The future for the information world

Alexander Wilson

Explores the future role of professional librarians in an information world, a world in which traditional book world occupations, including those of the librarian and the indexer, are overlapping and merging, and new specializations arising.

Dictionary definitions of the word ‘librarian’ tend to be based on management of a collection of books, or by analogy to the building containing them (Oxford English dictionary); while the wider connotation of ‘library’, which I wish to describe, is as a knowledge resource.

New-look librarians

Even historically, a definition of a librarian as a curator of collections was inadequate. Basic to the idea of a library is that it is intended for use; thus the complementary aspect of the librarian’s role is to be a mediator between the user and the collection. Taking for granted the skills of building up and maintaining the collection, he/she has the additional function of organizing the collection for use; through subject classification, cataloguing, indexing, and personally assisting the user in the search for information. Standing between many thousands of documents internally structured to individual concepts of the author, editor and (dare one say) the indexer; and the ‘ignorance’, by definition, of the information seeker, is a tough assignment. It is trying to do for many texts, and nowadays a bewildering range of media, what the indexer does for one text.

Polarized on the curatorial and expository functions of the librarian are the images of the librarian/curator and the ‘special librarian’. At the collections pole he or she relates to the archivist and the museologist; at the information pole to the information manager and the information scientist. Somewhere in the middle, around the packaging and indexing equator, a Saturn’s ring of indexers, bibliographers, publishers, editors, compilers, technical journalists, and their electronic publishing equivalents, database managers and others, dazzles the librarian’s eyes. I will try to follow the Theory of Special Relativity, and see the universe of information from one small planet.

What has happened to library philosophy for at least the last generation is that the special librarian model has prevailed, much to the danger of our intellectual and cultural heritage, as the new concern for preservation of library materials has revealed. Having recently finished a stint as President of the Library Association, I am at a loss to distinguish between the special librarian and the information scientist. Both are distinguished from the collection-based curatorial specialities of the librarian/curator or scholar/librarian, by a concentration on user needs, subject knowledge in a special field, and the skills of evaluation and analysis of information resources.

My theme is one of convergence and integration of skills, not of distinction between their various practitioners. Nor is it more than an historical hangover to distinguish between the book ‘trades’ and the ‘professions’ of librarian, indexer or information scientist. One major library supplier now employs 14 chartered librarians where there were one or two before; a successful international bookseller in the Midlands has as its Principals a chartered bookseller and a chartered librarian. We cannot get too cosy, for there are trading relationships between us, copyright protection not the least of them, but we have to learn to share the same house comfortably.

Also we face the same steep learning curve, the threat of obsolescence if we do not change faster than we ever have before, the need to think internationally in a world market. The new technology is creating a global integrated system for knowledge transmission that makes distance irrelevant and skills interdependent.

External changes

The trend in librarian philosophy away from curatorship and towards a concern for use reflects our response to external social, technological and political changes, sometimes upheavals. To review them briefly: the information explosion, coupled with the fragmentation of science and other disciplines, has caused librarians to abandon the idea of the self-contained library in favour of networks of co-operation (in current jargon to pursue an access rather than a holdings strategy). This cooperation may take the form of payment for dedicated document delivery services (the British Library predominating in the UK), buying in bibliographical records, looking up remotely held information at a fee, and so on. Perhaps ‘abandon’ is overstating the motivation. It would be truer to say that the concept of the self-
sufficient library has been eroded by the pressure on resources, shrinking as need grows. Librarians have good reason to be sceptical of outsiders who see co-operation as a solution to inadequate local resources; but it is more than an amelioration of decline and it is here and growing fast.

Economic scarcity underlines a new and welcome concern to be cost-effective, to manage better, to provide value for money and be concerned above all with the user; my national library experience prompts me to add 'including the future user': our successors will not thank us for a 'burn-up' of what assets we inherited. It is a painful irony that base budgets to maintain the traditional library are shrinking, as the pressure, and opportunity to develop the global or distributed library, are growing.

As with all the other links in the publications chain, libraries have taken on the new technology of telematics to improve their internal housekeeping processes, now as modules of an integrated system based on a flow of compatible records. Such records enter the system at various points and arise from various management needs as well as those of cataloguing. The dwindling bands of dedicated cataloguers are further diminished by the availability of standard records to be purchased: so that internal record creation, other than incidental to circulation or service activities, becomes a process 'by exception'. The self-contained catalogue is as obsolescent as the self-sufficient library. By the same driving force, bibliographical records are internationally standardized.

The high-level management of bibliographic standards and systems grows more important as the single-purpose cataloguer becomes 'an endangered species'. However, to paraphrase King Edward VII, we are all cataloguers now; i.e., the skills of describing documents and analysing their contents must remain basic to the service-orientated librarians who now predominate.

Whilst electronic technology supports library processes, it also enables electronic publications, which threaten to bypass the library. Of course, electronic information can be accessed in the library, and new formats such as CD-ROMs are just new library materials, but the trend is towards user-friendly systems for specialized user groups, like medicine, law, engineering, and so on, which require intermediaries only for training and coaching. From the scholarly work station in the university, users will be able to consult the library catalogue, use its services and go beyond it to formal and informal information resources, by means of the Local and Wide Area Networks now coming into being.

**Shrinking and linking**

The importance of the university library as such will shrink as the role of university librarians becomes more obvious and significant. For a new, breathtaking opportu-
What of the mediating role between this chaotic plenty of information resources and the information seeker who is not sure what he or she is looking for, at least not in the terms of the structured knowledge system? Pragmatically, and first of all, since the perceived need is for better subject access, one can throw in library indexes, contents pages, book indexes, results of previous searches, relying on minimal compatibility and the systems software to help the user through. At his automated work station the researcher can search and download bibliographical records, statistics and full texts, results of previous searches—all these things assuming proper regard to ownership of intellectual property (an increasingly vexatious problem). He or she will have transparent access to a host of sources in many countries, assuming they can find the means to pay the costs.

Artificial intelligence systems, now coming into specialized markets, seek to provide such full analysis of content, accessible in so many ways, as to make the end-user a super-powerful indexer or cataloguer: to make the rigid and inappropriate (from the individual user's point of view) organization of the distributed knowledge base seem custom-built for his purposes. Indeed, like a computer-aided design model, he or she can rotate it conceptually in various ways, reshape the model and freeze the new concept in the system, without disturbing the concepts of other users. This is what the HYPERMEDIA project at Brown University is about, in the limited environment of undergraduates doing studies in a controlled body of digitized documents: texts, graphics, etc.

Who will provide the skills base for inputting knowledge to these AI systems? May not the skills of the librarian entitle them to a share? And the indexer too? Is there going to be one information profession, or a whole range of overlapping occupations? And will the world be too much concerned about our desire for a clear identity, or more about whether Mr A or Ms B can do the job and grow in so doing? For new-look librarians, flexibility, high expertise, the ability to work in multi-disciplinary teams, and a management outlook are the prerequisites.

The Library Association is seeking to extend hospitality to related occupations, and at the same time ensure that its qualification structure will enable librarians to compete in the new world beyond the library, as well as within it. Although it is abundantly evident that books are going to be running in parallel with electronic publications for a long time yet, also the need for collections of information materials on the spot is going to remain cost-effective, yet I borrow a slogan I have often derided to give you a maxim:

‘Librarians are dead. Long live librarians! (and indexers).’

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An index of first lines has long been recognized as essential to any anthology or volume of collected poems, but so far as I am aware Ogden Nash is the only author whose work has been embellished with an index of last lines. It is tempting to see this as an expression of the deliberate quirkiness of his verse; but the evidence seems to indicate that it was the idea not of the author but of his editors.

From a quick scanning of the holdings in one American library, it is clear that most of his numerous volumes of verse had no index at all. Of those I have examined, only two, Versus (1949) and The private dining room and other new verses (1952), had an index of first lines. A collected edition, Verses from 1929 on, published in the same year as The private dining room, rather surprisingly was unindexed.

The index of last lines appears in a volume published the year after Nash’s death: I wouldn’t have missed it: selected poems, edited by Linell Smith and Isabel Eberstadt (1975). (An English paperback version recently available in remainder shops, under the title The best of Ogden Nash, has the same feature.) Whether this unusual index serves any practical purpose I must leave for more fervent devotees of Ogden Nash than I to decide; but it may certainly claim to be a whetter of appetites and a stimulator of flagging interest. Such lines as

And Shelley went around pulling doors marked push and pushing doors marked pull just like everybody else.

or (more succinctly)

Their universe wobbles,

send one reader at least burrowing back into the main text to find out what can possibly have preceded them.

Postscript: There is, in fact, a KWOC Index to the poems of Ogden Nash by Lavonne Axford, using augmented titles and published by the Scarecrow Press in 1972. Unlike some other such labours of love, it must have been fun to compile.

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