

Only connect...

Address given at the 2002 ALIA Annual General Meeting, Sydney 20 May 2002

In E M Forster's 1910 novel *Howard's end* Margaret is trying to help the obdurate Wilcox explore the road of his soul. To her:

It did not seem so difficult. She need trouble him with no gift of her own. She would only point out the salvation that was latent in his own soul, and in the soul of every man. Only connect! That was the whole of her sermon... Live in fragments no longer. Only connect and the beast and the monk, robbed of the isolation that is life to each other, will die.

'Only connect...' is the theme of this address. It is about the need for greater connection within our profession. It is about greater connection with those who have the capacity to help us to progress a better Australia through its information enabling during this century. It is about greater connection with our values, because values are at the heart of the human condition. Life presents us with myriad choices, and we make our choices based on the values we hold.

Ethical leadership

An important role, within the ever-increasing panoply of roles of any modern professional association, remains to exercise ethical leadership for its profession. In fulfilling that role the ALIA Board of Directors endorsed in March 2002 a *Core Values Statement* — the first to be adopted by any library and information association worldwide — the preface to which asserts that:

A thriving culture, economy and democracy requires the free flow of information and ideas.

Fundamental to that free flow of information and ideas are Australia's library and information services. They are a legacy to each generation, conveying the knowledge of the past and the promise of the future.

Library and information services professionals therefore commit themselves to the following core values of their profession.

Those seven values are:

- 1 Promotion of the free flow of information and ideas through open access to recorded knowledge, information, and creative works.
- 2 Connection of people to ideas.
- 3 Commitment to literacy, information literacy and learning.

4 Respect for the diversity and individuality of all people.

5 Preservation of the human record.

6 Excellence in professional service to our communities.

7 Partnerships to advance these values.

That first value derives, of course, from ALIA's unique first object 'the promotion of the free flow of information and ideas' — unique among the professions in Australia, and unusual in its expression among library and information associations worldwide.

Partnerships

It is the last value — about partnerships — which is, however, the concern of this address. That value states 'we advocate co-operation between all library and information services, and with related agencies, for the private and public good'. At the local, national and international levels — despite occasional contretemps — there is no profession which already partners and co-operates more. We need, however, to now go beyond co-operation, to a position where every sector in the profession sees itself as a stakeholder in the others, rather than as a dispassionate or even critical observer.

For it is manifest that within our profession, as an Australian society at large, there is a disconnect.

During my presidential term I have participated in all of the ALIA special interest conferences, and many others. Those conferences have emphasised four things:

- the high level of commitment, energy, innovation and achievement in all sectors;
- that there are very many more positives about the profession, its practitioners and its educators than our professional jeremiahs would allow;
- information literacy is becoming a concern of all sectors;
- the lack of connection across those sectors.

By measures such as access, overall co-operation, innovation, application of technology, electronic provision, pay justice, information literacy and the library as educational change-agent, Australia's library infrastructure ranks among the top ten nations worldwide — as does that of our colleagues in New Zealand with whom we need to strengthen a connection diminished in recent years. In this Library and Information Week there is

indeed much to celebrate — a positive story to tell. *Libraries do change lives.*

The needs

Yet, if we start at the beginning, there are still too many Australian children who cannot be assisted in their critical pre-school literacy development by their local public library because that library does not have a children's librarian — and if that library had the funds for one, it would have difficulty in finding anything like a qualified children's librarian because Australia's library and information studies programs do not provide well for them. That should be the local, state and national concern of all of us — university, TAFE, teacher, public, special librarians and library technicians, information specialists, consultants, information brokers, educators and vendors.

There are still too many government schools in particular — those schools responsible for the education of seventy per cent of young Australians — which employ none or inadequate numbers of teacher librarians and do not support their libraries well, so children and teachers are disadvantaged, or the load is shed to public and other libraries. And if a TAFE or university library is inadequate students will resort to the public library — of which students of all types are typically thirty-five per cent of users — or to special and other libraries.

And if a school and a public library are inadequate and do not co-operate in developing young Australians who are literate, information literate and relate productively to libraries and library professionals in their formative years, TAFE and university libraries will inevitably lament the information illiteracy of their new students, blame their schools and their teacher librarians — and typically leave it at that. And if those young Australians move on as adults to decision-making positions in the corporate or government sectors they will arrive there with a baggage of poor library and information experience which may prejudice them against an appreciation of the value of timely, accurate and mediated information, and against those agencies and professionals best able to supply it.

The message is a simple one. To use an analogy, as each goose flaps its wings it creates an uplift for the birds that follow. By flying in a V formation, the whole flock adds seventy-one per cent greater flying range than if the birds flew alone. In other words, those who share a common direction and sense of community can get where they are going quicker ►

- and easier because they are travelling on the thrust of one another.

That sense of common direction tends, however, to be mired in our myopic professional silos, where it is easier and less challenging to ignore or even criticise those in other silos than it is to make the *conscious and sustained* effort to understand them, relate to them, and work together with them.

As an indication of that, disconnect sixty-three per cent of teacher librarians regard their knowledge of public library issues and developments as low or very low, and seventy-one per cent of public librarians regard their knowledge of school library issues as low or very low. [Bundy, A (2000) *Essential connections: school and public libraries for lifelong learning* <http://www.library.unisa.edu.au/papers/essential.htm>] Similar percentages would be likely found for special librarians, law librarians, health librarians, university librarians, TAFE librarians, information specialists and library technicians in their real knowledge of each other and of school and public libraries.

What Australia needs

That lesson was not lost on those in our profession and in the laity who saw last century the need for maximum connection in improving Australia's library and

information services. Because of them, there is now a substantial base of achievement on which we can move forward with confidence and assertion, to help Australia itself address the many issues about which it needs to connect if it is to prosper during this century — issues such as economic development, international competitiveness, education, environmental sustainability, health, Aboriginal reconciliation, multiculturalism, social inclusion and sustenance of an open democracy. They are issues which can only be addressed well by the free flow of information and ideas and systematic attention, not just to the digital divide, but rather to the information literacy divide — because all of the free flow of information in the world is valueless to those who do not recognise their need for information and have the capacity to identify, access, evaluate and apply the needed information.

The challenge

Those issues will be best addressed by a nation which recognises that information technology alone is no panacea — that there is no intertopia. A comprehensive human and specialist response is needed which we are indeed well placed to provide, because we do so already, and we do so with broader community appreciation and support than we sometimes recognise or certainly capitalise on. The

challenge before us is to foster a greater awareness within all sections of the community of what we already contribute, the high level of return on what is currently a very modest investment, and of the importance of increasing that investment. Consider, for example, that the whole of the public library system in Australia, used by nearly 13 million people, costs less than just one large Australian university with 35 000 students.

Our light on the hill

To paraphrase Ben Chifley, we have a great objective — our light on the hill — which we aim to reach by enabling the free flow of information and ideas in the interest of all Australians. We do this not only in our libraries but anywhere we may help. If it were not for that great objective, our libraries, our profession, our associations, would scarcely be worth the endeavour.

Our libraries, our profession, our associations, are surely worthy of such endeavour. However, if we only connect more in that endeavour, we will just as surely move that much closer to *our* light on the hill, and to a thriving Australian culture, economy and democracy enabled by the free flow of information and ideas.

Dr Alan Bundy, president



VALA AWARD

The VALA Award, made biennially, is presented to the Australian library or information centre judged to have made the most innovative use of information technology during the previous two years.

Nominations are now invited for the 2002 Award for applications implemented between July 2000 and June 2002 inclusive.

All libraries and information centres in Australia are eligible for nomination by staff, users or other interested persons.

Guidelines and nomination forms can be obtained from:

**The Secretary
VALA
PO Box 282
CROYDON VIC 3136
or from our website at
<http://www.vala.org.au>**

Nominations close 31 August 2002



**VICTORIAN
ASSOCIATION FOR
LIBRARY AUTOMATION, Inc.**

VALA TRAVEL SCHOLARSHIPS

CALL FOR APPLICATIONS

Every two years VALA offers up to two Travel Scholarships to enable suitable persons to travel overseas to examine aspects of library automation. Candidates proposing to study newer technologies of potential application in Australia but not yet seen here are most likely to be successful. No formal qualifications are required. Although candidates should be working in library or information related areas, they need not be employed in traditional library environments.

The successful candidates will receive up to \$12 000 towards travel, accommodation and living expenses. Successful candidates must complete the study by August 2003, and present a paper at the 12th VALA Biennial National Conference in February 2004.

Closing date for applications: 31 August 2002.

Application forms and more details are available from:

**The Secretary, VALA, PO Box 282, CROYDON VIC 3136
or from our Website at <http://www.vala.org.au>**