ALIA National Advisory Congress, Adelaide, 29 August 2013

The State Library of South Australia CEO Alan Smith kindly hosted the Adelaide National Advisory Congress, which took place on the evening of 29 August. Some 15 ALIA members from university, TAFE, school and public libraries, and the State Library itself, gathered to talk about the issues facing library and information services now and into the future.

Political environment

Participants recognised the challenge of making an impact nationally, when the sector is split across different types of institution, and is funded by three levels of government, by business and by not-for-profit organisations.

Members stressed the importance of remaining non-partisan; of actively reaching out and connecting with decision makers; and of promoting institutions and information professionals as a valuable investment, rather than as a cost.

It was felt that social media was a good conduit into the community and that more library champions would be welcomed in this sphere.

Technological/environmental/social environment

For opportunities, there was discussion about community-created content and the role of libraries in micro-publishing. Crowd sourcing was seen as aligning with the inherent values of library and information professionals and there was a great deal of comment about information-sharing, connectedness, technology linking people with each other, and with ideas.

There was talk about freedom hackers and wikileaks; the library as the third place and as the free space – free in terms of cash; free in terms of thought. Participants were concerned at the thought of either free element being challenged.

The meeting agreed there will be fewer opportunities for people to interact face-to-face in the future, but people will want to interact, and this will be an enhanced role for libraries. Also, information will be more available in the future, but there is a strong likelihood much of it will be tainted by advertising and vested interest.

There was discussion about people's love of new technology getting in the way of the information itself. Things on Google may not be as they seem but there is a lack of understanding in the general public that what they are receiving may not be accurate. People are too trusting of online information and are missing the selection process.

The library and information profession

Library and information professionals can help people navigate this mass of information. "We can teach people how to use these tools."

It was felt that ALIA should work with major employers to make membership a requirement to hold a librarian position and that ongoing CPD should be essential. Professionals needed hard evidence of the value they bring, and libraries needed to promote their role in education and literacy. "The National Year of Reading was successful because libraries were promoting a value for everyone – READING – not self-promoting directly."

Will everyone in 2040 be able to read and write or will we still have a literacy divide? The notion of literacy may change, but there will still be people who struggle to make sense of the world and need the assistance of library and information professionals.

Participants said that library and information professionals should promote a culture of research and development; our skills make sense and bring meaning to the mass of information that is now available.

In special libraries, the work of the professionals has to be central to the organisation. Knowledge will be even more important and why shouldn't we see librarians at the highest level of management?

Partnerships

We should be looking for partnerships in the use of new technologies, and bringing in expertise, business acumen, to supplement library and information professional skills.

Universities and institutions will increasingly form partnerships with businesses based on information and databases.

The community engagement expertise of librarians will be developed beyond library walls. There is an important role for libraries in teaching critical literacy skills. "We should be actively contributing to Wikipedia."

Other topics for discussion included:

- Data mining and filtering
- Integration of social media
- Collaborative collecting and specialisations
- Utilising and leveraging technologies that already exist outside the library and information sphere
- Repositories
- Librarians as knowledge infrastructure champions
- The loss of library and information courses
- Convergence of librarian and library technician roles

Responses to the IFLA Trends Report

Trend 1: New technologies will both expand and limit who has access to information
Agree. "Are you fully informed or is your News Limited?"

Trend 2: Online Education will democratise and disrupt global learning
Good for librarians. We can take this space. Online education will change the face of learning.

Trend 3: the boundaries of privacy and data protection will be redefined
Agree. If you check your Google searches you can see that you're being tracked. Information literacy – we need to encourage people to be critical. This is an essential role for a librarian. "Big Brother is here."

The next generation may not be as concerned about privacy, maybe because they haven't yet learned the consequences. The boundaries of privacy are less important to younger people.

Some people will want more privacy than other others. A role of the librarian will be to protect people's choices with the level of privacy. Libraries should advocate that privacy levers are available – we shouldn't advocate for one or the other but for choice.

Libraries/librarians should advocate for terms and conditions in social media and various applications so that people have a choice about how their personal information is shared publicly.

Trend 4: Hyper-connected societies will listen to and empower new voices and groups
A great thing and people should be doing this from their library.

Trend 5: The global information economy will be transformed by new technologies
It should be, and will continue to be.