DIVINING THE
DIGITAL FUTURE

A group of librarians recently sought predictions from a noted oracle. Their questions were many and varied. How digital will our future be? Will printed works cease to be created? How secure will digital information be? Can the library and information profession survive? Is our future GLAM? ALIA President JOHN SHIPP reads the digital tea leaves.

The sage pondered their queries and lamented that she could not give them the comfort of definitive answers. She confessed that her Delphic database had been corrupted by malware and that her iCloud account was inoperable as access was now subject to extortionate fees. If that wasn't sufficient tribulation, her banking and personal details had been hacked and there was so much wireless interference that her internet connection was almost useless.

The library and information profession has been utilising digital and communications technologies as they emerge. We have pegged much of our future on the continuing development of these technologies and their pervasive use by the communities we serve. We have advocated the digitisation of collections to aid preservation and to enable greater access. We have also been at the forefront of developing standards for the description and preservation of digital resources.

In recent months, ALIA has met with peak bodies within the GLAM sector to develop a concerted approach to common issues, including copyright and digitisation. So what is GLAM? It's shorthand for the creative collections-based institutions responsible for safeguarding our cultural heritage. Appropriately, it is also an abbreviation of 'glamour', which aptly describes Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums.

As an initial foray, an approach has been made to the Commonwealth Attorney-General for a change to copyright provisions regarding orphan works – those whose copyright owners cannot be determined or are uncontactable. Most GLAM collections include such works and, at present, they cannot be digitised legally. While many institutions are willing to take a risk, it would be beneficial to have a legal right to make digital copies available publicly.

So what about the other issues raised with the oracle? There is every indication that more of our collections and services will be digital in the future. This will have positive benefits for many people in our communities, but there may also be some challenges.

Professor Sue Bennett of the University of Wollongong has been researching the skills acquired by 'digital natives' i.e. children who grow up surrounded by a variety of digital devices. We often assume that they have well-developed technological skills. Professor Bennett's research indicates that there is a wide difference in skill, knowledge, aptitude and attitude. The disparity is often associated with socio-economic status.

This has implications for libraries. Digital natives who associate technology only with entertainment or basic communication may be alienated from the bright new world of libraries. We need to continue to be creative in the way we present our digital collections. We will have a continuing role in assisting people to gain the necessary skills to utilise our digital offerings effectively. In some instances, there is a great deal to learn from the developers of video games.

Security of information will become increasingly controversial. Inappropriate access to library information may not rival the release of hacked data from the Ashley Madison dating website. Nonetheless, we are well regarded for the reliability of the information we provide and that reputation must be protected. We also need to ensure that we have robust protection for the personal details of our users.

Predicting the future is a difficult art, but there are some certainties. Print publication will continue, although it will become increasingly specialised and dependent on niche activity. There will also be a continuing demand for skills such as bookbinding, paper conservation and limited edition printing.

As our lives increasingly rely on digital technologies, we will develop different skills, expectations and needs. The library and information profession will also evolve as we meet the changing expectations of our communities. There will be a blurring of the distinction between sections of the wider GLAM industry. Skills once associated with a particular sector will be sought by other sectors as we seek different ways to conserve, present and disseminate items in our collections.

However, we will need to learn from the woes of the oracle. With greater use of digital technologies, we will become even more reliant on others. The quality, reliability and reputation of our services will only be as good as the quality of the service providers we utilise. We have been innovative in the past and we will need to continue to stay at the forefront in the application of digital technologies. The future for the library sector is bright and has the potential to be radiantly incandescent. Bring it on.

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