Editorial

Recently I sat in a conference session where the speaker gave a very detailed, almost boring, description of how to set up a Web site.

I do not want to criticise the speaker or even the conference but it did set me thinking about the level of knowledge of the "average" librarian on the developments taking place in the way documents and information are managed.

My first reaction was "you are being elitist" because you know something about these things and other people do not. Then I thought "hold on, I assumed that other people know about these things. It is a shock to discover that they do not". That was the sobering bit.

On the evening of the same day I sat in on a debate on the future of the profession of "information worker" – at which there was a lot of discussion on the role(s) that information professionals might and should play in what is widely predicted will be the future information based society. I was shocked, again, and I have to say that I am not easily shocked, as some people at the debate bemoaned the tendency for "IT" people to get into "information" activities, the hoary old demarcation chestnut ... the tendency to worry when "others" are doing things that librarians think they should be doing. Librarians have no God given rights.

All of this got me thinking, provoked and encouraged in the interim by a discussion with the Editor of this distinguished journal, on the role of education in our profession.

I am not privy to the statistics on where the students in LIS schools come from or go to but I hazard a guess that it has not changed much in recent years. LIS is seen as a "nice" professional activity, maybe even "safe" in the sense that it harks back to dusty, musty rooms full of volumes, a haven of sanity in an increasingly frenetic world. I am old enough to identify with the latter yearning but I am also realistic enough to know that the past cannot be recreated and nowhere more so than in the world of information. It is (probably) ok if you are over 55 to say "I can survive without knowing about all this new-fangled stuff" even if it is unrealistic to be so minded, but it certainly is not all right to be a young librarian in a pharmaceutical company who does not even know how they might put the internal reports (presently on what was quaintly described as a "main-frame") on to a web based Intranet, as was the case with another person I met last week.

What is being taught to to-days students about the transaction based, distributed network loaded, digitised libraries of to-morrow? It is not even "to-morrow" it is already here in some cases. Again I am not aware of the details and I am sure that even the most traditional of schools are making students aware of the web, the internet, digitalisation, etc. That may be true, although I suspect that many of the students, especially those from a liberal arts background, are bored out of their skulls by techie lecturers droning on

about SGML, HTML, http, etc., as were, I suspect, many in the audience at the conference. The real question is what is the profession doing about the dramatic changes taking place? Is there any feedback from the coalface of the modern networked corporation to the lecturers in the library schools? Let me be more provocative, when was the last time that a lecturer in library management actually managed a library? Do that little examination of conscience, do not publish the result, just dwell on it.

I suspect that LIS teaching is not unique in, perhaps, being out of date. In fact I know that it is not. The profession of draftsman has disappeared, but that does nor stop schools from teaching technical drawing. However, the LIS business is unique in that the teaching leads to the production of people who end up in what is probably the widest variety of subject and professional activities. Think about it, the students sitting in LIS lecture rooms to-day will find themselves working in universities, advertising agencies, r&d labs, banks, book publishers, etc., all, supposedly, with the same basic skill, that of managing information. The gurus say that managing information in one form or another will occupy the majority of people in the next century, so the opportunities are legion. Why then the demarcation question? Why the "fear" of IT? Why the reluctance to really embrace technology and make it work for us, even if we have a liberal arts backgrounds.

Over the last few years I have spoken to teachers in LIS schools about my idea to create an MBA level qualification in the LIS area. The basic idea is to generate a very small number, say 5 every 18 months, of people, qualified to MBA level, who have spent (say) 6 months in three different LIS schools in Europe as post graduates, undertaking project work of a managerial level, closely supervised by a board which has employer and teacher representatives. The candidates should be those who have worked for a few years after leaving their LIS school. With such a qualification after a few years we would have the people who really could be the corporate information managers of the future organisations. I have not really had time to pursue the idea, but it seems more relevant than ever.

Maybe I am wrong, perhaps the present LIS education structure is capable of producing the right people at the right time. I would be delighted to be proven wrong. However, I do not see much evidence ...

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