



The Role of Information Professionals: where we are heading

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When Kate Curr asked us to prepare a 5-minute submission on the role of information professionals in the online environment, she pointed us to the [Australian Senate inquiry](#) into the role of libraries and the online environment. She suggested that this might give us some ideas on where to start.

I read through some of the submissions, and kept shaking my head. I saw so many of the same questions we librarians get here in the US - "Why can't you just digitize your collection and make all the books accessible to everyone at home?" "Why don't you have high-speed Internet access to remote regional libraries?" "And why do you throw books away?" We all face the same issues, as people become aware of the breadth of the Internet but don't realize its lack of depth in many areas, and assume that the Internet will solve all our information problems.

And I read the testimony of two representatives of ALIA (Australian Library and Information Association), and it was quite clear that the roles and concerns of libraries and of information professionals in the online environment are very different.

Libraries are places. They serve a critical role in the community and within universities and other educational organizations. The Senate inquiry is a useful and important one; the institutional concerns of libraries are enormous, and many of their problems can be at least reduced by more funding on both a Council and national level.

But let's look at the role of information professionals. Library funding alone isn't going to increase our impact on the online environment. In fact, while many of us do work physically within a library, a growing number of us do not. In fact, I believe that our profession is strengthened as more and more professionally trained librarians go out and infiltrate the world... working within organizations and in job functions that do not include the "L"-word.

I think of the many people in the US who get law degrees because they know they need legal training but not necessarily because they want to work in law firms. Likewise, it's my dream that, as the world of online information becomes more complex and pervasive, professionals from every discipline will realize that they need the structured training of how to create, manage and distribute information that they can only get through graduate library school programs.

So, I believe that the role of information professional in the online environment is to permeate the workplace. Here's my vision... work with me on this. Just a couple of weeks ago, Bill Gates announced his interest in computing wrist-watches. Right now, analog watches are among the most user-friendly gadgets known to man. Imagine what will happen when Microsoft gets a hold of them... Time will need to be "upgraded" twice a year; we won't just switch to summer time, we'll have to change to an entirely new operating system.

But here's my dream. The woman in charge of designing the new user interface for the computing watch will make it intuitive -- simple yet powerful, with all the features you need and none of the

bloat that you don't need. Gates will call her into his office and say "How did you do this, where my software designers have always failed to make user-friendly software?" (yes, I'm fanaticizing here.) And she will say, "But, Bill, I'm a **librarian!** I understand how information is presented, processed and used. Of course I built a user interface that worked. That's why I went to library school -- to understand information!"

So, I think our role as information professionals is to go forth and be fruitful and multiply. Our role is to be ubiquitous. There will always be a need for libraries, but there is an even more pressing need for librarians and information professionals, who work as free-roaming agents, raising awareness of information issues and solving the information problems of the world. Our role is to be an essential component of every information management function within organizations and institutions.

We may have started out working within libraries, but our vision and mission is far broader. We're out to rule the information world, and -- as long as we keep our motives under wraps until we've succeeded in taking over -- I think we can rule the world.

