

# EXORCISING THE IMAGE

Adam Edwards

IF we, as a profession, are to be perceived as "fit", then we must have a professional image which proves to the public that we are. My particular subject is: how do today's students see academic librarians and academic libraries?

At student parties, the conversation inevitably comes round to what subject you're studying. Admitting to being a student librarian takes real guts. (You can try to avoid the issue by saying you're an information scientist, but that simply confuses people even more—at least they've a vague idea of what a librarian does!) People's reactions vary. Some avoid me for the rest of the evening; others are totally bewildered by my non-librarian-like appearance (my favourite colour is bright red). These reactions are usually followed by statements such as "You must like reading very much" or "Don't you get bored stamping books out all day long?". The message is clear: students (and doubtless other people too) have no conception of what a librarian really does and this has serious consequences for our future.

Academic libraries are, by and large, dull, brown coloured places. (If a commercial firm displayed its wares in a similar fashion then they'd go bust, but then academic libraries are above market forces, aren't they?)

The librarians who staff these book warehouses, if they can be identified at all, are quiet, shy people who do their best to avoid their users. Facilities such as online searching are only to be offered with extreme reluctance. "Online search? You'll not be able to afford that. Go and use the abstracts."

This sort of library has a dreadful effect on recruitment to postgraduate library and information studies courses (as doubtless similarly uninspiring public libraries do with under-

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graduate courses). No one with any reasonably marketable subject background goes in for librarianship (indeed physicists have been known to prefer Sellafield to a post as a subject librarian!). Low career status means that the vast majority of library school students are arts students (78% according to Armstrong's survey)<sup>1</sup> with English (25%), history (20%) and languages (13%) as the top three subjects. And how many of these people fall into the "couldn't think of anything else to do" category? Twenty-eight per cent according to Sergeant.<sup>2</sup>

The result is a vicious circle as these drifters become the next generation of boring librarians, totally devoid of the motivation to improve their drab libraries.

OK, so it's a worst case scenario, but if that's how students and others—our customers—see us then we have an urgent need to change attitudes and to prove that this picture is all wrong. If the users are right, then some pretty drastic changes are called for. We are a service industry. If our consumers don't like what they get, they may, in our high tech information future, see fit to take their custom elsewhere.

Library schools need to be far more selective in who they take on as students. The message should go out to schools and careers officers that only people who are well motivated, who

We publish here extracts from a paper presented at the Open Forum of "Fit for the future: efficiency and effectiveness into the 1990s", the LA University, College and Research Section study conference, 11–14 April 1986.

have entrepreneurial flair and who are good communicators need apply. Adverts for courses should be placed in popular scientific journals—Strathclyde advertises in *New scientist*—so as to get through to science students in greater numbers. The adverts themselves should stress that information work doesn't necessarily mean giving up on research, even if it does mean starting in a new discipline (see Zaaiman's interesting article).<sup>3</sup> Interviews for courses should place great emphasis on students' communication skills. For example, candidates might be required to give a short exposé, prepared in advance, to show their ability to get ideas across.

The Library Association needs to do much more to change our image nationally. Librarians with an interest in astronomy may have seen Heather Couper, President of the Astronomical Society, talking about Halley's comet on Wogan. Astronomy instantly turned into a mass media subject on a programme watched by millions of viewers, who are left with the image of the subject as young and lively. At this conference I asked our President if he'd mind doing the same thing. He seemed to like the idea, so can someone fix it for Alex Wilson please?

Library staff could wear lapel badges to give users a chance to identify us as people and establish personal contact. This personification of our service can be reinforced with photographs by the library entrance, photographs in the departments covered, posters, handouts and introductory talks which focus on the staff. If they know your name, then students will ask for you—leading, it is hoped, to better use of the library.

These ideas and others which you may think of will go a long way to not only changing our image but also improving our normal services.

We are entering an era when knowledge will be corruptible at the push of a few keys. We want to have a major influence over the information future. To do so we must ensure that we maintain our control of the information present, lest the role be given over to more profit motivated individuals to exploit knowledge as they see fit. We have to be seen by public and politicians alike as being capable of performing that function. With our outdated image people will not take us seriously. We must change it. We must be "Fit for the future".

## References

- 1 Armstrong, C. J. *A follow-up study of the careers of former students from schools of library and information studies*. College of Librarianship Wales, 1983. (BLRDD report 5754)
  - 2 Sergeant, R. *Librarianship and information work: job characteristics and staffing needs*. London, BLRDD, 1977. (BLRDD report 5321)
  - 3 Zaaiman, R. B. "Differences in educational programmes for librarians and information officers." *Education for information*, 2 (1984), 95–108.
- See also: Slater, M. *Career patterns and the occupational image: a study of the library/information field*. London, Aslib, 1979. (Aslib Occasional publication no. 23).

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## Record number of delegates to IAML (UK) Study Weekend

THE theme of this year's Study Weekend held 4–7 April in Reading, was "Looking Forward", with a subsidiary theme of English music. The opening paper, given by Roger Wright of the British Music Information Council, combined both themes, with the title "Promoting English music: the work of the BMIC".

Saturday morning's sessions were all concerned with future developments affecting music librarianship, beginning with a talk by Hugh Cobbe, the new Head of Music Services in the British Library, in which the BL's music services were considered against the background of the British Library's 1985–1990 plan *Advancing with knowledge*. This was followed by an introduction to the National Discography, by Malcolm Tibber, and a paper by Denis de Freitas of the British Copyright Council on the future of music copyright law.

Saturday afternoon saw a visit to the historic Eton College Library, with a pause to visit the chapel and the Eton College Choirbook, one of the College's most famous treasures. Saturday evening combined work with pleasure, in an illustrated lecture on editorial procedures, by Margaret Laurie, the University's Music Librarian, and Christopher Kent, a Reading University music lecturer. A short concert by students from the Music Department followed.

Sunday morning's sessions turned to "high tech", beginning with Mark Sutton of the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, on the historical development of sound recording technology. Then followed a paper on music videos in libraries, by Peter Godwin of Middlesex Polytechnic. Andrew Potter of OUP and Richard Vendome of Oxford University's Music Faculty gave a fascinating demonstration of the Oxford Music Processor in their talk on "Electronic music publishing".

At the IAML (UK) AGM, Malcolm Jones took over from Rodger Crudge as President. The second part of the afternoon was spent exchanging news and views of current developments in music librarianship throughout the country.

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## Workshops — a new feature

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Monday morning saw, for the first time, a series of workshops on a number of themes: "Education for music librarianship"; "Music bibliography"; "Music publishing"; "Management of decreasing resources"; "New media in libraries"; and "Library publicity and PR".

The success of the Conference could be measured not only by the fact that there was a record attendance of over 100 delegates, but also by the enthusiastic comments of all present.

Celia Prescott  
(Nottinghamshire County Libraries)  
Karen E. Manley  
(South Tyneside Libraries)

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Karen Manley, Music Librarian of South Tyneside Libraries, has succeeded Bob Stevens as Editor of the *IAML (UK) newsletter*. She would welcome any items of news related to music libraries at her home address: 19 Newmarket Walk, South Shields NE33 4LJ.