

Opinioni

The new information professional: plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose

BOB MCKEE

Nota introduttiva

L'intervento che proponiamo è stato presentato al convegno *Towards an Information Society for All: a European Perspective* (The British Council – Bologna, 9-10 marzo 2001).

Sebbene la sua pubblicazione sia stata ritardata per ragioni tecniche, lo proponiamo comunque, poiché riteniamo che sia ancora fortemente attuale.

È dell'aprile di quest'anno, infatti, un'importante novità nel panorama professionale del Regno Unito: la creazione del CILIP [Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals], che segue l'unificazione dell'IIS [Institute of Information Scientists] con la LA [Library Association].

La definizione dell'identità professionale dello specialista dell'informazione ha dunque compiuto un altro, decisivo passo: il suo profilo va ritagliandosi uno spazio preciso, per integrarsi sempre più saldamente ed autorevolmente nel tessuto della società britannica.

E proprio al *corporate plan* del CILIP (<www.cilip.org.uk>) sta collaborando attivamente, in prima persona, l'autore dell'articolo, Bob McKee.

Nel contributo, che preferiamo pubblicare in lingua originale, il Chief Executive della Library Association ci offre una riflessione stimolante sulla "evoluzione" del nostro mestiere. Egli inoltre l'arricchisce di interessanti considerazioni relative allo sviluppo e alle radicali trasformazioni che le associazioni professionali degli specialisti dell'informazione e dei bibliotecari hanno conosciuto nel Regno Unito. La linea di sviluppo del percorso illustrato – maturato in un contesto particolare com'è quello anglosassone, ben diverso dalla situazione italiana (e non è certo questa una novità) – dimostra come il nostro mestiere sia profondamente segnato dai cambiamenti imposti dalla tecnologia – come, del resto, è sempre stato per i documentalisti in particolare – e dalle dinamiche organizzative e sociali in genere.

L'avvento di Internet ha evidenziato drammaticamente, agli occhi di tutti, le molte incongruenze e l'innegabile obsolescenza di talune attività, proprie delle professioni dell'informazione.

La strada intrapresa dai nostri colleghi d'oltremontagna, pur non prefigurando necessariamente percorsi analoghi in contesti differenti, che hanno caratteristiche e "storie professionali" affatto dissimili, pone a tutti noi l'esigenza di riposizionare il nostro lavoro quotidiano, al di là degli angusti limiti fisici e geografici in cui troppo spesso è stato relegato. Limiti che per lo più non hanno motivo di essere, dal momento che attengono ad una collocazione socioculturale ormai datata, e dunque controproducente, facilmente superabile nella realtà concreta dell'esperienza professionale.

L'evoluzione delle organizzazioni nell'ultimo decennio ha profondamente influito sull'intero mondo del lavoro e delle professioni, anche su quelle di tipo intellettuale (che non sono, cioè, direttamente coinvolte nel ciclo produttivo), con mutamenti di varia entità e natura.

Talune professioni sono scomparse, altre si sono sostanzialmente modificate fino a divenire irricognoscibili, altre ancora – tra queste la nostra – hanno semplicemente cambiato pelle.

In Italia, ma soprattutto all'estero, si parla sempre meno di documentalisti e di bibliotecari e sempre più di specialisti dell'informazione: il termine unico rivela l'inarrestabile sovrapporsi dei ruoli e delle funzioni, come pure il progressivo confluire delle competenze e delle abilità in un solo "saper fare", ampio eppure riconoscibilissimo. Pur con accezioni e valenze diverse da caso a caso, l'accento è posto sulla *materia*, vale a dire l'informazione, e molto meno sul *luogo* o sull'*ambito* in cui la professione è svolta.

Ecco quindi che luoghi tradizionali com'è appunto una biblioteca, quantunque conservino la stessa denominazione, assumono un ruolo o svolgono compiti affatto impensabili fino a qualche anno fa (valgano per tutti i casi di Helsinki e di Oeiras, illustrati più avanti, all'interno della rubrica **Manifestazioni**idopo, nella mia relazione su TISA2); e i professionisti che vi si impegnano provengono da "mestieri" diversi, che tuttavia hanno sempre come riferimento comune l'informazione e le sue modalità di fruizione.

L'accesso generalizzato alle tecnologie dell'informazione (banche dati *on-line*, siti internet), unitamente alla maggiore alfabetizzazione informatica, ha aperto a tutti – almeno all'interno dei Paesi sviluppati – l'opportunità di usufruire, in maniera diretta e disintermediata, di fonti che sino ad un decennio fa erano appunto accessibili e utilizzabili con estrema difficoltà.

Le tecnologie dell'informazione hanno inoltre dato vita a nuovi mestieri che, benché nati su presupposti diversi e a partire da ambiti formativi esclusivamente tecnologici, sono molto più vicini al mestiere del documentalista di quanto possa sembrare ad un primo sguardo: si pensi soltanto a tutte le professioni legate al web. Chi non trova una qualche affinità con il *web editor* o con il *web surfer*, per citarne due fra le più note? Chi di noi non si occupa ormai, anche solo parzialmente, del proprio sito?

Il ragionamento dell'autore, lucido eppure appassionato, ha il pregio di rompere i confini abituali della nostra professione, per riproporla in un'ottica nuova: non sarà più un unico *iter* obbligato, magari accademico, a stabilire chi debba essere lo "specialista dell'informazione".

Al contrario, l'insieme composito degli *skill* necessari ai mestieri dell'informazione proverrà in misura crescente da percorsi diversificati. Essi, pur serbando un solido e coerente impianto formativo e quindi un'indiscutibile validità, prefigurano già una ricca trasversalità curricolare. Sicché le professioni dell'informazione rimarranno certamente riconoscibili – e, si spera, opportunamente certificate –, ma non potranno più essere rigidamente vincolate da codificazioni chiuse e aprioristiche.

Altrimenti, come si spiegherebbe il moltiplicarsi delle attività formative, legate appunto alla comunicazione, all'informazione e alla stessa formazione? E, corrispondentemente, l'aumentato interesse, nei riguardi di queste, da parte di strati sempre più vasti della società?

Un altro fattore è stato ed è tuttora determinante nello sviluppo della nostra professione: l'accesso diffuso alle informazioni e, parallelamente, la crescita democratica dell'Occidente richiede, da parte nostra, una maggiore sensibilità verso un'utenza sempre più esigente e insieme desiderosa di emancipazione.

Dobbiamo pertanto facilitare in ogni modo l'accesso diretto alle singole informazioni, proporle in un linguaggio chiaro e attuale, adatto al nostro interlocutore; di più, dobbiamo aiutarlo a muoversi autonomamente e consapevolmente nel caos dell'eccesso informativo: in una parola, ripensare coraggiosamente il nostro lavoro, a misura degli utenti con cui abbiamo quotidianamente a che fare.

Massimiliano Tosato

My task is to reflect on the concept of “the new information professional”. What are the competencies needed by our new information professional in our new information society? How are they different from the traditional competencies of librarians?

In considering these questions I want to look at what is new – what is changing in our profession. But I also want to look at what does not change – at what the information professional of the future will have in common with the librarian of the past.

All of us here share an aspiration, an ideal: concerning freedom of access to information.

A world where physical barriers to access are removed; where legislative barriers to access are resolved; where linguistic barriers to access are overcome; and where the technological barriers – the “digital divides” – become non-existent.

But in this world – if we can one day achieve it – information will still need mediation; an intermediary who can convert the chaos of unstructured information into orderly, organised and usable knowledge. The new information professional will do what our profession has always done – add value by giving people access to knowledge.

So our purpose, our role in society, does not change. But the activities we undertake in order to deliver that purpose – they have changed radically in recent years.

Every few weeks I receive on my desk a number of letters to sign. They are letters addressed to new members of our profession, to welcome them into our professional community and to confirm that they have been registered by The Library Association as being fully qualified professional practitioners. As I sign the letters, I think of the future careers of these new professionals, careers which will extend over the next 25 years. And then I think back over my own career which began 25 years in the past.

Will there be any similarity between what I was doing 25 years ago and what these new professionals will be doing in 25 years time?

In one way there will be similarity. Back in the 1970s, a library was essentially a room containing books and other printed materials, with places for people to read and write and study and meet. In the 2020s and 2030s the library as a room or a building will still exist – because the library as a place; the library as a focal point of its community; the library as a social space and a social institution; will always exist. Just as books will always exist.

But also in the 2020s and the 2030s many libraries will not exist in the way that we know them today. Already there is the “hybrid” library – based partly on documents and partly on digital resources. And there is talk of the “virtual” library – the library that exists not in reality but in virtual reality: not in physical space but in cyberspace.

Of course the virtual library already exists and is becoming relatively commonplace in business environments and in academic environments. Many of our professional colleagues no longer work in a library. They work with information, with knowledge – within an organisation, within a community; but not within a library as we would traditionally understand that word.

So, much has changed and much will change in that 50 year span from the first years of my career to the last years of the careers of today’s new professionals.

But, at the same time, some things will not change – because those things form the unchanging core, the steadfast heart, of our profession and our professionalism.

Our purpose does not change – we give people access to knowledge whether in documents or in digital form; whether this is the intellectual knowledge of scholarship; or the knowledge that comes from the imagination, from poetry or music; or the knowledge which forms the intellectual capital, the corporate intelligence, of an organisation.

And our principles, our values, our ethics also do not change. Freedom of access to information means freedom of thought and freedom of expression; it means equality of opportunity in a society which is inclusive – which does not exclude or marginalise certain groups. It means mutuality – a community of people coming together for a common cause; mutual endeavour for mutual benefit. We stand as a profession for equality, inclusivity, mutuality; and also for freedom and individuality.

This is an international conference and from an international perspective there is a great deal to be done across the world to promote these principles, these values, these ethics.

Any profession – if it is genuinely to call itself a profession – must have a mission in society and a set of values and ethics. We have these things and they

remain unchanging. Indeed, as the world changes around us, it becomes ever more important to hold fast to our basic purpose and to the fundamental values which underpin our profession.

I talk of our profession because we do have one single profession whether we describe ourselves as librarians, or information scientists, or knowledge managers.

I have a theory about librarians and information professionals. We are good at organising knowledge. So therefore we are good at categorising and classifying – at partitioning knowledge into separate subdivisions.

But sometimes in describing our own profession we are too good at this. We divide ourselves, we separate ourselves. Public library, school library, university library, industrial library, national library; librarian, documentalist, information scientist, knowledge manager.

These distinctions can be useful (as all good systems of classification are useful). They describe the different organisational environments in which we work. They describe the different activities which we undertake. But they are all different facets of the same single profession.

It is a mistake to focus in our descriptions on the differences between us. That is why I say we give people access to knowledge – because that purpose expresses what we have in common, what binds us together as one profession.

With this in mind, let me say something now about our profession in the UK – because it illustrates my two themes: that we are one profession; and that, while some things change, some things do not change.

The Library Association in the UK was formed in 1877. Next year will be the 125th anniversary of our library association. But also next year, after 125 years, our library association will cease to exist in its present form. It will be transformed into a new organisation. A profession which in the UK has become partitioned will become unified.

You will know the story of information science. How in the first half of the twentieth century, a new set of competencies began to emerge as scientists working in industry and commerce found that information in their fields of activity was expanding rapidly – and they had to learn how to manage that information effectively in order to keep up to date with their scientific knowledge. They became skilled at the science of information, of documentation. And they felt that this was somehow different from the traditional skills of the librarian.

And so in the UK in 1958 a separate organisation was formed, separate from our library association. This was the Institute of Information Scientists, formed to

promote and develop the skills and practice of information science as something distinct from, separate from, librarianship.

The two organisations at that time seemed to serve two different constituencies of interest; two separate areas of professional activity.

But what has happened since those days? There has been an increasingly rapid convergence between the activities of librarianship and the activities of information science; a convergence caused largely by technology.

Industry and commerce have invested in computer-based information services because this can give a competitive advantage, particularly given the globalisation of much commercial activity.

The education and health sectors in the UK have also invested in an electronic information infrastructure for reasons of scholarship and reasons of management. And now we have programmes of investment in school and public libraries – to give everyone access to networked information and networked learning opportunities.

And what this means is that the skills of information science applied to the digital environment – the skills of indexing, abstracting, thesaurus construction, information retrieval – are becoming central to the work of librarians. Colleagues working in libraries and colleagues working with information are using the same skills and addressing the same issues.

The librarian and the information scientist, once separate, are now coming together. And this is reflected in the coming together of our Library Association and our Institute of Information Scientists.

Any profession, as well as a mission in society, as well as a set of ethics and values, needs a body of knowledge – a coherent academic discipline capable of study and research and teaching. In the UK a number of universities provide courses of study designed to encompass the body of knowledge which forms the academic basis of our profession. These courses are accredited by our library association and also by the Institute of Information Scientists – and since 1999 that process of accreditation has been carried out as a joint activity, with both organisations working together using one common body of knowledge. So the accreditation of professional courses in the UK recognises that librarianship and information science now form together one coherent academic discipline, one single professional domain.

And next year, our library association and our Institute of Information Scientists will merge into one unified organisation for our profession. A new organisation with a new identity and a new name: perhaps we shall call it the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals.

So we have our new information profession – expressed not as an aspiration

but as a clearly defined entity. With a purpose, with principles, and with a clearly described body of knowledge to underpin professional practice.

This coming together of librarianship and information science and knowledge management into a single coherent profession, a single coherent conceptual framework, should not surprise us. Because there is no real difference between the conceptual model of a traditional library service and the conceptual model of a digital knowledge environment. In each case there are the sources of knowledge; the systems by which that knowledge is stored and retrieved and disseminated; and the social dynamics of people, organisations, communities. Models of the future knowledge environment and models of the traditional library environment always have these three broad aspects – of sources, systems and society.

With this in mind, our new information professional becomes perhaps more flexible and adaptable than our traditional librarian has been in the past. Our new information professional, for example, may progress along a career path which cuts across traditionally separate parts of our profession – so that a school librarian may become in their next job an information manager in industry because both jobs require the same competencies and the same approach: only the organisational environment is different. And our new information professional becomes perhaps more adept than our traditional librarian at working in partnership with colleagues from other professions – educators, health professionals, lawyers, media professionals, technologists. The clear distinctions that used to exist between different professional domains are beginning to break down.

Perhaps in this we start to see the crucial distinction between the information professional of the future and the librarian of the past.

Working in a library with other librarians it is easy to become insular and inward looking. Working with information in a broader organisational context with colleagues from different professional backgrounds – it becomes necessary to look outward not inward, to build relationships and partnerships, to integrate rather than remaining separate.

So the information professional of the future – while clearly evolved from the librarian of the past – will be in some ways a different being, having adapted to different circumstances.

The new information professionals will understand and engage with the organisation for which they work; will be integrated into that organisation and its strategic objectives; will build partnerships and will work well in multidisciplinary teams; will facilitate the development of information literacy throughout that organisation; will think strategically about the development of information services;

will take risks in order to move forward; will enjoy the process of change.

At a conceptual level the new information professional and the traditional librarian are very similar – they understand the sources of knowledge, the systems of storage and retrieval, and the social contexts of the organisation and the community in which they work. But at an attitudinal level the new information professional and the traditional librarian are different.

There are new skills and competencies – because of the focus on information and on technology. But there are also new approaches, new attitudes, new behaviours. At the heart of the new information profession is a fundamental cultural change:

- from a focus on operational matters to a focus on strategic thinking
- from a focus on what divides us to a focus on what brings us together
- from an inward focus on internal preoccupations to an outward focus on key issues of public policy and social concern and organisational strategy
- from a focus on bureaucracy and administration to a focus on activity, leadership, partnership
- from a focus on how things are done now to a focus on how things might be done in future
- from a focus which is defensive to a focus which is developmental

And so – to conclude. We are faced in our profession with a time of great change, great challenge but also great opportunity. Technology is reshaping radically the traditional processes by which knowledge is created, packaged, supplied and used. Technology means the globalisation of the information business which is why the issue of the “digital divide” is so important. Technology underpins the aspirations of our society for equality and inclusivity through access to knowledge and access to opportunities for learning.

The new information professional understands this – understands that the information profession has a central role in the creation of our information society – a society based on knowledge and learning. But that new information professional, while embracing the opportunities of our future, needs also to understand and acknowledge the enduring heritage of our past.

What our profession does – in terms of our activities, our skills, the tools and technologies we use; these things change over time. But why our profession exists and how our profession goes about its work; these things do not change. Our purpose is always to give people access to knowledge; our principles are always those of inclusivity, equality, mutuality, individuality and freedom; and our professional practice is always that of the skilled intermediary between knowledge and the users of knowledge.

The more things change (in terms of what we do) the more things need to stay the same (in terms of the enduring mission and values and practice of our profession).

The information professional of the future may well work in a way that is very different from the librarian of the past. But both will share the same purpose, the same principles, the same professional inheritance.