Chapter I

Libraries and the Internet: Policy and Practice in the 21st Century

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INTRODUCTION

This is an exciting time for world libraries. It is also a time of great challenge, uncertainty, change and risk. The introduction of the Internet and the World Wide Web, and the Global Information Infrastructure is creating enormous tension in the library community. The potential for a global networked community of libraries is only beginning to be understood. The challenges posed by such an entity are many and unique. According to Wedgeworth (1998) there are four main concerns to be addressed in the context of a global library community:

- Education of librarians worldwide in use of the new information and communications technologies;
- Attention to emerging technologies and trends in information use which will affect the role of libraries;
- Awareness of the importance of librarians in this increasingly complex networked milieu; and
- Understanding of the cultural similarities and differences which directly affect the service mission of libraries.

These concerns are global in nature. Today, it is all but impossible...
to find a library that has not been affected by the revolution in information and communications technologies. Libraries are by their very nature information intensive, and information and communications technologies, thus, have become a basic work tool. In a recent study by Bertot and McClure (1998), the authors’ found that 83.6% of public libraries in the United States have some form of Internet connection. Of this number, 87.7% provide public access to the Internet to their patrons. Numbers such as these are impressive, but may obscure the reality of Internet access to library patrons. The United States has heavily invested in its information infrastructure. Efforts led by the Federal government, such as the National Partnership for Reinventing Government, the President’s Information Technology Advisory Committee, and the National Information Infrastructure initiative, have encouraged scientists and the private sector to explore and adopt new information technologies. Other countries are not as sophisticated. A recent cover story in CIO Enterprise magazine (Abramson, 1998) highlights the differences among countries. Level of connectivity, cost of service, quality of service and access to vendor support vary greatly from country to country. For example, in Russia, the telecommunications support is good in Moscow, but not beyond the city limits. In Mexico, the skill level of those working in the information industry is below standard. The hardware and software found in Brazil is excessively expensive. China suffers from a serious lack of support from information technology vendors. These technology barriers and others (e.g., nationalism, culture, legislation, urban vs rural) make the library’s road a rocky one.

These concerns, however, must be addressed in a context that has been enriched by the more traditional library practices and roles. Libraries are replete with experience and skills which enable the institution to respond and meet the challenges of global connectivity. This book, *World Libraries on the Information Superhighway: Preparing for the Challenges of the Next Millennium*, represents the thoughts and experience of librarians and academics on the changing role of libraries in a global networked community. Diverse and important topics are addressed here which acknowledge the strengths of traditional library practices and the challenges of reconfiguring these practices in a digital world. It is apparent, upon reading these chapters, that the library is alive and well in our world. Librarians have become adept at anticipating and capitalizing on the changes wrought by informa-
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