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The role of the profession in the future must move from mere delivery to selection, analysis and repackaging of information to ensure that the minimum volume of symbols incorporating the optimum volume of knowledge is supplied...

The availability and capability of information technology is prompting renewed interest in document delivery. Document delivery was a major concern decades ago, but, with the development of the technology we now take for granted, it seemed for a while that librarians were coming perilously close to believing that the bibliographic record (as represented in on-line catalogues and bibliographic databases) is an adequate substitute for the item.

While individual libraries have recognised the potential of modern advances in information storage, retrieval, communications and copying to locate original documents and transmit copies in a timely and efficient manner, we lag behind the United States in achieving political commitment to overcoming the tyranny of distance and the inelasticity of budgets by instituting a national high-speed, multilevel network.

The National Research and Education Network (NREN) bill was sponsored by Al Gore, now Vice-President, and signed into law in December 1991. The process has progressed to dealing with what may be seen as the secondary problems of networks in first world countries—those which involve organisational issues of information network policy and procedures, governance and financing.

But there are also problems of culture and access to be considered, and these are problems with which all members of the Association should be concerned.

Writing on information technologies in the Pacific, Donald Rubenstein, suggests that in Micronesia and other Pacific Island areas, the principal issues in developing information networks are human and cultural, rather than technological and organisational. In that culture,

as in many others, information exchange is predominantly through face-to-face interaction. In Micronesia the preferred and usual way of getting information is still to go and talk directly to someone else.

The advantage of face-to-face communication is that the volume of information delivered is manageable.

It is true that information storage technology has seen such advances in recent years that billions of characters can now be stored in less space than it takes to house one book. Transmission capabilities have similarly advanced, enabling telegraphy to progress from 50 words per minute to billions of words per minute. Yet human ability to process information remains unchanged. In common with our remote ancestors we still process symbols at approximately 300 units per minute.

Rubenstein argues that the medium and the message are not equivalent but that the medium of information alters its nature and power. In developing information networks for the Pacific Islands he suggests that it is important to be sensitive to how new information media may affect basic cultural patterns and relationships.

In our development of information networks and in our belief that people will access information electronically, we, too, should ensure that we consider the human and cultural requirements of our potential clientele.

Information technology may be driving the future, but the library profession is the profession which can give that future a human face. While we should be drawing the route maps and steering the technology, we also have to acknowledge that, though there are some libraries which are moving into the provision of 'document delivery' services, strong commercial interests are likely to be equally, if not better, placed

to develop the infrastructure and the specialised collections needed to provide the services publicly funded libraries will require.

It is true, also, that for many individuals, personal direct access to document delivery services may well meet many of their needs.

But many users will not be information literate to the level required, and if they are not, it is up to libraries, all libraries, to ensure that these users develop adequate skills to take advantage of information in all forms and from all sources.

The cause of information literacy has not been universally adopted, despite the sterling work being done in South Australia to alert the profession to this worthy ideal.

But even if every potential and actual library and information network user was highly information literate, libraries would not be redundant.

Speaking at the American Library Association conference last year, Gloria Steinem called the public library 'the last refuge of those without modems.' There will always be a role for libraries in meeting the needs of those who have no other source of information.

There is, however a major role which relates to the human capacity to process information. Ranganathan exhorted us to save the time of the user. The amount of information an individual can process relates to his level of information literacy and the amount of time he has available. The role of the profession in the future must move from mere delivery to selection, analysis and repackaging of information to ensure that the *minimum* volume of symbols incorporating the *optimum* volume of knowledge is expeditiously supplied in response to each and every inquiry.

As a profession we must work to make this happen. ▪