

FRONTLINE

DECIDING OUR FUTURE



Over the past months we have been active in seeking your feedback on the future of libraries and our profession through the National Advisory Congresses

(NAC). These meetings will conclude with a summit in October. We have seen record attendances in each state and we thank you for your interest and involvement.

Interesting discussions on the issues that confront us today and those that have an impact into the future sometimes leave us with a pessimistic view of our future, perhaps because we tend to focus more on potential problems, and we find the unknown

challenging too. Current issues voiced at the NACs have included outsourcing, the huge mass of digital material now available but not catalogued, are we

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invisible to our funders, the ageing of the profession, managing and planning for multiple digital platforms, copyright and digital rights.

We have received some criticism of our topic for this year's NAC. Some of our members said they felt library and information professionals discussing their own future is ridiculous, self-serving and not very critical in nature. While I see some merit in this criticism, I believe that it is important that we discuss the issues that affect us today and will affect us into the future.

Not only do we need to understand how our services will be shaped by others into the future, we also need to know how to shape our future ourselves.

In that context, it is interesting how we stumbled over the question of what the world would look like if libraries did not exist, finding it inconceivable. Libraries have been around for centuries, we said, why wouldn't they continue to exist? When they did not exist in the early days of Australia, local industrialists created Mechanic's Institutes to provide books and information to the masses, playing a key role in adult education in the process.

Our concerns were to be expected. What will happen to the literacy levels of our communities?

Where will our communities meet? It is likely there will be an even greater divide between the haves and the have nots; we will find ourselves not

just talking about the digital divide but about a whole new poverty index measuring the differences between the content poor and the content rich.

Those who can afford it will access the information and those who can't will be the poorer for it.

Tertiary institutions would certainly suffer if the library did not exist. Who would assist with literature reviews, research and, more importantly, developing and managing the organisation's own content through institutional repositories?

When looking at science fiction novels and how libraries are depicted, many books describe the 'library' as being a virtual place where there are vast collections of information and data – in fact one assumes it holds everything. There is also only one 'library', it is global in nature and available at all times. This scenario assumes the information contained within this 'global library' is easy to find and retrieve. Will this fantasy ever be a reality? We know that to have a global information repository, the infrastructure would need to be huge and the standards, algorithms, and taxonomies required would keep librarians employed for quite some time. Maybe this is a positive move?

In 2009 Bill Thompson spoke about the future at a Victorian Public Libraries gathering. He made this important point: those who don't invent a future for themselves must live in someone else's.

Now is the time to decide what future we want for libraries and the professionals who work in this sector – and then we must go out and build that future.

Julie Rae
President

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