Fundamental changes, enabled by network and computing technologies, are occurring in the professional communities of librarians, archivists, and information systems managers.

Digital representations and electronic access are enriching the library's traditional services of physical access to analog artifacts: books, periodicals, audio and video recordings, microforms, etc. The digital libraries research agenda represents, in shorthand, this new area of professional concern.

Archives are expanding their concerns for preservation and access, institutional history, and records management to the electronic record-keeping systems that are increasingly the sole source of evidence for the official actions of organizations, agencies, and governments.

A synergistic shift is underway among information systems managers in such fields as decision support, executive information systems, electronic commerce, and workgroup computing. Digital documents and electronic forms are supplementing or replacing database records and file systems as paradigms by which the contents of information systems are organized, described, and used.

Convergence: technologies, professional practice, and user services

These changes represent a convergence of ideas and interests within the information professions—among librarians, archivists, and information systems managers—the full benefits of which are as yet unrealized. The potential of this convergence lies in three areas: technology, professional practice, and user service.

Networked information technologies have both enabled and stimulated changes in libraries, archives, and information systems management. These technologies include the World Wide Web, networked information search and retrieval tools, work group computing technologies, and technologies for managing documents, electronic texts, and other digital media. On its surface, technology is the area of greatest progress toward convergence, but the benefits are limited by the immaturity of the technologies themselves and the very early stage of their adoption in the various information professions. New technologies are needed that are better designed to the needs of information users. These new technologies will need to become more integrated into the professional fabric of librarians, archivists, and information systems managers in order to increase the benefits of this convergence.

Professional practice—standards, methodologies, and their intellectual foundation—is perhaps the least-developed area of convergence. Despite more than fifteen years of literature on the subject, the cross-pollination among librarians, information systems managers, archivists, and records managers remains limited. Differences in organizational roles, discipline-specific languages, and historically distinct domains of information content may account for the slow pace. Nevertheless, there are fundamental issues in the management of digital content—organization and description, search and retrieval, preservation and access—that will benefit from the collaborative attention of the various information professions, the power of such collaboration coming from the distinctive competencies and unique contributions that can be made by each of these professions.

User services may in time become the greatest driving force for convergence among librarians, archivists, and information systems managers. As networked information technologies begin to offer the appearance of an integrated world of information, users will expect the reality of such integration. Within any enterprise a user may need and seek information that has traditionally been in the domain of the libraries, the archives, or various management information systems. These distinctions among domains are not so meaningful from a user's perspective, whose interest is in useful information—timely, reliable, accurate, and relevant. Truly useful inte-
gration will need to go deeper than the thin veneer of a Web-browser interface and HTML document presentation. The issues of professional practice—organization and description, search and retrieval, preservation and access—will need to be addressed with some consistency across a number of formerly distinct information domains if the resulting services are to meet user needs and expectations.

Enterprise-wide information strategies

The agenda outlined in the “Call for Statements of Interest and Experience: Enterprise-Wide Information Strategies,” developed by the Coalition for Networked Information and shared at the Spring Task Force Meeting (March 25-26, 1996), provides the basis for advancing the causes of convergence in technology and professional practice, and for improving user services. The emphasis on spanning boundaries, both organizational and technological, is a key to progress and success, and has been a strength of CNI since its inception. Equally important is the Call’s invitation to cross-disciplinary teams, which may include “academic and administrative computing units, libraries, archives, and academic and administrative units that create and use networked information.”

Many of the challenges outlined in the Call address the issues of convergence in the information professions: cross-domain information flows; interoperability; and boundaries between personal, work group, enterprise, and open communications. Two more of the challenges are of special importance to information systems managers, archivists, and records managers, and may be equally critical to such areas as library automation, reference, and the organization of library services. These are: legacy systems and resources, and center/periphery relationships.

Both the intellectual goal of this CNI initiative (“a framework of shared ideas and language... a ‘shared mental model’ for formulating, describing, and analyzing enterprise-wide information resource and service strategies”) and the tangible goals (learning-based workshops, written case studies, and useful and sharable technologies) promise a positive contribution toward realizing the benefits of convergence of the information professions in technology, professional practice, and user services.

The CNI initiative can make an important contribution by orienting the initiative around the organizational construct of “the enterprise.” The ubiquity of networked technologies has resulted in a loss of distinction between local and remote users of information, or between primary and incidental service recipients. The anonymity of the network and its users has sometimes resulted in a lack of focus on the part of information providers. This is not to say that only users who are local and known are important. Indeed many information services are intended for remote, anonymous users as the primary audience. By inviting information providers and information professionals to consider and define the scope of their “enterprise,” and by asking that information strategies be described in the context of this enterprise, this initiative introduces a useful and flexible organizational construct to the consideration of information resources management.

Final comments

Organizational collaboration among librarians, archivists, and information systems managers represents an important (and possibly inevitable) trend in the information professions. Work in this field has the potential to add value in all sectors—education, government, professional societies, and commercial industry—based on timely, accurate, and relevant information delivered where, when, and to whom it’s needed.

The organization responsible for information—whether libraries, archives, or management information systems—will not matter nearly so much to our users as will the quality of information, represented in part by its selection, organization, description, search, retrieval, preservation, and access.

The Enterprise-Wide Information Strategies initiative of the Coalition for Networked Information is a promising project to help advance the benefits of convergence among the information professions toward reaching common “enterprise” goals.

“Within any enterprise a user may need and seek information that has traditionally been in the domain of the libraries, the archives, or various management information systems.”