DIFFERENT VOICES,
MANY THEMES

Establishing oneself in a new industry can be a daunting task. To ease this transition, Julie Higgins and Caitlin Savage found it useful to find out what our industry was talking about. They captured what they found in a showcase presentation for the 6th New Librarians' Symposium held in Brisbane.

The sources for this project were the Energise, Enthuse & Inspire column published in INCITE in 2011 and 2012, and a collection of blogs. We reviewed the author profiles to include only those written by library students or new professionals. By looking at the most frequently used words and phrases we found a simple way to begin identifying the key topics being discussed. After some more reading, we organised around 50 of these topics into three key phases of our development as library professionals: starting out, settling in as professionals, and looking to the future.

For the first phase, the journey through postgraduate study seemed like a good place to start. We quickly found that many aspiring information professionals were already working in libraries before they began their studies. Our analysis suggests that some of us pursued library studies based on a love of books and reading, some enjoy working with diverse clients and users, and others just relish the challenge of problem solving.

The value of maintaining an eportfolio throughout our studies and beyond was mentioned in many of our sources. This tends to be a requirement in many library courses as a way to provide evidence of new skills and key achievements, and can help a candidate stand out while job hunting. Similarly, many of our sources shared ideas for seeking out industry experience while studying – whether through short term contracts, volunteer opportunities or student fieldwork placements.

Our second phase addressed the issues faced by new graduates in forming professional identities, and transitioning from so-called 'lurkers' to become participators in online public forums. Following library professionals on Twitter is just one way for new graduates to boost their confidence and improve their awareness of library issues. The importance of having a professional online profile, or being 'Google-able', was emphasised, as was the ability to balance the use of social media in our personal lives.

We found that while libraries traditionally stand for a variety of social principles, we have many different personal philosophies that define our identities as information professionals, from working with disadvantaged communities to lobbying to protect our internet freedom, fighting censorship and advocating for open access. Sometimes the challenging part as professionals is finding a way to convert these philosophies from theoretical perspectives to realistic practices.

Julie Higgins and Caitlin Savage: not lurking anymore!

Our third phase looked to the future, where debates about the relevance of our profession as a whole raged on, and heated discussions were held about the value of the different technologies we work with. What does it mean to be a library professional in 2013? How about 2023? There are a lot of different opinions.

One of the hot topics among these discussions was ebooks. Like many disruptive technologies, ebooks are having a considerable impact on traditional library services. While they bring many advantages, including simultaneous use, improved accessibility and no shelf space requirements, there are still a lot of kinks to work out.

There were also debates about the ongoing relevance of libraries and librarians, but we think these views are often fuelled by misperceptions about what library professionals do. Some are concerned that libraries might not find their niche in the rapidly changing digital environment. However, we think the continuing strength and evolution of libraries suggests that they will always have an important role.

For our own learning, we found so much value in identifying the voices and topics of discourse in our field. It is extremely motivating to see how engaged both new library professionals and students are, and we're excited to take the leap from lurking to participating.

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Julie Higgins recently commenced as a Liaison Librarian for Health and Life Sciences at Deakin University, having worked there since October 2011. Prior to this Julie worked as a social worker in the health sector but had already taken the plunge towards a new career by commencing the Master of Information Management at RMIT. Now with only a semester to go, Julie is looking forward to completing her course and having some free time!

Caitlin Savage has worked at Deakin University for several years as a Library Professional Cadet and recently commenced as Liaison Librarian for Business and Law. In her spare time, Caitlin studies the Master of Information Technology (Library and Information Studies) at QUT (also with one semester to go!) and reads a lot of science, classic and contemporary fiction.

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