Research: priorities for the profession

Dr Ross Todd

On Sunday 25 October 1998, the ALIA Board of Education hosted a forum for library and information sector practitioners and educators. One session of the forum was devoted to discussing the research priorities seen to be important in providing library and information services in Australia. Ongoing research was regarded by the forum as vital for informing the decision making process development and provision of effective information services. In identifying research priorities the forum recognised the value of providing services that satisfy the information needs of diverse groups in changing information and social environments.

I have summarised the main research areas raised at the forum: this is by no means definitive, rather a starting point.

1. Understand the dynamics of the human dimensions of the values/benefits of libraries and information agencies.

Statistics often indicate strong support for public libraries and information agencies. However, the value or benefit of these agencies is often expressed in terms of what the organisation does (services) or what it provides (resources), or in terms of justifying its *raison d'être* to funding authorities. Understanding the value from the end-user perspective is necessary: How do libraries actually 'help'? How do libraries contribute to personal empowerment and lifelong learning, for example? How do libraries help people to get on with their lives, solve problems, get around barriers, find direction, fulfil their information needs? How can we effectively market the value of libraries to individuals? What does this mean for the provision of value-added services?

2. Understand information seeking and information utilisation in an information-rich environment, rather than an information-scarce environment.

The development of the World Wide Web and electronic information products and services has the potential to provide a huge amount of information at any one time. How do people cope with this, how do people manage the 'flood', how do people deal with information overload? And how can libraries provide the 'intellectual' scaffold of information and critical literacies to help people effectively engage with the Net, even outside the library context? At a broader level, this focuses on developing a greater understanding of the human interface with electronic sources of information. For example, there is a need for in-depth usability studies of human-computer interaction to shed light on the human dimensions of electronic information searching.

3. The importance of the development of information literacy.

There was recognition of the gap between the rhetoric and the reality of information literacy. There is need for more research into the impact of information literacy development particularly in the education sector — school, TAFE and university — and its impact on school performance, undergraduate performance, and how teaching and learning processes can more effectively integrate it. How can libraries best deliver information literacy instruction? How can learning theory, for example, inform the library's role in developing information literacy and lifelong learners?

4. Research in emerging areas of information practice, such as knowledge management and electronic information management.

How is human knowledge generated, constructed and utilised? How can this understanding inform the design and provision of information services? How can library and information organisations capitalise on the human knowing in organisations — the life experiences, networks, expertises, procedural and declarative knowledge — and use these as intellectual capital for the strategic goals of the organisation? What are the relationships between a person's existing knowledge, information needs, information seeking behaviour, and interactions with libraries and information agencies? How concepts and practices of copyright, intellectual property, media annexation of scholarly output, impact on electronic information management.

5. Elucidation of notions of information communities and information networks.

How does information actually flow in the groups and communities that libraries serve? Greater understanding of human information networks and the nature of information flow in these communities is important to effectively meet the information needs of these groups. Are libraries the most appropriate answer? What are the barriers/gaps in information access for these groups? Who are the most appropriate information providers? Should libraries be all things to all people? How can libraries contribute to a communities development? These questions highlight the need for more understanding of the patterns of information seeking behaviour of target groups that represent library clients. Understanding the dynamics of information-seeking, information processing and information utilisations of groups of library users is seen to contribute to more effective interaction and meeting needs.

6. Understand the information-seeking behaviour of the 'library non-user community'.

There is evidence that indicates that a substantial portion of the Australian population do not use libraries and information agencies. What are the needs and information behaviours of library non-users? Why don't people use libraries? Should everyone use libraries anyway? Should libraries be interested in non-users?

The identification of these research areas raises other key questions. Whose responsibility is it to undertake this research? Is it just the academics in schools of librarianship and information studies? What is the role of ALIA in this research, if the research is considered to an important element in the vitality, energy and longevity of the profession? What is the role of professional practitioners? I look forward to hearing your responses.

I encourage you to comment and add your ideas to the debate. Please e-mail me (Ross.Todd@uts.edu.au), I will compile the results in a future report for *inCite*. ∎