

Paul Willis: 'Working with libraries offers a wonderful connection to talk science.'

Photo: Grant Nowell.



TELLING A DIFFERENT STORY

'We are story telling animals,' says Dr Paul Willis, and because of that, we human beings respond particularly well to information that is expressed in story form, with an identifiable beginning, middle and ending. Why should library and information professionals care about that? For the same reason Paul, Director of Australia's science hub RiAus, and his fellow science communicators care, because effective story telling is perhaps the most powerful way we can connect with our communities.

'RiAus is not just a new institution,' Paul Willis says, 'it's a new industry. There's no template. We're exploring and experimenting with all sorts of models to reach the adults making decisions relevant to our lives and affecting the future of our kids.'

LIBRARIES ARE WHERE THINKING PEOPLE GO.

RiAus is located in the former Adelaide Stock Exchange building, and tribute is paid to that historical connection with a nifty electronic 'tickertape' swirling over the entrance. Inside the ornate building, now known as The Science Exchange, a team of science communicators and educators are hard at work producing a breathtaking array of events and resources designed to 'bring science to people and people to science'.

RiAus produces quality content that will bring a gleam to many a public, school and academic librarian's eye. There's the PD Plus program, including live streamed interviews and real-time Twitter discussions with scientists working at the cutting edge. After broadcast, these are packaged with additional resources, including lesson plans, and made available online.

Consultation with public libraries in South Australia in 2013 has inspired the creation of a series of children's holiday science activity packs, fully downloadable free of charge from the website at www.riAus.org.au, while National Science Week and Book Week come together in The Great Big Science Read, a program encouraging Australians to think, read and write about science. And later this month RiAus is launching RiAus TV, Australia's Science Channel, in association with Hostworks.

Libraries and scientists share common concerns around functional literacies, and a common quest in the desire to reach out and share (as the Library and Information Week theme for 2012 would have it) lots of good 'stuff'. But Paul isn't too sure a society that is simply aware of more 'stuff' should be the end goal.

Science communication, says Paul, has too long been stuck in 'deficit model'. This long established theory essentially asserts that the general community's lack of interest in something – such as science – is the result of their lack of awareness. Therefore, more information about that something is the key to changing the public's point of view; more science in the public domain – purely because it's 'out there' – therefore leads to individuals changing their attitude to the role and value of science.

Not so, says Paul, and the research backs him up. Facts delivered, even when they are delivered with cunning communication tricks, do not necessarily create advocates. Active engagement does, but even that's not the whole story.

On any given issue, there will be those who are already engaged in the conversation, and a (potentially significant) group within the community who are, as Paul puts it, 'unengageable'. These people simply aren't interested, and never will be. Frustrating as that may be, the 'unengageable' are not where he believes the main communication effort should be focused.

'We want to reach the disengaged,' Paul says. These are the 'reachable', the audience who want to be involved, but aren't – yet.

'They don't want to be wowed by science,' he explains, 'but they do want to be involved, and we need to provide the platform to enable them to join the discussion.'

'These,' he says, 'are the people who will make the difference, who will tackle climate change, deal with the energy crunch and genetic modification, and have the conversation about vaccination.'

Now, let's step back to libraries for a moment. The deficit model, and its lack of effectiveness, has begun to be discussed in this profession too. Professor R. David Lankes, Dean's Scholar for the New Librarianship at Syracuse University's iSchool, highlighted it in his presentation, *Moving Past the Deficit Model and Demonstrating our Worth*, delivered at the Texas Library Association Conference in 2013 (available at quartz.syr.edu/blog/?p=3061). He told his audience, 'the true role of a librarian is not to organise collections, it's to fulfil the dreams of a community'.

Such an experience, according to the professor, gives librarians the ideal opportunity to 'connect themselves to achievements'. So the discussion turns to how to tell the story, to moving on from the message of 'knowing and/or having stuff', to a much more enticing and positive tale of attainment – with the help of some stuff from the library.

According to Paul, there are two words that keep turning up in the science communication discussion as the RiAus team grapple with leaving the deficit model behind. They are 'accessible' and 'relevant'.

'We need to foster the conversation by making sure we're providing relevant information and making it accessible,' he says. A good example of this is the Mercury Rising event, at which speakers from the Bushfire and Natural Hazards Cooperative Research Centre contributed to a live streamed presentation and discussion hosted by RiAus last September. While the content of the presentation referenced the scientific knowledge of bushfires and human behaviour, science itself was deliberately not the star of the show.

'We focused on practicalities and bushfire safety, because we wanted to reach people with relevant information, expressed in language they could understand, about how to stay safe and protect their properties in the event of a bushfire.'

Paul believes working with libraries offers 'a wonderful connection to talk science'.

'Libraries are where thinking people go,' he says. 'I hope library and information professionals will make themselves aware of what we have available. We have a huge bank of free material that you can bring into your libraries any time you like.'

'I would also like to see libraries using and distributing our *Ultimate Science Guide* to children in years eight and nine, and our *Postgraduate Survival Guide* at university level' (both available free on the RiAus website).

'We've got lots of material suitable for this age group, including interviews with early career researchers in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), that help explain what a career in science actually looks like.'

Libraries and librarians, he believes, can help children at a particularly critical point, when parents and school counsellors often start actively encouraging them to leave the 'nice hobby' of science behind for better recognised, well paid careers. At this time in their young lives, the library's role as a 'third space' offers much needed neutrality along with that vital accessible and relevant information.

The library may just be what makes the difference for the nerdy kid who might turn out to be the next Bill Gates or Brian Schmidt – and what a great story that would be.

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