

Public information and policy

Distinguished US information scientist visits Australia

Dr Toni Carbo Bearman is the Dean of the School of Library and Information Science at the University of Pittsburgh, USA. From 1980-1986 she was Executive Director of the US National Commission on Libraries and Information Science (NCLIS), the government agency for advising the President and Congress on policy and planning in the library and information field. She has been one of the major players in the information policy debate in the United States over the last 15 years.

Dr Bearman was in Australia a few weeks ago for a private visit. While here she spent some time in Canberra with the Minister of the Arts, Tourism and Territories, David Simmons, and with senior staff of the National Library, and addressed a meeting of ALIA ACT Branch members. She also gave an interview to Elaine Harris of the ABC, covering aspects of 'public information', the impact of technology, ethics and other topics. The following excerpts from this interview give the flavour of her comments:

'There is often a very fine line between public information and other information, especially when it becomes difficult to determine what information should be protected. Even information that we may at first consider to be private may be of interest to others and it might be in the national interest or the public interest for the information to be made public. For example, although medical records are usually considered to be confidential, information about a contagious disease may need to be shared with others to protect the public.

'New technologies make it easier to find out information about people. With the large number of databases containing information about people and the ability to link them together it is very simple for someone to find out all sorts of private



photo Garry Hanson

Toni Carbo Bearman with Minister David Simmons at Parliament House on 17 June.

information about a person — how much money we're making, how much our houses cost, what we have in the bank, where we're working — all kinds of

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information gathered for different purposes but easily linked together. Laws are needed to guard against unlawful or unethical invasion of privacy.

'Technology has actually influenced public information to the good as well as

facilitating invasion of privacy and creating fears. It has provided much better access to information about government, to consumer information and to information in general. For example, if we're looking for historical information about our family, we can search databases of genealogical records and identify photographs, maps, books, newspapers, magazine articles and other information to build our family trees. Networks provide access to materials beyond the four walls of any single institution and can link information from libraries, historical societies, museums, archives, government records, and other organisations...

'I don't think that the (electronic) visual image will replace the word, I think it will supplement it. The younger

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in curriculum emphasis in Years 11 and 12. If you hear or see the expression CPPT — Cooperative Program Planning and Teaching — you have a succinct statement about the professional role, which teacher-librarians need to take up.

The time is past for teachers to send their classes to the library for a 'library lesson' each week, so that their students will learn 'library skills'. Children learn to use a library and its resources by having a real purpose for their search or a research need, which is an integral part of their school program. The longer I work as a teacher-librarian, the more I am convinced of the ineffective and downgrading result, which the 'library lesson' has on promoting, resource-based learning, information literacy and children's literature. It reduces the teacher-librarian's potential role in the school and it devalues libraries and librarianship.

This year the National School Libraries Section is working with our colleagues in the Australian School Library Association to produce a school library planning document, which will support teacher-librarians in the development of effective school library programs. We need to replace the outdated 'Books and beyond' and

address the important issues of programs, personnel and facilities. The complexity and diversity of the job make this a daunting task, but it must be tackled. The reference group and the eventual consultants for the project will need to consult widely in order to produce a document, which will be able to support teacher-librarians and school libraries throughout Australia.

There are some wonderful programs being developed in Australian school libraries...

Over the last few years we have seen great developments in centralised cataloguing services with ASCIS — Australian Schools Cataloguing Information Service — available throughout Australia. The ASCIS subject headings have provided a much improved classification system for Australian children. Many automated systems are now available, from which

teacher-librarians may choose. Computerised acquisition, cataloguing and circulation facilities are becoming more widespread. In some larger schools electronic security systems have also been installed. As the economy tightens, teacher-librarians will need to present stronger arguments in favour of such technology; educational budgets are decreasing and we will have to work hard to protect the advances made in this area.

How a school views the role of its teacher-librarian(s) and its library is a great measure of its understanding of children, learning and curriculum development. It is a great indicator of the value, which a school apportions to the concept of life-long learning and to academic and intellectual achievement. If you have children and you are choosing a school for them, don't forget to ask about the role of the teacher-librarian and the school library. Schools which have introduced a whole school approach to developing the school library program love to talk about their initiatives with conviction and confidence. There are some wonderful programs being developed in Australian school libraries and many excellent, hard-working teacher-librarians, who will need the support of the entire library profession in the immediate future. □

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generation has been raised, not on text and print as many of us had been, but on moving images on television and in video games. They get their news and information, not from newspapers and other text, but from images: first the picture, then the words. They have come to expect a multimedia presentation.

'Although younger people approach computers with little fear or hesitation, more and more adults are becoming comfortable using them. Some older adults have been hesitant to use the new technologies, because they have had little or no experience with them in their past. At the University of Pittsburgh we have been working with Vintage, a neighbourhood association for older adults, to teach people to use computers. Many of these people are interested in returning to the workforce and they have found that they lack the computer skills needed. We have found that having people of the same generation teach each other, after a special training session, is very effective and more comfortable. It removes some of the fear and provides a peer group positive influence.

'The other group that has been helpful is the grandchildren. It seems to be less threatening to have a grandchild teach a

grandparent, because the two generations share a common bond...

'Even though some people years ago predicted a paperless society, we have found that people are actually using more

...there is not the same tactile pleasure that one gets from holding a book.

paper, in part for electronic publishing and photocopying. I think that people still want to hold that document in their hands. With something like Sony's new product, we will be able to carry text with us in compressed form. However, it's not that easy for us to read on small screens and there is not the same tactile pleasure that one gets from holding a book. At the Australian Society of Archivists conference, Peter Manning referred to the pleasures of a new book. He loves books for the sense of being able to hold them, for the content and for the smell of them.

'One of the courses I teach in our school is Ethics in the Information Society — a topic I consider to be extremely important. Many ethical issues are related to the use of information — who gets access to what information, how do we protect privacy, how do we protect intellectual property and many others. This course encourages the students to consider the ethical implications of the library and information work they do and teaches them some of the important questions they need to consider in their work.' □



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