

Forty Years of Progress and Harmony ? A Progress Report at Half Way

Tony McSeán, president 1993-4 and 2001-2

Retrospective

Looking back on the 17 years I've been involved in EAHIL, two things in particular have caught my attention. The first of these is just how much the development of EAHIL have reflected the world at large - the huge technological, professional and political changes.

Technical

When I joined the Board, the only email system I had used regularly was so cumbersome there was no practical alternative to printing out each message and treating it like an old-fashioned memo. Fortunately I only received two or three messages each day; online searching was something that needed specialists and that you charged a lot of money for; the web was something that strange physicists got excited and incomprehensible about. I had an address book, used travel agents, went to shops and bought CDs, paid monopoly rates for air travel, wore a tie, and commuted by stagecoach. Maybe I made up the last one. You would have been put quietly to bed with an ice pack if you had suggested that in 20 years the quick reference collection would be practically redundant, students would think that neither librarians nor paper had a role to play in their studies, that paper publications and local archives would be entirely obsolescent, and that researchers and clinicians would no longer visit libraries because journals, books and integrated search services were available everywhere. Free.

The way EAHIL ran itself reflected this. Only in the most exceptional cases was Board business conducted outside the twice-yearly meetings. Any urgent matters were dealt with by executive Presidential action, sometimes with the help of the paid, part-time secretariat. The alternative was cumbersome circulation of letters or cumbersome and costly telephoning. This kind of barrier to participation was reflected across the whole of EAHIL's governance structure. The current situation where the Board is in effect in permanent session, using its email list to discuss and decide would have been, if not science fiction then certainly utopian. The poor old president still finds herself doing most of the actual work, though.

Professional

Over the same period, the profession has changed in a number of significant ways too. It seems to me that medical librarianship is very much less of a separate community than before, and is becoming more and more integrated into the mainstream of research librarianship. In the communities I know best, health libraries are increasingly being linked with university library services or integrated into mainstream health administration and to be on the staff of a medical library is increasingly seen as a stage in a career rather than the career itself. We are also seeing the beginnings of what I see as being fundamental changes in the structure of the profession. I shall be returning to this in more detail in the next section, but we are definitely seeing the reduction in size of large, hierarchical library structures as clerical processes are eliminated and

the library itself ceases to be a focus for services.

The flexibility and freedom provided by EAHIL's new open access structure match this new situation very well, in my view. It is easier for the member, and less of an administrative burden, to accommodate a faster membership turnover than before, and members can take what advantage and benefit they feel appropriate. It may have longer-term implications for the recruitment of new activists for Council and board, particularly as Council is growing significantly in size and councillors have the significant additional burden of assessing membership application, but for the moment this does not seem to be a problem. Last year we had the widest choice I can remember in the Board elections, and candidates for Council also appear to be easier to find than before.

Political

EAHIL was founded in a bygone political era. The former Soviet bloc was still intact and seemingly as permanent as the Alps and the nation state was much more of a watertight reality than it is now. Again, this made the administrative process more time consuming and complicated than now seems plausible. Simply having to allow for a separate currency for each country in which there was an EAHIL member was a nightmare, with the cost and expense of changing money into and out of *Francs Belges* an ever-resent reality.

From looking through the archives of the early years, it seems that our founders very sensibly based many aspects of their brainchild on the Medical Library Association — still the very model of a well-managed and successful professional body. There are assumptions about a shared, established pattern of library professionalism and of a basic, fairly high level of library resourcing which were soon to be cast to the wind by the emergence of countries in Central and Eastern Europe which combined the freshness and excitement of youth with in many cases youth's lack of structure and chronic shortage of funds. Within our limited compass, EAHIL has done an excellent job in bringing together different strands and traditions of the health information profession, and this can be seen nowhere more clearly than in the venues for our exhibitions and conferences.

Plus Ça Change, Plus C'Est la Même Chose

Referring back to my initial paragraph and following on from my remarks about our founding group, the second thing that struck me about EAHIL's development over the past 20 years is how well we have been served by the structures that the established. Through all the change and development, the Statutes and the governance structures have remained remarkably intact. We still operate on the original structure of an executive board elected by universal suffrage, supported by a council elected on a national basis and reflecting national membership levels — reporting and subordinate to a general assembly of members meeting at our conference and carrying ultimate responsibility. It worked well in 1987, and still shows no signs of decay or mismatch with reality. Statutes and Rules of Procedure may have been rewritten, clarified and modified as circumstances have changed, but remain recognisably the offspring of the original documents.

Prospective

Health Warning

As the title implies, our editor has asked me to look forward as well as back, to make some projections and predictions about what EAHIL might look like in 2027. I was surprised to be asked, because my record for predicting the future of our profession and its institutions is virtually 100%. 100% wrong, that is. My surprise was particularly sharp, because as it happens I wrote an article almost exactly 20 years ago making a set of predictions about where libraries and scholarly communication might be at around this time. Having done what I can to bury and suppress this grossly inaccurate piece of work, I am certainly not going to provide a citation for it now (and it is not on the web, as far as I can tell). However, I can comfort myself that at my present age it is very unlikely indeed that anyone will be interested in calling me to account; and almost as unlikely that I will be in any state to understand them if they do. So here goes.

Futurology

The first thing to say is that the future of the profession and the future of our professional associations, though obviously linked, are not the same thing at all. Partly driven by IT, society in the developed world is changing fundamentally away from collectivism and traditional social structures into a more individualistic and less face-to-face approach. More and more of the interactions in our life occur on a distance-independent basis, both socially through lists, chatrooms, 2.0 sites such as facebook.com etc, and in our work. Professional associations are just one category of organisation which have suffered from this growing reluctance to sign up to the traditional style of membership organisation, and throughout the world our professional groups are coping with declining membership and associated financial problems. It was a worrying financial projection that led EAHIL to adopting its radical, and as it turned out highly successful, adaptation of the open access concept, and many other associations are contemplating or implementing painful and difficult changes in order to secure a sustainable future. Our professional associations and the membership that sustains them are faced with an uncertain and probably an uncomfortable future, and technological and social change challenge, undermine and bypass our comfortable assumptions and the basis of so much of our working lives. We have a lot to offer our users, but it will not be what we have traditionally offered and for many of us the changes will be hard to digest.

Where's the Library Going?

One of the mantras of American management guru Tom Peters is that organisations need to plan to change every aspect of what they do, and this is certainly true of libraries serving the scientific and medical (STM) communities. Libraries have principally existed to provide a cultural and scientific archive, to manage information scarcity in a fair and open manner, assistance in selection and access to information resources and to provide a safe and congenial place for scholars to work. None of these seems to have an assured future in the digital world:

- < For the first time in history, most libraries do not have the knowledge, capacity or the resources to maintain a perpetual archive of the scientific record. With very few exceptions, libraries are choosing to, in effect, outsource their archiving activity either to the publishers themselves, to collaborative organisations such as Portico or to national bodies such as the Koninklijk Bibliotheek's e-Depot archive.

- < The need for rationing was inherent in the technology of the printed word, with consequences that have shaped our profession. We built selective collections based on our perceptions of user needs. We have developed highly complex processes within our libraries in order to provide a fair and equitable rationing of finite resources. As a profession take for granted our extraordinary (and to many outsiders bizarre) ability to devise byzantine rules supported by forests of decision-trees in order that our users may share fairly in what we offer. Even in the present transitional state of e-publishing this skill is now at least obsolescent: if 150 undergraduates rush out of the lecture theatre in order to read the same *NEJM* paper the technology now means they can without any outside intervention — and in fact the technology probably means they have no need to rush anywhere.

- < Reference support, library training and information literacy generally have been mainstays of the professional librarian's life but this, too, is changing. In my professional lifetime, access to the scientific literature has moved from printed indexes of varying ingenuity and complexity through Medlars, Medline and search engines to the point where Web of Science and Scopus provide extraordinarily sophisticated and flexible access with a negligible learning curve. It may be that these proprietary services are already comparable with a poor-to-average reference librarian (but without the walk across campus and the queuing for service) and our users like them — perhaps more than they like us. Making projections on the basis of past events is always hazardous, but it seems to me very likely that we will (a) see scientific abstracting and indexing services becoming better, easier to use and closer aligned to our users' needs *as they perceive them*, and (b) will become progressively cheaper, more widely available until such time as they are provided *pro bono* by the Wellcome Trust, the NLM or whoever, or even built into Windows 2012 or System XIV. Personally, I feel that the difficulty over information literacy with digital media is at most temporary. The number of health professionals who think Google is infallible and that everything is free must dwindle in the face of everyday experience of real life. Or am I being naive?

- < Academic libraries are still packed with studious youth, and there are many interesting and creative programmes designed to get the student bottom onto the library seat. Provision of coffee is now a commonplace, and we can find widescreen televisions showing sport and MTV, roller-skating reference librarians who can be summoned by SMS, collective workspaces for the groupwork generation and many other features that would send the traditional librarian stereotype onto the psychiatrist's couch (if only there were an evidence base for it). However, we are increasingly dealing with digital natives with at best only a vestigial grasp of the library's centrality to the learning process. Coffee and roller skates may not be enough in a future where net access is ever more universal and portable, and where everything really is "available on the web", even if it is paid for in

part by their college or hospital.

Much of the above is an oversimplification, and not everyone and every place is moving to digital at the same speed. However, given that we are considering a 20-year period. It used to be said that in 5 years things will change less than you expect but in 10 years they will change much, much more. Given the ever-accelerating pace of change we might adapt this to 3 years and 7, but certainly over 20 years it would be foolish to think that any of the above four pillars of librarianship will have anything more than marginal application and the curiosity value currently accorded to steam trains.

What's the Librarian Doing?

It is not all bleak, however. One of the most interesting features of the networked world is how resilient so many existing structures survive against all expectation. Why are there still record shops in our cities? Why are we all not using Skype? Libraries and librarians have great buildings and significant budgets, both of which have self-perpetuating survival value. Librarians mostly have significant job security. And so change will probably be gradual and cumulative. However, change there will be and a significant amount of professional thought is going into how we might translate our professional and customer service skills into providing new value for our users and our masters.

With the obvious exception of those library and information professionals who feature in popular television drama, most of us are possessed of an unusual talent for empathy — for adopting the goals of our users and working hard to facilitate their success. We are also excellent at customer relations, as demonstrated by the number of trained librarians fulfilling this role in publishing and related industries. These are skills that need to be applied more widely.

We will surely remain at the heart of ensuring that our institution and its staff get the best value and the most important resources for the amount of money they are prepared to spend on information. This is likely to be steadily more circumscribed by the constraints of national or regional acquisition agreements, and by the shape of big deal contracts but it would be strange if our employers did not want to retain a voice in this process, and stranger still if it did not rely on us to speak on their behalf. We also have skills that can contribute significantly to our organisation's goals in the management and development of intellectual property (IP). To some extent this can be seen in experiments with institutional repositories, but in my opinion these are something of a blind alley and perhaps in some cases are being developed to satisfy a deep need to build collections whose traditional outlet is being blocked by the ubiquity of web resources in general and big deals in particular. If we are to have a future in IP management and support, we need to be more focused on the organisation's goals in these areas and not regard repositories as a publishing surrogate (although that may indeed prove to be an important and significant side-benefit).

As discussed above, library space is already being put to a variety of innovative uses, but other developments in education and medical practice may give more opportunities to extend this, with interdisciplinary research, distributed teams, and more flexible working and studying all

becoming more and more of a feature of our lives. With close links throughout the institution, we are well placed to foster and support the creation of new communities and facilitate new ways of working.

There also seems to be considerable potential for the development of information professions “embedded” in research or clinical teams and providing information and assistance in support of individual team goals. Even with the increasing sophistication of search tools, such an arrangement promised improved quality of information and increased productivity for the team as a whole.

In Conclusion, *or rather* In Continuation (And What Will EAHIL Do?)

Notwithstanding the doom and gloom of the previous sections, the immediate future for EAHIL looks secure and bright. Unusually, we have a sustainable economic model and an interesting and sensible business plan. What I expect to be the increasing fragmentation and loss of structure in the provision of medical information is both a threat and an opportunity for us. On the one hand, we may see the gradual disappearance of any sort of consciousness that information midwifery is a separate, definable professional group at all. But as internal support structures steadily disintegrate, it may be also the case that those involved in information services will be increasingly looking beyond their employer for their professional support, their continuing education and their everyday peer group. In the way we have developed, EAHIL is very well placed to do this and the forthcoming provision of professional certification may play an important part in this.

I am no more going to give a 20 year projection of EAHIL’s development than I am going to expose to public ridicule my forecasts of the late 80s. Planning cycles are becoming shorter and shorter in all types of organisations and for many of us anything longer than 2-3 years ahead cannot properly be considered “planning” at all but slips into the realm of “speculation” or “guesswork”. What EAHIL has to be to survive is creative and nimble. It has many advantages, not least an impressive generation of activists coming through to take on the mantle of leadership from the increasingly sloped shoulders of us older professionals. In addition to good people and a member community that demonstrates impressive coherence and commitment, EAHIL has much else going for it. Even in its newly expanded state, it is a very manageable size which seems somehow to be a good fit to current technology. Larger organisations have their advantages but attract a clutter of overheads, commitments and distraction; smaller organisations can struggle to find an adequate critical mass talented activists. Like with children, you can never look at a professional association and say “job done”. All you can ever say is “so far, so good” and I think we *can* say that about EAHIL.

And finally, why do I refer to “progress and harmony” in the title? Simple. As well as serving on the EAHIL Board I also chair the council of trustees for CILIP, the UK’s national library association. There is a tradition that at the beginning of each annual cycle of meetings and activity CILIP council stands and drinks a toast to “progress and harmony”, and given the amount of misery in the body of this article, I thought it would be a good sentiment to begin and

end with.