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The future of the book

The following comment appeared in the science journal *Search* some fifteen years ago. The journal reports on an impressive innovation in the storage and retrieval of knowledge as follows:

'The new devise is known as Built-in Orderly Organised Knowledge (BOOK). Many advantages are claimed over the old-style learning and teaching aids... It has no wires, no electric circuits to break down, requires no network or electrical connection, and is totally self-contained and portable. Anyone can use BOOK, even children, and it fits comfortably into the hands.

'Each sheet of paper presents the user with an information sequence in the form of symbols, which (s)he absorbs optically for automatic registration on the brain. When on sheet has been assimilated, a flick of the finger advances it...

'A small accessory, available for trifling extra cost, is the BOOKMARK (Modular Address Retrieval Component). This allows the user to pick up a program where it was left off...

'Altogether, the Built-in Orderly Organised Knowledge unit seems to have great advantages and few drawbacks. We predict a great future for it.'

The fact that such humorous comments make just as much of a point today as they did fifteen years ago is significant in itself. In the almost thirty years since I completed my post-graduate qualification we have been constantly told that the world is changing, that technology is replacing the printed word and that our skills will be redundant.

The reality is that the world is changing, technology is complementing the printed word, and our skills must be adapted to make the fullest use of new capacities to perform our traditional roles of organising information for access and mediation in assisting users to best meet their needs.

In picking up the capabilities of the new technology, library managers, and more particularly library funders, need to be aware that it expands rather than replaces traditional roles and materials. In the past we have not been good at gaining funding for new tools and methods. Too often they have not been used at all, or they have been introduced with user charges, which cannot be defended on any logical ground in a context of free access to traditional materials and services.

If we cannot achieve additional funding to expand our capabilities, we must become better at prioritising, and ensure that funds are applied in the most effective ways from the users point of view to both new and exciting service methods.

Books and the services which depend on them will be with us for a long time to come, but unless we become better at integrating the use as well as the costing of books and new technology, we run the risk of either relegating ourselves to becoming curators of book museums, or cutting ourselves off from our heritage in joining the already crowded world of electronic information processors. We have the skills and resources to integrate both. This is our competitive advantage.

From the president's diary

During the last month I have visited regional groups in the Hunter Valley and at Bendigo, and been struck yet again by the wide range of activity to which ALIA members are committed, as well as by the generosity with which our members share their experience and provide support to one another.

In talking with Bendigo members the topic of compulsory competitive tendering was raised, with some members expressing disappointment that ALIA had not taken a strong stand in opposing compulsory competitive tendering in libraries.

Use of choice and competition to achieve efficiency and/or economies in operating is neither good or bad in itself. However, it can have negative implications where it is applied as an end in itself without sufficient focus on the specific outcomes required. The key issue for those of us working in libraries whose services may be subject to competitive tendering is to examine what is likely to give us the best advantage for our users. If the funding authority has a commitment to whole of service tendering, emphasis must be on the clarity with which outcomes are specified and the quality of tender documentation.

This is where our tradition of cooperation is vital. There is now a considerable body of experience, both in Australia and overseas, in library tender specification, and anyone involved in competitive tendering should be drawing on this.

To respond to the interest and concerns of members ALIA has produced one of its occasional papers series on competitive tendering. If you are involved or likely to be involved in a competitive tendering process, make that your starting point...

Use the competitive tendering process not only as an opportunity to focus on your own service efficiency but also to demonstrate to funding authorities the role and power of good quality information to support decision making. Demonstrate the library's information capabilities by providing the information they require. This is a pretty powerful profession and a powerful Association when we call on its resources. ■