Unity in diversity: toward a common professional vision of health sciences librarianship*

By Merlita M. Opena
Chief, Research Information, Communication, and Utilization Program

Philippine Council for Health Research and Development
Department of Science and Technology
Bicutan, Tagig, Metro Manila
Philippines

A redefinition of librarianship is necessary to respond to the ever-changing environment. Librarians must view their profession more broadly, because they are part of a network of relationships. To meet these challenges, health information professionals must commit to spending the time necessary to engage in both professional and personal growth.

During a recent review of a library school—to determine whether it should be discontinued, merged with a computing program, or transformed into something new—a quick survey of potential employers showed the need for information professionals who are adept at processing and managing information. The demand exists in the job market, but I believe change in the profession is necessary.

A very simple model developed by Dr. Emmanuel Soriano, a former university president and now a practicing management consultant, can provide a starting point in redefining today’s librarian and information professional [1]. There are three interrelated components in Dr. Soriano’s model: the environment, the strategy, and the organization. Shifts in health sciences librarianship and, for that matter, the total information business will constantly occur as the strategies and ways of organizing respond to the ever-changing environment. The changes may be viewed as sometimes hostile, competitive, or uncertain, but they are full of strategic opportunities. As the global village becomes a reality, the environment expands beyond the four walls of our libraries to other players in the information business, such as suppliers, users, and sources of information other than libraries.

Health professionals are both suppliers and users of information. With information technologies becoming more user friendly, health professionals, allied with the computing and communication professionals, are creating information products that formerly have been the domains of information professionals. Technology enables them to expand beyond their organizations, communicating directly with other experts either through e-mail or online conferencing, thus lessening the need for intermediaries and avoiding institutional control. Although these developments may appear as threats, they offer opportunities for librarians to form alliances with other disciplines and to become co-creators, not just organizers of storehouses.

Even if a country has an aggressive information industry, if the country’s environment is not facilitative, adoption of new technologies will take some time. In the Philippines, for example, deregulation of the telecommunications industry has just begun. The participation of players who bring with them new and affordable technologies is speeding up the connectivity process. However, because the current infrastructure will not support the rapid expansion of the national communication backbone that links to the Internet, electronic connectivity has thus far been limited to the academic community.

One interesting result of access to the information highway in the Philippines has been the increasing demand for more databases containing solid, local information. E-mail is not enough; users want access to more substance via a network. This presents many

opportunities for librarians and information professionals. The environment is essentially the totality of society, with its economic, social, political, technological, cultural, and ideological components. Each component has controllable and uncontrollable as well as predictable and unpredictable variables. As we move into the global village, there are many conflicting forces to manage and with which to work.

THE NEW PARADIGM

The new-paradigm thinking in science reaffirms the constant change occurring in our view of nature and our understanding of the process of the acquisition of knowledge in man. Capra notes five shifts [2]:

Part to the whole. The properties of the part are only understood from the dynamics of the whole. Parts are really patterns in an inseparable web of relationships. Our profession is part of a bigger network.

Structure to process. Every structure is a manifestation of an underlying process in an intrinsically dynamic web of relationships. More important than structures are the processes that people continuously undergo. In this age of virtual organizations and virtual libraries, relationships transcend rigid structures. It is no longer necessary to have everything under one roof because of the shift in emphasis to processes.

Objective science to epistemic science. The understanding of the process of knowledge, epistemology, is explicitly included in the description of natural phenomena. There is no agreement as to what is proper epistemology, but an emerging consensus is that epistemology will have to be an integral part of every scientific theory.

Building to network as metaphor of knowledge. Fundamental laws and principles and basic building blocks are replaced with the network as a metaphor of knowledge. The network consists of relationships with no hierarchies or foundations, thus abandoning the idea of modeling and judging all sciences against the fundamental laws of physics. In the health sector, networks or alliances are common phenomena because of the understanding that a disease cannot be cured with medicine alone. The healing process is the work of many people and many factors.

Truth to approximate descriptions. All concepts, theories, and findings are limited and approximate, and there will always be new and better ways of doing things. We are not limited to what has been accepted before as gospel truths.

The implication for the library profession of the five shifts Capra describes is that members must view things, their jobs included, from a broad perspective, because they are part of a network, a process.

THIRD WAVE'S KNOWLEDGE-BASED SOCIETY

The above paradigm is also supported by the futurists Alvin and Heidi Toffler [3]. They describe the third wave's knowledge-based society with the following features:

- knowledge as the new factor of production vis-à-vis land, labor, capital, and technology;
- intangible values, measured not in hard assets but in the capacity of a country or an organization to acquire, generate, distribute, and apply knowledge strategically and operationally;
- heterogeneity of markets or users; presence of niches;
- new definition of work where the concepts of direct and indirect labor are blurred;
- constant process of innovation process shortening product (or service) life cycles;
- shrinking scale of work units, downsizing;
- more innovative and matrix organizations, characterized by the deployment of functional experts in a multidisciplinary team to carry out innovative projects where coordination is through mutual adjustment, encouraged by liaison personnel and integrating managers;
- need for systems' integration arising from complexities;
- concepts of infrastructure (virtual organizations or libraries) in the electronic network; and
- acceleration of things toward real time.

ORGANIZATIONS IN TRANSITION

The ways and the speed with which the components of the environment change and are interrelated are tremendous. Considered at the national and global levels, groups and individuals will communicate directly and do business with each other in a decentralized and wired society, transcending national borders. These changes will be reflected in the anatomy of organizations, in work relationships, management control, work assignments and coordination, rewards and career ladders, and leadership. For example, because information is available to and accessible by everybody in the organization, a flatter structure is possible. This constant change means that the organization's products and services will have to respond to the varying demands of the market, most of which are differentiated niches.

Because our profession has been a pioneer in developing health databases and the online services that make them available, we have an edge over others.
who are just starting. Although we may take satisfaction from the fact that we have led the way in the health information business through the use of the new technologies such as full-text journals on CD-ROMs and the Internet, we need to move forward and develop products and services that satisfy even more user needs.

OUR PROFESSIONAL STRATEGY, OUR COMMON VISION

After scanning the environment and knowing that an organization will have to constantly reshape itself because of environmental changes, what's the next step? The next step lies with people within the organization, whether formal or informal. Their professional vision must reconcile with the vision and mission of the organization of which they are a part. The information generation, provision, and communication tasks may be done by libraries in tandem with other units or in a completely different set-up. Such diversity exists all over the world, and the concept of library will have to expand according to the situation of an organization.

Any organization has a life of its own, a mission. Matsushita vividly stated this organizational mission in several ways.

"I believe that the mission of business [information] management is to respond to and fulfill the desire of human beings to improve the quality of their lives" [4].

"Different businesses [organizations, libraries] supply different kinds of goods and services, but to every enterprise the same principle applies: the enterprise exists to improve human society through its activities" [5].

The vision of health information professionals—and any professionals, for that matter—therefore should be to fulfill their organization’s mission and improve the quality of life of the people the organization serves as well as the people with whom they work every day, whether in a network environment or not.

Health information professionals must pursue two interrelating tracks of personal and professional growth: of doing the right things and doing things right. The first is concerned with the “know why” and the second one with the “know how.” Professional development, the “know how,” helps the organization achieve its goals efficiently and effectively. The “know how” requires education and re-education, because the way of providing information services today is very much different and complex. It is beneficial if the learning and relearning process takes place among groups of people, preferably with different disciplines. I noticed that the more impressive works presented at the MLA annual meeting and the congress have been those of teams that have expertise in the subject areas, computing, communication, and management. These specialists need librarians on their teams, too. These are opportunities to be co-creators aside from being facilitators and disseminators of information.

Professional growth should not occur at the expense of personal growth—the “know why.” The two go together. Knowing why we do things and the ethics (from the moral and cultural perspectives) of why we do things are important. The technologies of today are empowering our profession. There are increased opportunities to know and learn more. The empowerment process enables us to nurture our body, intellect, and soul in an environment where we strive to realize our own growth and that of others. The common vision of the profession is not only a new perspective; it is also the commitment to spend the time on professional and personal growth to be part of the multidisciplinary, international teams of the future.

REFERENCES

5. Ibid., 9–10.

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