

A radical profession?



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Early this year Karen Schneider, an American Library Association councillor commented to her colleagues on a US listserve 'Remember you are really important to the world. We are one of the most radical professions...'

Now there's a thought. In the many presentations I have given during my presidential term, I have contended that an information enabled and democratic 21st century Australia has much need of the values, insights and capabilities of librarianship — but I had never considered 'radical' as one of our defining characteristics. The context for Karen's assertion was the burying of Harry Potter books by a church in New Mexico on 30 December 2001, and the library as a symbol of the fight against censorship and the free-flow of information. This is a reality of library life in the United States but it is not something about which we can be complacent in Australia given the readiness of the restrictors in society to use any opportunity to do so, of which 11 September 2001 stands as the most recent example. Well might Thomas Jefferson have observed that 'A society that will trade a little freedom for a little security will lose both and deserve neither'.

My *Macquarie* has several definitions of 'radical' most of which do fit well with our mission and aspiration to make a difference to people's lives. At their core is a sense of being fundamental.

Librarianship does remain fundamental — without it there is no systematic custodianship of the record of human civilisation. And libraries do change lives. As John Levett, the rapporteur of the 2001 ALIA Raiss symposium, put it:

I remain convinced that what our profession has to offer is unique. No other has exhibited quite the same disinterested concern for the ways individual lives may be enriched, and personal empowerment enhanced by access to what is now called 'information'

If we track back through the various library associations which have endeavoured for over 100 years to progress the contribution of libraries and library professionals to society, that 'disinterested concern' has always been there. Those involved in the Library Association of Australasia from 1896–1902 certainly expressed it in their conference proceedings. It was central, too, to the motivations and actions of the Australian Institute of Librarians from 1937 to 1949, and to its successors the Library Association of Australia from 1949 to 1988, ALIA from 1988 to 1999, and the new ALIA following the ACLIS–ALIA merger in 1999.

However it is curious that none of those predecessors of the new ALIA appear to have developed a single set of professional core values, although those values were reflected in different ways in their objects, debates and policies. It is perhaps a sign of the times that there is an increasing interest in just what are the core values which underpin corporate, governmental and professional sectors in society, and that it is incumbent on all of them to be able to convey unequivocally and concisely why, in

societal terms, they exist. It is particularly important that a profession can readily convey what it professes.

At its March meeting the Board of Directors therefore endorsed the following ALIA Core Values Statement. It is a statement which iterates just why we are a radical profession, and to which every member of our professional broad church should be able to connect. The advantages of a single statement are:

- for the understanding and inspiration of prospective members of the profession;
- for reflection by current members — as one commentator has put it, to stimulate 'an examination of professional conscience';
- to underpin a claim on more of society's resources to enhance our contribution to it.

ALIA core values Statement

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.

- 1 *Promotion of the free flow of information and ideas through open access to recorded knowledge, information, and creative works.*
We assert that this access across time and across cultures is fundamental to a thriving culture, economy and democracy.
- 2 *Connection of people to ideas.*
We guide, inform and educate the seeker in defining and refining the search, and foster intellectual freedom and all forms of communication.
- 3 *Commitment to literacy, information literacy and learning.*
We enable independent and formal lifelong learning by providing resources and expertise to meet the needs of learners, and of the human spirit.
- 4 *Respect for the diversity and individuality of all people.*
We accept each request without bias and in confidence, and strive to meet it with all our resources and expertise.
- 5 *Preservation of the human record.*
We seek to preserve the cultural memory, knowledge and evolved wisdom of humankind, to explain the past, illuminate the present and inform the future.
- 6 *Excellence in professional service to our communities.*
We strive for integrity, competence, personal growth, and service to our profession and to our communities.

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7 *Partnerships to advance these values.*

We advocate cooperation between all library and information services, and with related agencies, for the private and public good.

The challenge with goals is their achievement. The challenge with values is, of course, how to live up to them. That *ALIA Statement of Core Values* is, it appears, a world-first for a library association, although it derives from an American Library Association draft. Probably also a world-first are the outcomes of the NSW Pay Equity test case in which, *without ALIA*, librarians and library technicians would not have featured.

Our place in the world

Australia can claim internationally significant progress in a number of other library-related areas such as information literacy, joint-use libraries, the National Library's Pandora digital archive, the national borrowing scheme for all university students and staff, Kinetica, GRATISNET and other national resource sharing initiatives.

It is interesting to speculate on where Australia now ranks as a library and information nation. In a public library context in 1956 British Librarian Lionel McColvin ranked the top four nations as the United States, United Kingdom, Denmark and New Zealand. Australia did not rank, and did not deserve to. However, within only a genera-

tion or so, it now ranks among the top ten nations worldwide for its public library system in terms of nationwide access, professionalism, buildings, resources, services, technology, and usage. I would extend that assessment to assert that for the performance of, if not the investment in, its total co-operating infrastructure of all libraries and information services, Australia ranks in the top ten countries worldwide. If that sounds implausible consider which countries might also be in that top ten — only two in the Americas, a handful in Northern Europe, none in Africa, Singapore in Asia, and New Zealand in Oceania.

There remain, of course, very significant deficiencies and the major challenge of convincing all decision makers — corporate, governmental, educational — that increased expenditure on library and information services truly is a high-return investment, not a cost. That it is an investment that Australia must make if it is to become information enabled during the 21st century. That through that enabling it can become a smarter, more productive but also importantly a more enlightened, tolerant and humane nation. Imagine, for example, what Australia's public libraries could be if the meagre 6c per Australian per day spent on them was increased to 12c per day.

Not the least of the needs is the right of every Australian child to develop their literacy

through public libraries well-staffed with children's librarians *before* formal schooling, and their right when that schooling begins to have access to a decent library and qualified teacher librarians. As great a challenge is educating governments and corporate Australia about the competitive advantage of a country which has access to timely, accurate and mediated information, and the capacity to use it effectively. As the recent *ALIA Statement on information literacy for all Australians* emphasises this is a whole-of-profession and whole-of-society issue beyond the scope of just technology to resolve.

The future

We should now proceed with total confidence that with its commitment to 'the free-flow of information and ideas in the interest of all Australians', its core values, and its manifest achievements, our profession is radical — that it is a profession of which Australia, indeed the world, has great need in the 21st century. Educating, researching, coordinating and advocating to that end requires a strong, well-resourced, decisive and risk-taking national professional association, about which its personal and institutional members will be of broad vision when it fails — as inevitably it will — to meet all of their particular needs and concerns.

Thank you for your continuing support of that association. It has been my privilege to have again served as its president. ■

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