

Linking people with ideas



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At our last Board meeting, the directors of ALIA spent some time sharing our ideas about the library and information profession and the role ALIA currently plays, and potentially could play, within our industry. Communication, innovation, education and learning were the focus of our discussion. ALIA's first core value statement is that 'A thriving culture, economy, and democracy require the free flow of information and ideas. Fundamental to that free flow of information and ideas are Australia's library and information services' (*ALIA towards 2010*).

The philosopher Sir Isaiah Berlin (1909–1997) discussed the importance of ideas in human life: ideas inspire us, shape our lives, influence our actions and change the course of history. In our meeting, we agreed that the common thread woven through our careers as librarians, and part of the professional satisfaction we all gained from our work, was our passion for linking people with ideas. It is a two-way street, libraries help people draw on existing ideas and encourage them in turn to create new ones. Different types of libraries link people with ideas in different ways: whether at the social and community level of public libraries, at the scholarly level in academic libraries, or at the business level in corporate and government libraries. Dr Barry Marshall, who recently won the Nobel Prize for Medicine, credits a Perth medical librarian with finding and sending the references that were instrumental in helping him develop his ideas on the causes and treatment of stomach ulcers.

Awareness is growing of the impact libraries have on the whole community. The report *Libraries Building Communities*, released earlier this year by the State Library of Victoria, highlights the cultural, economic and social value of libraries. The report analyses the contribution of libraries and librarians across four key areas: free public access to computer and information technology resources (helping to reduce the digital divide); the location of information (creating better informed communities); literacy and lifelong learning; and connections between individuals, groups and government. The clear message delivered by this report is that libraries are very successfully linking people with ideas, in physical, virtual and abstract ways. The 'linking' is achieved by location, the building itself providing a place where people can meet to exchange ideas and information, as well as through electronic access to information. Libraries are also seen as a link be-

tween the government and its citizens. The 'people' themselves are very diverse, and libraries are important in ensuring equitable access to information resources by all sectors of the community, regardless of ethnic background, social and economic standing, or age. The 'ideas' reside in the library collections and resources, and are generated through people's cognitive interaction with these resources and through their social interaction with each other.

Other communications industry players — the news media, mobile phone services and software companies — talk about 'connecting with information'. Disintermediation, the removal of the middleman who connects the producer with the consumer, is a hot topic. Autotellers and online flight bookings are new, direct ways to access services. Surfing the net, I found a marketing dictionary (<http://www.marketingterms.com>). On disintermediation, it says: "Intermediaries survive by adding value. If changes in the marketplace render an intermediary's role less valuable, then the intermediary must adapt. If not, the old intermediary will likely be replaced by a new, more valuable intermediary."

Library and information professionals must make the most of their unique position as intermediaries between people and ideas. In an increasingly information-intensive world, we face new challenges accessing, evaluating and making sense of the information that is all around us. I believe that 'linking people with ideas' should become a catchcry for our profession. A librarian already has in-depth understanding of user information needs, while LIS research is leading us to a better understanding of information-seeking behaviour. In our intermediary role, we can design and develop systems to enhance our information retrieval capabilities and help users overcome the challenges they face.

In the ALIA five-year plan, we wrote that "the Association and our members operate in a challenging world characterised by rapid social, economic and technological change, far-reaching changes in the information environment and challenges to the core value of the free flow of information and ideas" (*ALIA towards 2010*). The directors of ALIA are committed to working with all members of the Association to advocate our fundamental belief in our professional role linking people with ideas and, within our professional body, to link our own members with ideas. This will be a focus of the National Advisory Congress, to be held in Canberra on 25–26 November. We look forward to stimulating and sharing lots of new ideas. ■

Feedback to your Board of Directors

Do you have an idea, compliment or concern about your Association? Contact any director and ideas will be reviewed at each Board meeting.

E-mail to feedback@alia.org.au will be automatically forwarded to all Board members.

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