Direct Line

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What will the library of the future be like? Indeed, some have asked whether there will be a library in the future. There is little doubt that developments in information technology hold the key. There will be considerable change as the means for storing and accessing information presents both opportunities and threats for the information professional.

These issues are the subject of a recent publication in the Haworth Library and Information Science series. *Libraries and the Future: Essays on the Library in the Twenty First Century,* edited by F W Lancaster (New York: The Haworth Press Inc., 1993. 322 pp. US$39.95 ISBN 1 56024 451 8). This is a collection of eleven 'visionary statements' by 'mostly librarians and other information professionals' whose contributions are based on their visions of the library in 2020.

As would be expected in such a crystal ball gazing exercise, there is much divergence in views about the library of the future. Some common themes do emerge however. The delivery of information will be the major focus for libraries and the role of information storage will diminish. Strategic partnerships and leadership skills will be required to ensure the maintenance of the role of information providers for librarians.

There is also a strong theme, from W David Penniman, that urges library and information professionals to become more actively involved in the development of new information technologies. 'We must shape the future, not let it shape us'. A more active role is required on the part of librarians in determining how the technologies will be used.

Reading through the book provides some basis for reflection on how librarians currently do their jobs and what must be done to take advantage of the opportunities that new technologies present. The library must be seen less as a 'fortress' and more as a 'pipeline'. Library schools are producing good technicians when 'architects of vision' are required. Libraries are set to become 'intelligent buildings' capable of 'exporting' library services to the home. New formats will exist alongside the old. Libraries will become community centres with global connections housing the 'sum total of accessible information available anywhere'. Libraries in 2020 will be judged not on the collections they house but by the services they deliver.

W. David Penniman, in his essay *Shaping the Future for Libraries Through Leadership and Research*, emphasises the strength of libraries as their people-orientation. With a new philosophy of 'information service leadership', librarians should aim to harness information technology to address the 'barrier to understanding'. Access to trillions of bits of information will do little to enhance our knowledge without the librarian to guide us.

I particularly enjoyed Pat Molholt's essay *Libraries as Bridges; Librarians as Builders.* She argues that the exponential growth in computing power together with miniaturisation of equipment will produce an increased capacity for storage of information in less space. While data will become plentiful, it will become difficult to find. Librarians must therefore play a critical role in the structure and organisation of data through 'improved capability and connectivity among information resources' and stresses the need for the development of standards. 'This is a challenge both we as individuals and our professional associations need to address with a sharper focus'. She goes on to say that 'unlike the great traditional libraries of the world, where a large proportion of what one needed could be found in one place, our libraries today no longer have the space nor the funding to operate that way'.

Molholt sees the future of networking as involving graphics. 'We talk a lot about text...but we need to focus much harder on graphics. ...they convey critical information as text alone cannot do.' She also sees networks as having the potential to equalise access to information 'making what is on the shelves no longer the measure of a library'.

It is interesting that many librarians have suggested that their main concern in the growth of networks is that we will create an even greater division between the 'information rich' and the 'information poor'. This proposition is of course linked to the cost of information delivery in the technological era. It is on the issue of cost and pricing that there is some divergence in views amongst the authors of the various essays in this book. Young, (*Vision of Academic Libraries in a Brave New Future*),

suggests that connect-time fees will be 'the killer of public access systems'.

He goes on: 'In reality there has always been financial disparity not only among users but also among libraries, some having larger and better collections. ...These disparities will remain in the future and will be exacerbated as costs rise.' Kilgour, (*The Metamorphosis of Libraries During the Foreseeable Future*) on the other hand suggests: 'Since users will not spend time and money travelling to a library, the services of the electronic library will cost less, and finally users will download data for processing in their microcomputers, thereby saving time in producing correlations and patterns not easily derived from printed materials.' He goes on to conclude that 'every player in electronic library systems will win by having his costs reduced, and in addition the user will be a double winner because his success in obtaining information will be increased by 50 percent, the most desirable of all the benefits of the metamorphosis from bibliography to information.'

And there are other issues of importance raised throughout the book. These include matters of copyright and censorship. One author predicts a substantial increase in the role of volunteers for the library of the future (without commenting on the impact this may have on the employment of library professionals). There is an interesting piece by Seiler and Surprenant which opens with the statement that 'The end of the print library is in sight' and predicts that in the race for control of access to systems, the library will be bypassed. Included in this essay is a fascinating exploration of the 'virtual library' of the future.

The variety of perspectives included in this collection of essays certainly challenges the reader to contemplate the shape of the future library. The important and critical message that this book delivers is that information technology will change the nature of the work of librarians and the institutions in which they work. Strategic partnerships need to be developed such that the future of the profession is assured. These will include cooperative efforts within and between library sectors. Further, there needs to be appropriate political will towards issues of equity of access and associated issues of costs and prices. Finally, it is up to individuals working in libraries and professional associations such as ALIA to ensure that we are key players in the debate on the shape of the library of the future. ■

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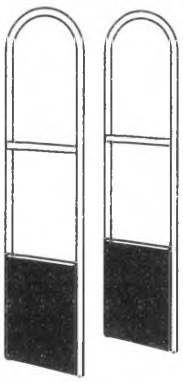

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