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Abstract: In the face of budget cuts and threats to professional posts, librarians should promote all of the professional skills they have, particularly information literacy, in order to ensure relevance as more information is delivered electronically.
Paper type: Viewpoint

This column provides an opportunity for new librarians to address those who have already served full careers. As someone who is not only new to the librarianship, but who only moved to Scotland four years ago from Connecticut (home to the four librarians who successfully challenged the FBI and the Patriot Act) I have a perspective which often seems out of kilter with the library establishment in the UK. What struck me when I first started visiting libraries here was that some of the librarians I met seemed to have lost the spark, the will to push forward, develop new programs, and fight for their ground. This is particularly true in school libraries, where the librarian is a solo worker in a building full of people who have no idea what they do, how qualified they are, or what their potential contributions could be to improving academic life. I recently had a conversation at the British Library with a librarian who asked me if I thought libraries as places would become obsolete in the face of digitization. Although it is true that as a student, I myself much prefer to access journal articles online from my house, libraries are so much more than where the books are, or as is often the case in schools, where the computers are. If digitization sounds the death knell to libraries, then librarians (from the front line up to the top of the professional organizations) have fallen down on the job. The Campaign for the Book, recently organized to bring focus back to reading, is a great idea with a great message. Its message, however, may not necessarily be helpful in the fight for the future survival of librarianship. In a world burdened by a glut of information, librarians have a real opportunity to become paladins, to champion and facilitate effective use of information for all, even if paper printing were to disappear overnight.

What does this mean and how can it be achieved? Librarianship in the UK needs to develop and promote *all* of the professional skills of librarians. The book-centered skills of librarians are already well-known: this is why the Campaign for the Book and other book-centered campaigns are not going to safeguard librarianship against threats of budgets cuts, deprofessionalization, or obsolescence. In the US and Australia, traditional skills such as library/bibliographic instruction and user education developed alongside learning theory into what is now referred to as information literacy (Robinson, 2006). An information literate person, defined by the American Library Association as one who is "able to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information," (American Library Association, 1989). It is much more than a set of measurable standards, however, despite their proliferation in many countries. Information literacy is, to a degree, a way of thinking:

Serendipity, intuition, and experimentation are all essential components of the information seeking process even for experienced searchers. Other attributes may also have more impact on the process than mere skill, such as curiosity, persistence, and patience (O'Connor, 2009).

Information literacy has been a large part of school library advocacy in the US, as the number of hours school librarians spend teaching information literacy has been linked to increased student achievement (Lance, 2002). Increasingly, mastery of information-handling is also seen as a critical skill in the workforce. It is dangerous, however, to treat information literacy as an economic tool or a wedge to drive librarianship back into the centre of society. Information literacy instruction in the US, particularly in education libraries, has become a way for librarians to reach out to users and demonstrate their professional skills in tangible, relevant, valuable ways. In the UK, information literacy seems to be the domain of consultants and researchers, and is not something always championed by librarians in libraries. In my experience, it is often the librarians who have an interest in information literacy, as well as good relationships with other departments, who find ways to keep it in the curriculum. Some other librarians I know have been discouraged from running more than just a basic library induction by disinterest or even mild hostility from the teaching staff.

Librarians are not, and should not pretend to be teachers. The chasm between the two professions in the UK is a possible reason why information literacy is not seen as a universal aspect of librarianship here. This is different in the US, where most school librarians are dual-qualified as librarians and as teachers, and where faculty status is a hotly-debated topic for academic librarians. If "educating" or "teaching", as terms, make librarians or library unions uncomfortable, then let us use "training" as a more generic term. Librarians in all sectors in the UK should be training users to become information literate, not only the librarians who have a keen interest in the subject. In order to become fully able to do this, librarian trainees should be taught, as part of the Body of Professional Knowledge, basic user training and behaviour management. These two subjects do not change who or what a librarian is or does. These subjects, when taught as part of a post-graduate library qualification course, facilitate basic human interaction and allow librarians to deliver excellent customer service. These subjects allow librarians to best practice their full body of professional skills.

Librarianship is fundamentally a service profession. In order to best serve users, librarianship needs to remain relevant, and libraries need to remain at the heart of communities. In a time of increased threat, when changes in technology coincide with severe economic hardship, it will not be to the advantage of the profession to focus on our most well-known domain. Librarianship encompasses a plethora of skills involving organization, resource management, reader development, customer service, and information literacy. Librarianship is not only about the physical resources to which we facilitate access, it is also about how we as librarians help our users interact with these resources. We have an essential role to play in helping our users navigate through an increasingly complex world of information. Information literacy will only become more relevant as more information is freely available. Librarians are professionally information

literate people, and now is the time to show off our skills in this area. If not now, then when?

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