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'Everything old is new again'

A couple of weekends ago I enjoyed the luxury of reading, rather than skimming, the Saturday newspapers. I was sitting overlooking the beach at Port Stephens with all the time in the world, on a break from work. Maybe it was the sun or the sea breeze, but I think it was probably the time for reflection which made me ponder the significance for our profession of the media coverage of digital development.

For example, there are those reviews of websites. The *Sydney Morning Herald Weekly* 'Icon' supplement includes guides to the best websites — wine, dating services or whatever. This is a model we recognise from our own excellent Weaver's Web and its predecessor, Webb's Web. What struck me in particular was an article in the same supplement which grandly pronounced that what will be needed in the future are professionals who can compile guides to resources online by trawling the web, evaluating and sifting out the wheat from the chaff, and then presenting the information in a form that users want and can use readily. OK, those were not the exact words, but that was the message. So I thought — now where have I heard that before? It seems 'Everything old is new again' (help, someone, what's the name of that song?).

My first reaction to this so-called new insight about the need for mediation between users and information was, of course, exasperation. Why don't people understand that sifting and evaluating is what librarians have been doing since before the dawn of time? Why don't people recognise what we can do and ask us to take on this work, when we have not only the skills of searching but finely-tuned approaches for evaluating and packaging of information? And what is more, we have developed a body of theory which can form the basis of all information tasks, regardless of the form of the information.

As I thought longer, I began to wonder why we, as a professional group, have been unable to effectively communicate the range of skills and capacities we possess. Certainly, some outside our professional group understand our expertise but we have to admit that the terms we use most often to describe ourselves — information professional, librarian, library technician and so on — somehow click into a repertoire of stereotypes that people carry deep in their heads. The kind of contemporary information work which most of our Association members do has no resonance for members of the community generally. They simply do not recognise what we do at this point in our history.

So what do we need to do to overcome this faulty perception of library and information services workers, to counter the view that we are fusty, anachronistic and obsessed with quietness and book-stamping? As I see it, there are two ways to go on this.

First, we could try to update the image held out there in the community, so that people can understand what we are really like, and more particularly,

the enormous scope of our knowledge and skills. My guess is that to turn community perceptions would be a Herculean task and require resources well beyond our means. It would need a sophisticated campaign of information and persuasion to saturate our media over a substantial period. Some will remember that such a campaign was undertaken by the Chartered Accountants some years ago. It may have had some effect short term, but I don't know if my underlying view of accountants (which happens to be fairly warm and fuzzy because I have accountants in my family) has fundamentally changed.

Second, accepting that there are deeply-ingrained stereotypes, we could move beyond these to establish a new identity for ourselves. And how do we do this? I believe that we will make a lot more headway in building community understanding of what we do if we show by our actions, as well as our words, that we see ourselves as part of the rapidly expanding and diverse information workforce. Which begs the question — what might those actions be?

Clearly the actions need to be carefully worked through in an overall strategy, but an obvious action would be to shape our association so that it is more hospitable to the new breed of information workers. If we can accommodate the interests of others besides the traditionally educated library and information services workers in our midst, then maybe we have a better chance of being part of the mainstream of the Information Revolution, a position which I fear we do not currently hold. At least, that's what media coverage of the information economy and society suggests to me.

What we need to achieve is a situation where we accept the fact that others are reinventing the wheel, a wheel we have come close to perfecting. We should not do this by pulling up the drawbridge and asserting our ownership over particular knowledge and skills in information provision. We should rather allow others over the drawbridge and into the keep. They are perhaps less well educated and equipped compared with us, but they may have expertise which we lack. The new breed of information workers can share our knowledge and learn from us, just as we have much to learn from them.

Achieving a balance which admits the new information workers, while preserving traditional values and the special interests of what has been a tightly-knit community of librarians, will be a major task. I expect it will take quite a few years of discussion and debate. But let's begin the discussions now!

We have much visiting of divisions around the country planned for this year. We have much to chew over. The divisional structure discussions, for example, will be critical in the history of our Association. But I would like to hear your views also on the longer-term future of our profession and how our association can support the development of the profession as well as prosper in its own right. ∎

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