

Frozen in headlights on the information superhighway?
By Amanda Cossham

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Information is so accessible to so much of the western world that it has become a major factor in our lives. This is a truism. But what effect does this have on us as librarians? There are two effects in particular: the effect on the profession as a whole as information expands exponentially and it becomes impossible to select, acquire, and manage it in all its variant forms, and the effect on each individual librarian who must learn new skills and about new tools and must keep up with the latest trends in all things web in order to have the edge over clients who will see us as irrelevant – or indeed lose sight of our very existence - if we do not.

Are any other professions changing as much and as fast as librarianship is? I very much doubt it. We face challenges, changes, developments at every turn. New information technologies provide us with new formats, new ways of communicating, new ways of manipulating information, interacting with our clients, suppliers, and bibliographic utilities, presenting our public face, managing libraries' resources (and free resources) and making them available. Change is a constant: rapid, vigorous, stressful change; it cuts at the fundamentals of what we believe we are here to do: select and organise information, make it discoverable, accessible, useful, timely, interesting, vital to those who require it.

Librarians attempt to manage the wealth of information that is being, not only that which is traditionally published (albeit electronically these days), but also that which is created in an age where anyone can publish anything on the Web and have it read by everyone. And there is simply too much to manage; we are losing ground. If libraries are no longer trusted sources of information; if we have lost our monopoly (or if not monopoly, at least an area of significant expertise); if the clients we serve can do it for themselves to a level that they are quite happy with; if Wikipedia is seen as a fundamental and authoritative reference tool and deep meaning can be imparted in a tweet of 140 letters or less ... how do we recast both our profession and our own skills, knowledge and expertise?

It's all too easy to succumb to the glut of information and the new ways of manipulating it. This is information overload, the heavy traffic on the information superhighway. Our responsibility as a profession is to organise what we can, or at least to have some idea of what is out there, to know how to find and get to it, and to extract and present it in a way that gives it sense and meaning. This is something we can work on collectively – and we are doing so. But to work on this as a profession requires an improvement in all aspects of the knowledge of the individual librarians within that profession; each has a responsibility for continuing to upskill as information avenues multiply.

So, we also have the impact of information overload on our own levels of professional knowledge and understanding. There is considerable pressure to keep up with the latest developments and ideas or be seen as passé. Professional knowledge, acquired through our qualifications and built on through our professional practice, is being expanded with new skill sets, concepts and ideas about the management, access and use of information appearing on a daily basis.

Like Alice in Wonderland we run twice as fast just to stay in the same place. It's not a comfortable place to be; we don't always enjoy it; we feel unsure of ourselves with this immense weight of information and new skills that we think must acquire to keep up. If we fall behind, or pause to catch our breath, the landscape unrolls past us and it's all

too easy to feel crushed under the weight of the new, or impotent in our efforts to work out what is really necessary. This is information overload in action.

And this is where continuing professional development steps in – and how fortunate that we have the skills to determine our own information needs and find ways of meeting these needs.

There is no way that an initial library qualification can cover all of what we need to know – even if it wasn't changing this fast. Educators debate the gap between what they think should be taught versus what the profession says it wants, and wonder whether the gap matters and whether or if it should be filled. Sue Myberg noted 'If there isn't a chasm between LIS education and practice, there jolly well should be. It is the task of educators ... to introduce neophyte information professionals to the DISCIPLINE of 'LIS' (or whatever else you want to call it)'. (Open Lib/Info Sci Education Forum <JESSE@LISTSERV.UTK.EDU>, 9 January 2010, quoted with permission.)

I think that the gap does need to be acknowledged, but this should not affect the curriculum that is taught. The LIS body of knowledge, theory and fundamental skills is becoming more important as a way of advancing us as a profession, and we should focus on developing the theoretical understanding, critical thinking and analysis, flexibility, and sound approaches to one of the realities of working in this profession in the 21st century: ongoing and vigorous professional development. But what else should we be able to do?

Should a graduate be able to set up a website? Maybe. Should they be able to upload documents to a website and maintain it? Probably. How about set up a blog for the library's teens, or develop the library's Facebook page or trouble-shoot client login problems or develop a text-messaging reference service? Quite likely. Should the acquisition of such skills take precedence over reference interviewing techniques, or cataloguing or theories of information organisation or information literacy or any one of the dozens of other 'traditional' knowledge and skill sets? Definitely not.

We cannot afford to overlook the breadth of technology-based information management and manipulation skills, but it is vital to have the long-term building blocks in place: the theories, the understandings of how information is created, disseminated, managed, manipulated and used, of how people interact with and use information, of the importance of continuing professional development as a strategy for maintaining our individual currency and developing our skills as the information landscape changes. Without the basic frameworks we've been using for years to arrange and make accessible to the public, information contained in books, serials, newspapers, pamphlets, conference papers, theses and suchlike, we cannot hope to make sense of the digital information flood and so help our clients to likewise learn to critically assess the daily downpour.

Are we keeping up with everything? No, and we should not try to. The ground is changing and we should focus on what we can do, rather than stand like rabbits in headlights as the trucks accelerate towards us down the information superhighway. In fact, it's no longer just a highway, it's an entire roading network, full of confusing interchanges, lacking any kinds of road rules.

Qualifications equip librarians to think critically, analyse and evaluate. They teach information literacy, reference interviewing, understanding of controlled vocabularies and natural language, reference sources, high-level understandings of metadata and the way information is created, expanded, developed, presented and published. These are the skills which enable us plan how we will manage information overload, identify what is important for our professional development as well as for the development of services

within our libraries, and accommodate the pace of change even if we can't anticipate the next development.

Let's evaluate our own individual information needs, and select what will best meet those needs. Take the most straightforward of strategies: start a list of things you wish you knew a bit more about, then take 15 minutes once a week and explore that concept or tool. One new search engine. Your own RSS feed. Project Gutenberg. LibraryThing. A mailing list (no, they are not dead and gone). Or follow one of the thinkers or bloggers or news sites. Research Buzz? Resource Shelf? Library Link of the Day You choose – there are thousands.

Let's pick our areas of expertise and explore them. Let's learn to speak the language of those who use information, utilise the synergies and celebrate the differences. Let's use our existing knowledge to further develop new skills, and challenge ourselves to go beyond the comfort zone. Let's not be so worried about change that we are enervated. Give it a go – become an informed librarian.

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About the Author:

Amanda Cossham is a Principal Lecturer in the School of Information and Social Sciences at The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand, and the Bachelor of Applied Science Degree Convenor, a strategic role with oversight for the development of the degree. She lectures in information and library studies, and her professional and research interests include continuing professional development, graduate outcomes, cataloguing and classification, current awareness services (SDI), and records and information management. She is a member of the Editorial Board of the *New Zealand Library and Information Management Journal*, and works as an information management consultant. In the words of Terry Pratchett, she 'doesn't want to get a life because it feels as though she's trying to lead three already'.