Pressure to 'control' information

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A couple of months ago I was shocked to hear a news item about the arrest of a Chinese national working as a librarian in Dickinson College in Pennsylvania. The radio story covered the case of Yongyi Song who was held for five months detention in a Beijing prison on the grounds that he had been gathering state secrets while on a visit to China. By all accounts Yongyi Song was collecting documents which had been widely available during the Cultural Revolution. Happily, after vigorous lobbying by his colleagues, IFLA and others, the librarian was released and returned to his job in Pennsylvania. Happy ending. But was it really a happy ending? Was I justified in feeling pleased when I heard that this man had been released from gaol? Could some of us find ourselves in a similar situation and come under physical or legal threat because we convey information which others do not want conveyed?

In looking at our situation as information professionals in a western democratic country, I feel confident that no Australian librarian is in danger of being arrested and put in gaol, in this country, simply for collecting public documents. But the problem is that all of us, whether we realise it or not, are under pressure to 'control' information — and not just in the bibliographic sense. Increasingly organisations are realising the value of information so information is being restricted and not being made available to those who do not have obvious rights or the resources for access. I remember some ten years ago when the New South Wales state government decided to make its legal reports available electronically exclusively through a commercial network service. We jumped up and down but in time came to accept the so-called 'commercial realities'.

Of course, we recognise that there are situations where it is appropriate to withhold information from general circulation — for privacy reasons, or for cultural reasons as with certain Aboriginal knowledge. What concerns me is that in the new environment with the growing realisation of the power and value of information in the knowledge economy, we may not be paying enough attention to preservation of the notion of the free flow of information which should be available. There have been a few flurries of interest and attempts by our profession to set down some basic principles about this. For example, when the ideological push to 'user pays' concepts began to be acted out in local and state governments, the profession had to start defining core and value-added services. But information technology rather than ideology is, I believe, a greater threat.

Some information is certainly easier to access because of technology. But on the other hand, the general maintenance of information in electronic form makes it very easy to place restrictions on access and uses. And when this capacity is linked to organisational knowledge management strategies in regard to holding back rather than disseminating information, we need to be concerned about information flow.

In brief, in embracing IT and its potential for sharing information, we need to understand the other side of the IT coin and its potential for cutting people out of the information loop.

Happily, here in Australia we have a tolerant and open society. For us, the 'c' word (censorship) is not a major issue at the moment, but we need only to look at the legislative proposals such as *the Digital Agenda Bill* and *Broadcasting Services (Amendment) Act* and others to see that there are more-subtle dangers in the digital age. These proposals purport to build on concepts of democracy, but because of the way access to IT and infrastructure are unequally distributed, their effect can be to make access significantly more difficult than in earlier times.

In the coming years as government ideologies drive market concepts to their logical conclusion and the scope and reach of government diminishes, we have to face some very significant questions around the free flow of information. And what is important for us to realise is that the issues are not coming with a flag on top saying 'watch out', alerting us to the need to consider where we as informational professionals stand. The issues are embedded in the expectations of our communities, our governments, our bosses and in our day-to-day practices in libraries and information services. So what we need to do is resist Censorship but also realise that another type of 'censorship', with a small 'c', is a fact of life in an electronic world. In this context, the issues of principle are often hard to detect and attacks on the basic principles of freedom of access to information are largely unintended. We should not lose sight of the need to combat this more subtle form of censorship which is imposed by others or by ourselves through our work practices, we need to work to maintain basic rights to information. ∎

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