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It's just a Click Away, or is it? The Challenge of Implementing Global Information Networks

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As I thought about the challenges of achieving globalization in reference services, I was reminded of the story of Tantalus in Greek mythology. Tantalus, King of Sipylos, was the son of Zeus. Although he was a member of the society of the gods, his misbehavior aroused their anger, and Zeus condemned him to suffer eternally. As punishment for his misdeeds, he was condemned to hang from the bough of a fruit tree over a pool of water. When he bent to drink, the water would recede; when he reached for a fruit, the wind would blow it from his reach. The word tantalize originated from his name.

For many in the world, the World Wide Web and its promise of facilitating global access to information is like the fruit and water were to Tantalus ... unreachable because of economic policies that keep people impoverished and uneducated, government systems that oppress freedom of information, state monopolies on telecommunications systems that keep connectivity expensive, absence of electricity in rural areas, outdated technical infrastructures, and so on.

Some statistics from the annual report of the Global Digital Divide Initiative published by the World Economic Forum place this claim in context:

- there are expected to be 1 billion Internet users in 2005
- by 2003, Asia will have 200 million internet users, surpassing North America and Europe
- Industrialized countries, with only 15% of the world's population, are home to 88% of all Internet users
- more than 80% of people in the world have never heard a dial tone, let alone sent an email or downloaded information from the WWW

What can libraries and librarians do to shrink the digital divide and ensure free access to information? What role can libraries play in a world where the promise of global access to information is so integral to the health and welfare of its inhabitants? IFLA's theme for this conference "Libraries for life: democracy, diversity, delivery" would suggest that librarians do indeed have a significant role to play.

Librarians As Agents of Change

From their inception, libraries have provided local gateways to knowledge, have reflected the plurality and diversity of society and have supported the process of democratization. Information is power, and ensuring access to information is the role of the librarian, now more than ever.

Why should Libraries create networked reference services? Many of us have observed that:

- library staff are being stretched thin as demand increases and expectations of patrons continue to rise;
- patrons are increasingly at a remove from the library and expect information to be delivered to them where they are;
- reference requests are becoming more specialized, detailed, and complex and often require access to resources beyond a library's walls; and
- there is strong interest in collaboration among libraries to share resources and create better services to patrons.

Going Where the Patrons Are

Libraries today are using technology to link those in need with credible and accurate resources. QuestionPoint, begun by the Library of Congress, OCLC and partner libraries, is one of many innovative projects designed to make information available faster and better able to meet more specialized demands. And today's speakers will offer their visions of service.

The universe of information is a world that is paradoxically both immediate and unknowable. The Web has created a fundamental change in the way people collect, manage and disseminate information and acquire knowledge. Instead of a trip to the library, many researchers turn first to the Web. Few would argue, however, that many people will need the support of a trusted advisor, an intermediary in accessing, interpreting and evaluating what is available online. To keep current, library and information professionals must adapt and not feel threatened by the pace of change but embrace it and use it to imagine new and more responsive programs and services.

As the geographic borders that used to define us evaporate into wireless networks of interoperability, the greater the likelihood differences in cultural backgrounds and contexts will obscure information sending and receiving. The technical complexity of the global network will be far easier to overcome than will prevalent cultural and political prejudices and attitudes. If the events of September 11 in the United States taught us nothing else, it taught us that we must be sensitive to the perceptions of others and work hard to promote understanding and multiculturalism.

It will take time, patience and well-placed global partnerships before we can shed our blinders and interact responsibly with a world around us that is increasingly affecting each aspect of our daily lives. No library can do it all alone. And we need multiple tools and strategies. WE need standards and best practices to support interoperability; collaborations with publishers and technology producers to ensure universal access. We need to create and then nurture a culture of technical and strategic innovation so that libraries can fulfill both traditional and new library services. And finally, we need to create opportunities for professional development and training to increase our sensitivities to other cultures.

No library can or should do it all alone. Globalization can provide many benefits. It can extend 24/7 access to information, subject expertise and collections to a library patron anytime, anywhere. That is an exciting and powerful concept. But it is not without cost ... in development and implementation, in staff training, etc.

Change is hard and it costs. So there are choices to be made. And each library must reaffirm what kind and level of service it will provide to its patrons. Knowledge is power and investment in knowledge is an investment in the future. I can think of no better place than here in Scotland, the birthplace of IFLA to advance our discussion of the global library in the information age.