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Citation: Bawden, D. (2004). Documentation in an information society. Journal of Documentation, 60(2), pp. 107-108. doi: 10.1108/00220410410523150

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Link to published version: https://doi.org/10.1108/00220410410523150

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Documentation in an Information Society

Summary
The contributions of the theories and practices of 'documentation', located with the library/information disciplines, to the development of information society are real, but limited. There is scope for further input is considerable . (6 refs.)
Keywords: information society; information policy; open society

Two of the reviews in this issue deal with books about the 'Information Society'. Alistair Duff reviews Mattelart's 'The Information Society: an Introduction', and Sreºko Jeluëiº reviews May's 'the Information Society: a sceptical view'.

Echoing the books themselves, the reviews largely focus on the relation between technical advances and public policy, and the role of the state. This is often considered to be a relatively new phenomenon, beginning with the widespread adoption of digital computing the in the 1960s, although even this seems to be regarded as ancient history of limited relevance by those who seem to believe that modern communication begins with TCP/IP email. Jeluëiº draws from May's account the realisation that some of the 'plurality' claimed as the result of new ICTs can be identified in the late nineteenth century. In similar modest vein, Duff suggests the study of information society itself may, as yet, better be regarded as a new research specialism than a truly new academic field.

Nonetheless, the significance of the information society concept should not be under-estimated, at the least as a 'carrier' for a variety of political and policy issues, as with those aired at the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) held in Geneva at the end of 2003 [WSIS 2003]. The recommendations from this meeting seem to lay a reasonable stress on the importance of libraries and similar 'public' and 'cultural' institutions in providing access to information and in promoting e-literacy [although many in the library community were unimpressed by the linking of libraries and archives with institutions such as post offices in the information access role].

The role of the library/information sector, within which 'documentation' is generally located, in the development of an information society, however this may be understood, is often regarded by those outside the information professions as a rather peripheral one. The 'post office' example noted above is a real, if seemingly trivial, example of this; the relatively small number of recommendations and action points in the WSIS documents which make explicit mention of the sector is a more substantive one. The dominance of the political economy frame in the discourse of information policy formulation, the discipline which, rather than any other, should underlie information society developments, is another [Rowlands, Eisenschitz and Bawden 2002].

Yet there are strong reasons for believing that LIS theory and practice have made and are making significant contributions in this area, and could make more. Three examples must suffice. Duff reminds us of Mattelart's identification of the contributions of the librarian/classificationist Melville Dewey, whose innovations in bibliographic control facilitated, albeit in a roundabout way, the growth of global communication, from the end of the nineteenth century. Dutch and Muddiman (2001) suggest new roles for the public library service in building an inclusive information society. It has also been argued that library and information services may play a significant role in the development of 'open societies' in the Popperian sense [Robinson and Bawden 2001]. If it is the case, as Duff believes, that there will remain a strong division between 'regimes of information scarcity next to open societies of information abundance', then this may be the most significant contribution of all.

It is noticeable, however, that the majority of books and articles giving analyses of, and conceptual frameworks for, information society tend - like those reviewed in this issue - to be written from the perspectives of other disciplines, notably social sciences, political science, and communications technology. While there are honourable exceptions [e.g. Dearnley and Feather 2001], this has to be seen as a regrettable limitation.

This a topic which will be fully covered in *Journal of Documentation*. We welcome contributions of several kinds: full articles, reviews and letters.

David Bawden

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