The inclusive library: rethinking information services for the network society

In the President's Address at Members' Day, **Sheila Corrall** took the opportunity to talk about library and information services in the context of the wider environment – focusing in particular on the 'network society'.

Providing truly 'inclusive services' means addressing issues such as cultural diversity, digital exclusion, freedom of information, intelligent agents, joined-up provision, license restrictions, lifelong learning, strategic alliances, the 24-hour society and virtual environments. Our environment is also dynamic and complex and it is often the combination of forces that poses the greatest challenges. Sometimes this creates tensions and potential conflicts, for example, managing joined-up provision with resources subject to license restrictions, or balancing freedom of information and data protection. Effects can be reinforced and accelerated: the 24-hour society feeds off virtual environments, and the development of open archives for scholarly publications has received further impetus from journal price rises.

One of the most thoughtful commentators on the 'network society' is Manuel Castells, Professor of Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley, who sees the internet as the modern-day equivalent of both the electrical grid and the electric engine of the industrial era. The net is both the medium and the message – 'the fabric of our lives' and also 'the technological basis for the organisational form of the Information Age'.[1] As Castells points out, networks are old forms of human practice which have taken on a new life in our time by becoming information networks, powered by the internet. The new order provides unprecedented business and service opportunities for scalability, interactivity, flexibility, branding and customisation, but it also brings the social threats of individualism, isolation, exclusion and alienation.

Castells identifies three 'unmet challenges' of the network society which are central to our concerns as library and information professionals:

1 Freedom. As the internet becomes the pervasive infrastructure of our lives, who owns and controls access to it then becomes an essential battle for freedom, with the threat of biased or monopolised use by commercial, ideological and political interests.

2 Exclusion. In a network society where most things that matter are dependent on internet-based networks, to be switched off is in effect to be sentenced to marginality, or to be compelled to find an alternative principle of centrality.

3 Education. Access alone will not solve the problem, nor will technological proficiency; the entire education system needs to be restructured to enable installation of information-processing and knowledge-generation capacity in every one of us.

Castells is a powerful advocate for information literacy, which he links with learning to learn and informed action: '…what is really required is the skill to decide what to look for, how to retrieve it, how to process it, and how to use it for the specific task that prompted the search for information. In other words, the new learning is oriented towards the development of the capacity to transform information into knowledge and knowledge into action'. We must play our part in developing the information capability of society and it is reassuring to see this acknowledged in recent reports from our various policy advisory groups on national information policy,[2] social inclusion[3] and the knowledge-based economy,[4] as well as in the report on library provision for children.[5]

Service trends

One of the striking developments in library and information services over the last few years has been the expansion of information skills teaching in academic libraries and the integration of information skills units in the academic curriculum. Library staff have moved beyond their traditional support

role, being recognised as valued partners in the educational process and invited to extend their activities to cover research, learning and key skills in addition to information-handling. This recognition of our professional abilities and application of those abilities in related areas is evident in other service developments, such as the creation of specialist roles to advise institutions on copyright and help manage their intellectual property; the assignment of responsibility to library staff for the management of intranet services in government departments; and the appointment of senior staff to head up e-government initiatives in local authorities or knowledge management programmes in business and industry. The establishment of director-level posts combining libraries with other services (IT, learning, publishing and heritage) is also giving information professionals a higher profile and strategic influence in many organisations.

Another key service trend is the fresh impetus that has been given to many traditional library activities by technological developments. We have seen renewed interest in cataloguing and indexing in the context of the electronic library and access to networked resources. This whole area of 'knowledge organisation systems' has grown to embrace established methods, such as classification schemes and thesauri, as well as newer approaches, such as semantic networks and ontologies.[6] Reference work has been transformed with new digital services, based on email, chatrooms or web contact centres. These are often offered by two or more libraries working in partnerships or consortia to take advantage of their different subject strengths and time zones. The Collaborative Digital Reference Service launched by the Library of Congress in June 2000 has more than 200 members drawn from academic, national, public and special libraries around the world.[7] Similarly, initiatives such as whichbooks.net[8] and Youth-BOOX[9] are acting as web-based readers' advisers and helping library staff to reach out to reluctant users. These developments are giving library and information professionals opportunities to extend their horizons and work collaboratively both within the profession and with people from different backgrounds; but with other players moving into our traditional territory it is vital that we assert leadership in areas where we are qualified to do so.

The use of partnerships to extend and enrich information provision is evident at international, national, regional and local levels. Publicly-funded programmes to create, describe and evaluate digital content (such as the New Opportunities Fund, Research Support Libraries Programme and Resource Discovery Network) typically operate in this mode and are also intended to foster a culture of resource-sharing and cross-sectoral collaboration or 'joining-up' as envisaged in the LIC report *Empowering the Learning Community*.[10] One of the key issues here is the sustainability of such initiatives in the longer term, given their reliance on short-run project funding. Partnership working within organisations is also a significant feature of the current library landscape, with library space in all sectors often being used to house related services and activities such as one-stop-shops, IT helpdesks, video-conferencing suites, internet cafes, study centres and art galleries. This operational convergence can be found with or without corresponding organisational convergence in a unified management structure, but the trend is generally positive in raising the profile of the services concerned.

Questions for professionals

It is clear that as individuals we face choices in planning and delivering our services. We all have to think about the boundaries of our operations in the context of current trends and prevailing influences, in relation to our user base, content, services and staffing. Questions include:

Inclusive user base
▪ Do we reach out to under-represented segments of our primary community?
▪ Do we target particular user groups, implicitly or explicitly?
▪ Should our resources and services be accessible to external customers?
▪ Do we seek feedback from stakeholders and involve them in strategic planning?

Inclusive content
- Do we deal with internally-generated information and knowledge resources, as well as externally-published material?
- Do we convert or create material to meet identified community needs?
- Do we provide integrated access (physical and intellectual) to different forms and types of content?
- Do we have a stated policy on duplication or substitution of print and e-media?

Inclusive services
- Do we help our users to gain skills in finding, evaluating and managing information?
- Do we provide facilities and support for people with disabilities or special needs?
- Do we look for opportunities to apply our specialist expertise in different areas?
- Do we offer services in partnership with other departments or external providers?

Inclusive staffing
- Do we have a diverse workforce reflecting our community and society?
- Do we involve staff in decision-making, especially customer-facing people?
- Are all staff given equal opportunity to develop their knowledge and skills?
- Are there career paths allowing the progression of experienced workers?

Actions for CILIP

As members of a professional community – and specifically as members of CILIP – we also need to identify our key result areas where collective action and concerted effort are necessary to deliver inclusive services in the network society. Here are my own priority actions for CILIP.

First, I think we should concentrate our advocacy activities initially on three things identified in the knowledge economy (KPAG) report – things which will also begin to meet Castells' 'unmet challenges':
- defining and establishing legislative, regulatory, fiscal and ethical frameworks that support information management and knowledge utilisation;
- developing and promoting a voluntary national standard for 'Investors in information', along the lines of the Investors in people standard;
- defining the information skills and behaviours needed for the network society and embedding suitable units at every level of the education system.

Second, we should mobilise the profession to move these things forward by reorganising our special interest groups around the big issues, engaging the membership at large in this task:
- dealing with the difficulty in finding committee members by reducing the total number of groups to create a larger pool of active members per group;
- avoiding confusion and competition by eliminating the present overlaps and duplication in coverage both within CILIP and with other organisations;
- repositioning the groups, by shifting their emphasis from operational matters to cross-cutting strategic concerns (such as information literacy).

Third, again echoing points made in the knowledge economy report and also by the Information Services National Training Organisation, we must develop a new membership and qualifications structure to create an inclusive profession:
- bringing in people fulfilling new roles in information and knowledge work, who are not necessarily information specialists, but have information-intensive jobs;
- providing more flexible routes to chartership, that reflect emerging roles and also enable experienced practitioners to gain deserved professional recognition;
- becoming the 'institute of choice' for all players in the library and information continuum, strengthening our claim to be the authoritative voice for the profession.

Fourth, we need much closer collaboration between information educators and information practitioners; CILIP is well placed to help all parties to work together on professional curricula for the network society:

- ensuring that initial professional education takes full account of contemporary roles in both conventional and non-traditional information services;
- promoting close involvement of leading practitioners in the design and delivery of educational programmes for both new entrants and experienced staff;
- exploring the scope for accrediting a broader range of information-related programmes, including information skills units designed for other professions.

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[1] M. Castells. *The Internet Galaxy: reflections on the internet, business and society.* Oxford University Press, 2001.

[2] *National Information Policy: report of the Policy Advisory Group.* Library Association, 2002 (www.cilip.org.uk/directory/prof_issues.nip.html).

[3] C. Herman. *Encouraging Diversity and Combating Social Exclusion: a report of an awayday held by CILIP on August 5/6 2002.*

[4] *CILIP in the Knowledge Economy: a leadership strategy report of the Competitiveness and the Knowledge-based Economy Executive Advisory Group to CILIP.* CILIP, 2002.

[5] *Start with the Child: report of the CILIP Working Group on Library Provision for Children and Young People.* CILIP, 2002 (www.cilip.org.uk/advocacy/startwiththechild/index.html).

[6] G. Hodge. *Systems of Knowledge Organization for Digital Libraries: beyond traditional authority files.* Digital Library Federation, 2000 (www.clir.org/pubs/reports/pub91/contents.html).

[7] D. N. Kresh. Libraries Meet the World Wide Web: the collaborative digital reference service. A*RL Bimonthly Report, 219, 2001* (www.arl.org/newsltr/219/cdrs.html).

[8] www.whichbook.net/index/jsp

[9] www.boox.org.uk/YouthBOOX/YouthBOOXHome.htm

[10] Empowering the Learning Community: report of the Education and Libraries Task Group to the Secretaries of State for Culture, Media & Sport and for Education and Employment. Library and Information Commission, 2000 (www.lic.gov.uk/publications/policyreports/empower).

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