat simplistically, is to preserve and make available human knowledge. This has been in the form of papyrus, manuscripts and, after the Gutenberg revolution of the mid-fifteenth century, the printed book.

Oral history at this stage was also a significant tradition of dissertation of folklore and information. Now in the Internet-era the librarian may increasingly find himself or herself out of the information loop as the desktop user becomes the centre of access to information.

These changes do not please many members of the library profession, however, librarians are not the only ones in fear of change — the scholarly community will have to give up its 'love' of the printed journal and book in a distributed electronic network environment. Michael Lesk of Bellcore, has indicated that he foresees by the year 2010 information will be provided in a largely digital form, either by information being produced electronically 'de novo' or by the most important printed works having been digitised. One sees instances of this in 'Project J-STOR', which Harvard University has initiated, where it is putting backsets of periodicals, such as *American Historical Review* and *American Economic Review*, on the Internet. Libraries will then, in effect, become book museums as much more information will be available on a twenty-four hour basis on the Internet.

This is a challenging time for research university libraries and their librarians, many of whom have been brought up in the historical ethos of librarianship. Constant budget reductions in University libraries mean that hard decisions have to be made. Many middle-level librarians have difficulties in encompassing the information changes which are occurring and extrapolating them into the scenarios of the management in which they operate.

Many universities have seen a convergence of their library, IT services and teaching/learning facilities. The *Virtual university conference* organised by the British Council and IDP in August 1996 in Singapore saw many speakers identifying a distinction in the twenty-first century between teaching (on-line) and research (largely off-line) universities. The former would be the majority, with the latter comprising, universities of the stature of Oxford, Harvard, and MIT. In the future we will see increasingly a scenario where undergraduates are less and less likely to purchase textbooks for financial and intellectual reasons, that is currency of data. We are currently seeing an increasing use of course packs in the United Kingdom and the United States which in

the future will be available interactively on the Internet as well as in Docutech type print outs.

The Australian Federal budget cuts of Senator Vanstone surely accelerate this tendency as students will wish to complete their course as fast as possible. Students will also increasingly demand value for money and question the pursuit of research for research's sake. Once much more information is available on the Internet (and we will increasingly see the commercial publishers making full-text electronic material on the Internet, although at prices which relate more to publisher profits than logical costs) then the role of the library has to be carefully examined. Librarians need not feel threatened if they see themselves as pro-active creators and interpreters of knowledge rather than passive conservative cataloguers of books. It is my belief that the role of Internet training, Internet publishing, flexibility of IT skills will make for, even in the present environment, a worthwhile and challenging life-long career. In the CAUL, March 1996 seminar in Adelaide on *Library and IT convergence* it was said that computer and IT staff are usually flexible but insensitive to the needs of patrons, whereas librarians are more often conservative but extremely receptive to patrons needs! In the merging of the two sectors, in which the University of Tasmania, the University of New South Wales and Griffith University stand out, there clearly needs to be a balance in the provision of services.

In the longer term, the concepts of 'virtual universities' and the provision of information on the Internet, both the delivery of information and the delivery of lectures, and course assignments, will lead to a virtual world in which geography will not be a disadvantage, although universities will need to develop 'niche markets'. The merging of infrastructures to undertake IT and library services makes economic sense but also provides a better integrated skills-base to achieve the relationship with the client base and the university funding infrastructure.

Dr Dale Spender in her keynote speech to the Singapore *Virtual university conference* indicated the key role in the future which library and IT specialists (whatever they will be called) will play in the facilitating of knowledge-access and provision. Various vice-chancellors in Singapore saw the Internet and associated technologies and cultures to be the catalyst for change and those universities looking to historical models may either wither or be subsidiary campuses of the big players at a global level. We cannot allow local internal 'turf wars' between various parts of campuses at a time when overall resources are declining. The library profession, or as I would prefer to put it, those who work in libraries, will need to decide their role in this future. ■

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