

Securing the right

Recently I had occasion to turn my attention to the statement of values subscribed to by many professional librarian associations, particularly, though not exclusively the statements on access to information and freedom of information.

The impetus for this move was my inability to access some articles on librarianship from the two libraries to which I have membership. The public library, unsurprisingly, did not carry the titles, the university library had ceased purchasing the titles in hard copy and I was excluded by their licensing agreements from accessing the material electronically.

Musing on the implications of this my mind turned to our professional values, in particular to the conflict between those values and the increasingly corporatised discourse of current library practice and our apparent

reluctance to engage with this conflict. To some extent I can understand why – the place of value statements, with their occasional moral tinge, is contestable.

Yet not only have these values been part of our professional discourse for a long time, they also go to the heart of liberal democratic institutions.

It can be salutary to recall what the professional organisations have to say on intellectual freedom, freedom of information, and access to information. On intellectual freedom, LIANZA's website states that selection and availability of material should be "governed solely by professional considerations". CILIP is committed to the access of all "publicly available information...regardless of media or format", but rather problematically will accept legal restrictions which should be stated. Further it urges employers to support the principle of "uninhibited access to information" and allowing library and information staff to exercise "discretion" in meeting the "legitimate interests of their users". ALIA's 7-point statement on free access to information includes "ensuring...that a citizen's information needs are met independently of location and ability to pay". Like CILIP it appears to accept uncritically that "powers of censorship are legally vested in ...governments" and that it will observe all laws and regulations. I am not going to argue that professional organisations should advocate the breaking of any laws, but the relationship between

the state and civil liberties and human rights is a finely balanced one of which we should be ever vigilant and, if our value statements are to have any gravitas, be prepared to challenge if need be. However, while we are keeping watch over the state we appear to be turning a blind eye to an even more insidious threat – the profit-driven privatisation of the public sphere as exemplified in our libraries. It may not be entirely coincidental that the push to apply the discourses of commerce to the practice of librarianship has followed the increasing power of commercial providers of information to alter library practices.

For while the policies as written cite these values as being "core" and "fundamental" to librarianship they are in effect being ignored in the everyday practice of our profession. When the main literary

format of disseminating ideas and information was through paper, librarians through their development and use of selection, organisation, and dissemination policies and practices were an essential part of the transmission

of ideas and knowledge. They knew this, valued their role, and worked collectively library to library and across nations in order to facilitate the work of scholars or the educational and leisure reading of their patrons.

Organisational values and value statements are always problematic. What is the value of values – some of which haven't been updated for some years – to which no one adheres? As we move from a philosophy of ownership of material – and yes dirty word coming up – *control* – which ironically, enabled the values to which they have subscribed for decades to be realised, to a mode of operation predicated on the commercial contracts of lease we are not only removing the *sine qua non* of a librarian's professional existence, but worse, actively enforcing a restriction of access to previously freely available material.

If librarians see any value in these value statements then they need to be seen to be informing our everyday practice and the contradictions between the statements and our practice need to be addressed. Librarian association statements of value are absolutely silent on the threat to both access to information

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and freedom of information posed by the transformation of information into a fungible commodity, developments in internet technology as a primary means of information transfer, as well as the growth in powerful international corporates in the information field. It is an undeniable fact that with our wholesale and largely uncritical reception of the new formats of delivering material to our patrons we are acting contrary to our values as they now stand. There are undoubted benefits of electronic access. That in itself is not the problem. It is the disjunction between the practices of the commercial world and librarianship as a public good and the consequent effect upon practices we claim

are core and fundamental to our profession that we have yet to confront. To sup with the devil one still needs a devilishly long spoon.

Did I ever get my articles? Yes, but not through a library. Whereas once a librarian would have been essential for some research needs now they can be by-passed altogether: a sad state of affairs. Where's the value in that?

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I am self made, but inspired by RMIT." **Romany Manuell**, Information Services Librarian, Holmesglen

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