

# A conference seachange?

As I write, the NSW bushfires and debate about the motivations of the arsonists reportedly responsible for many of them, continue. And post the raw surge of emotions about 11 September 2001 and its lessons about humanity, humility and mortality, why it happened awaits considered explanation.

Why? It is the key question which all too easily in our own professional endeavours can be subjugated to the question of how. This was certainly generally true of all of the ALIA sectional conferences and others I participated in during 2001. Those conferences did, however, demonstrate the diversity of challenge, opportunity and real achievement across the profession. Among the positives were the optimistic themes, far removed from the negative 'survival' themes too prevalent in library conferences and workshops in the nervous nineties. Consider, for example, *Passion, power, people* (TAFE), *Endless possibilities* (public libraries), *Seachange* (cataloguers), *Revelling in reference* (reference and information services).

*Seachange* — cataloguing in a dot com world held in Geelong in November showed that it is not axiomatic that a national conference needs an overseas speaker or two. It showed, too, that cataloguing and indexing — both too readily discounted by the unthinking — remain absolutely fundamental to the unique role of libraries as the custodians of, and access providers to, the analog and digital record of civilization. Australia is fortunate that it has been well-served by its cataloguing professionals, notably at the international level by Ann Huthwaite, chair of the AACR revision joint steering committee, and Giles Martin who has been on the editorial committee of DDC since 1993, and on its staff in the United States since 1999. Unless you are a cataloguer, an unusually eclectic reader of the professional literature or are able to access the fine volume of conference paper preprints of *Seachange*, you probably have low awareness of the issues, challenges and achievements of a fundamental part of your profession. Which brings me to a real limitation of the ALIA sectional conferences, and also conferences such as that of the Australian School Library Association, their lack of connection and information transfer to the profession at large, all of which profession has as its key value and driver that 'Free flow of information and ideas in the interest of all Australians and a thriving culture, economy and democracy' which is the first object of ALIA. Too often over the years I have heard, or sensed that for example cataloguers, library technicians, children's librarians, teacher librarians, home services librarians, or information specialists, feel their special concerns and challenges are little-understood by the profession at large and sometimes their own employers. Better marketing within the profession is surely needed before we can convincingly market what we can all contribute to an information-enabled country and world.

John Levett, ALIA's national president in 1991 and editor of *The Australian Library Journal* was the rapporteur of the *Revelling in reference* symposium held in Melbourne in October, with the themes

'Share the best, learn the new, make the difference'. In his usual incisive way, John made some observations about the symposium which could have been made about all of the other ALIA sectional conferences in 2001. He commented that the papers presented seemed to take information for granted, or at the value assigned to it by our clients, and that we seldom reflect on the possible complexities of their information need. Phenomenographic researchers in information literacy, such as Christine Bruce in Australia and Louise Limberg in Sweden, have come to a similar conclusion. As John stated, unless we pay more attention to questions of definitions of information and information need:

*'...we may become mere functionaries in institutional contexts ... we may thus condemn ourselves only to the how and leave the why unaddressed ... But the single distinguishing and common characteristic of all professions is autonomy — the responsibility and willingness to make considered and informed individual judgements ... and apply them regardless of any intervening institutional mores. For individuals, professions, institutions or governments to surrender, abandon or just simply forget the 'why' is to abandon autonomy and rush to a course of action the unconsidered and unforeseen consequences of which may be totally catastrophic.'*

Like ALIA's new structure, time will tell whether the October 2001 decision of the ALIA Board of Directors to minimise the number of underwritten national specialist conferences reduces ALIA's financial exposure and the time or financial demands on volunteers, trade exhibitors, sponsors, and national office. More important than those practical considerations is that your association now has an opportunity to underwrite a major national conference each year focused on the why and the how, the political context, and professional connectors rather than professional silos.

## Powering our future

Understandably employers and individuals may assess the potential value of national general conference attendance narrowly in terms of perceived direct relevance of the program to them. If, as an employer or individual, you have assessed the ALIA national conference *Powering the future* to be held in Sydney 20–22 May 2002 as irrelevant to you or too expensive, do think again. It builds on the achievements of past conferences, but is a national conference seachange with its strong focus on the why and how of the whole of the profession developing a public policy agenda for the information-enabling of all Australians in the 21st century. Ultimately the conference is about improving Australia's awareness of, and investment in, its library and information services, and the development of a national information strategy in 2002. Nothing could be more professionally or institutionally relevant, or important for Australia. *Powering our future* needs your contribution, and is worth your investment. Check it out at <http://www.alia.org.au/conferences/alia2002/>. ■



Alan Bundy

ALIA president  
alan.bundy@alia.org.au

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