

## The future of the profession – themes and scenarios 2025

Need to add National Library Act 1960 to the list of enabling legislation.

### Comments on the timeline

The recent history of libraries is the history of the technology they embrace, and this is not likely to change. In just 50 years the library profession has progressed from trained intermediaries needed for specialised searching if **anything** was to be found, to trained intermediaries needed in case **everything** is found. All the big developments have been technology developments. For example:

1973 National Library installs first computer in a library

1978 First Australian-based online information retrieval networks established

1983 IBM PC launched in Australia

1993 World Wide Web opens up commercial use of the Internet

2003 Wireless broadband availability underpins the flood of screen-based mobile devices such as smart phones and tablets and their successors, and has enabled the social media explosion.

In the 50s and 60s large libraries were the preserve of bibliographers and public libraries were the poor man's university. Half a century later libraries are the preserve of administrators whose task is to secure funding and technologists whose task is to translate contemporary developments in information technology into service delivery platforms. In less than half a century libraries have become computerised, but not automated. Face to face contact with customers remains important, but increasingly such contact is filtered through social media.

Throughout the post-war period, with the exception of the Whitlam government funding school libraries and the Gillard government funding school library buildings, library funding has come from state and local government, and this is not likely to change. Moreover, the fallout from the GFC, including the early evaporation of mining royalties, plus the contraction of Australian manufacturing, will negatively impact the Australian economy. Add to this the rapid ageing of the population and the rapid rise in care costs, plus a rise in unemployment, and the Australian economy is unlikely to be in a position to generously fund libraries for the foreseeable future – for at least a decade.

What are the implications?

- Libraries of all types will need to be 'armed' with up-to-the-minute information on where and how they contribute value to their respective communities – this development is already well in train thanks to the State libraries.
- Training for beginning professionals will need to have a high technology component. Few LIS academics have these skills and will therefore need to acquire them.
- Libraries will be asked to do more with less. High expenditure on wages relative to expenditure on services and materials will make library budgets look like soft targets.

- The future of libraries will be increasingly digital. Picture books will remain popular with young people and their parents; trade paperbacks will remain popular with recreational readers; there will always be a market for cook books and gardening books, but more and more library services will be offered and consumed in digital form only.
- Publishing output, in all forms, will still need to be controlled. Only libraries have the formats, the systems and the skills to do this.
- Increasing quantities of 'quality information' will be secured behind pay walls. Promoting awareness of the existence of databases, electronic journals, collections of grey literature, special digitised collections and so on, has traditionally been an important librarians' contribution, and this is likely to remain so, although traditional library systems, commercial and open source, will increasingly be viewed as discovery systems, capable of finding information from multiple internal and external sources through a single, simple, search interface. Many (more) of these systems will be re-purposed to be compatible with mobile devices.

### **Comments on the themes**

#### Convergence

- This scenario appears to project current developments into the future, with no 'step change' events – such as the widespread adoption of email and the replacement of the fax machine with the email attachment.
- Further scale economies are definitely within reach. Combined purchasing arrangements are probably the main benefit – especially in the context of digital materials and access to library system functionality.
- One library card makes most sense nationally, but it is unlikely that turf considerations will allow anything beyond state-based or state-shared systems.
- Standards and guidelines will need to be extended to more digitally delivered services.

#### Connection

- Private affluence with public squalor is likely to rule the day. Connection patterns are more likely to be fostered by individuals than organisations; it is hard to see a role for libraries here.
- Preferences for balanced budgets and lower taxes will severely constrain libraries' ability to facilitate the process of recording and safeguarding corporate and individual memories.

#### The golden age of information

- In a world flooded with information, organisation skills will be very important – but they will need to be promoted because people will think that if they can run a Google search they can navigate the big data world solo. The NBN will be a two-edged sword here: it will greatly improve access, and multiply the opportunities for information overload.

- Libraries will have (should have) a major, major role in teaching digital literacy to their clientele. This has major, major training implications for existing ALIA members, and newly-qualified professionals and their teachers.
- Competition. In order to be seen as the go-to information experts the IT world will seek to 'absorb' the LIS field. Records and knowledge management groups will further fragment our domain. More than ever, we will need ALIA as the voice of responsible, impartial, authoritative information management.
- The National Library will need to get its Act changed, like the British Library, in order to extend legal deposit to all relevant materials born digital.

Finally: the 'Libraries today' paras in the Appendix (p.34) are well out of date and should be deleted.

Implications for ALIA's StratPlan 2015

1. Update technology skills for practitioners and teachers.
2. Continue to promote library value, especially in the context of 'enabling' digital literacy.
3. Use the NBN (sustaining the competitive advantage) as the reason for upgrading library services nationally.
4. Bring out the voices of library users through social media, Friends' groups, seniors' groups, mums & dads, etc. Increase the proportion of library users to total catchment population in order to 'harden' libraries against arbitrary funding cuts.

Ian McCallum

Libraries Alive!

5<sup>th</sup> August 2013