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Edwards, J. Adam ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9536-6782> (1987) Informing the uninformed: using the national press to promote library/information work. *Library Association Record*, 89 (8) . pp. 395-397. ISSN 0024-2195 [Article]

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Informing the uninformed: using the national press to promote library/information work

J. Adam Edwards

ARE you a frustrated YUMPAL (Young Upwardly Mobile Professional Assistant Librarian)? Fed up with an excessive dose of the TINATURNER's (There Is No Alternative To Unremitting Repressive Needless Economic Restrictions)? Before you throw yourself off the nearest railway bridge, stop and think for a minute. Surely there has to be a way to convince the powers that be that librarians are performing a vital social function, that high-quality education and training mean providing adequately-staffed and -funded libraries in the schools, colleges, polytechnics and universities where students are taught?

This essay looks at ways college librarians, indeed all librarians, can inform the uninformed about the work of the library/information science (LIS) profession. Particular attention is focused on the national press as a channel for communication with the outside world.

Marketing experts like Philip Kotler¹ suggest a number of ways in which messages can be put across: for example, a library open day when customers get a chance to see all the hard work that goes on behind the scenes; or a promotional video, extolling the virtues of everything from the smallest college library to the latest worldwide online databases; or public meetings to tell people about what the LIS profession does and could be doing; or even TV and radio coverage. (Perhaps Max Broome might be able to get himself invited on to Wogan or the Jimmy Young Show!) However, of all the methods open to us, perhaps the most readily accessible medium for national promotion is the national press. After all, *The Times*, so one is led to believe, is read by the people that run the country, so articles and letters in that, and other, national dailies ought to be an excellent way of attracting the attention of local and national government leaders.

Last year, as part of my MSc dissertation,² I carried out a small survey of the coverage of LIS work in the national press. The survey covered all articles about libraries, librarians, information services, information systems, information science and information technology printed in *The Times* group of newspapers during 1985, as these are thoroughly indexed in *The Times index*.³ Articles on information technology were included for comparative purposes, as were articles in the specialist *Times* newspapers—*Times higher education supplement* (THES), *Times education supplement* (TES) and *Times literary supplement* (TLS). As these newspapers are "invisible" to the non-specialist reader it is of interest to see what proportion of LIS material gets only restricted exposure.

Table 1: Articles on library/information science in *The Times index*, 1985²

Subject	<i>Times/Sunday Times</i>	THES, TES, TLS	Total
Libraries	5	19	24 (23.8%)
Information systems and services	15	2	17 (16.8%)
Information technology	38	22	60 (59.4%)
TOTAL	58 (57.4%)	43 (42.6%)	101

THES: *Times higher education supplement*.

TES: *Times education supplement*.

TLS: *Times literary supplement*.

(NB: references covering articles in two areas are counted twice.)

Table 1 shows how *The Times* newspapers cover the LIS field and the terms used in *The Times index*.³ Clearly, information technology is getting the lion's share of the coverage, both in the mainstream and specialist papers. In contrast, articles on libraries are mostly siphoned off into the specialist papers, denying them a wide readership.

To make matters worse, many articles merely serve to reinforce the cliché image of the book-centred profession. For example, *The Times* for 6 March 1985 carries an article about the return of *The book of fines*⁴ to Somerset Record Office, 300 years overdue. Whilst this story will doubtless bring joy to the hearts of those interested in antiquarian books, it merely serves to confirm the popular prejudices that many outsiders have of LIS work. In contrast, only four articles link libraries with the use of information technology. More are needed.

"... only four articles link libraries with the use of information technology."

The second table should be of particular interest to those who think that librarians should become information scientists. The term information science is clearly very poorly used outside the LIS world! This point is illustrated by an article on training for the information future by Dr Tony Greenfield, an industrial research consultant and founder professor of medical computing and statistics at Queen's University, Belfast—a university which has its own LIS department—in which he talks about the need for trained information professionals, whom he describes as information technologists:

"Our student of polymathy will learn to interview a client, to persuade him to talk about and help him to formulate his problems. He will learn to write memoranda, letters, reports and

articles, to speak in public, and to play all roles in committees. He will acquire a working knowledge of making diagrams and charts, slides and transparencies, block and plate making, typography, printing, proof-reading, and lay-out of publications. He will be trained in self-communication, note taking, transcription and filing."

It is a pity Dr Greenfield does not describe such students as information scientists or librarians. The LIS profession needs to inform him—and others like him—that its workers already have the training he outlines.

"... some articles ... argue the case for using information technology to replace libraries ..."

Whilst some articles show ignorance of LIS work, others are almost as bad, as they argue the case for using information technology to replace libraries or information workers. In an article promoting the launch of Datasolve's "World Exporter" information system, it is claimed that the new hi-tech product is "... more cost effective than starting and maintaining a clippings and monitoring service or corporate library".⁶ That the company librarian or information scientist might actually include the World Exporter system as one service within the corporate library seems not to have been considered.

Fortunately other articles are more positive about LIS work. For example, *The Times* (21 May 1985) carried an article entitled "Pink pigs popping up on the VDU"⁷ which discusses a project by a graphic artist designed to help college library users to use the Dialog information retrieval system. It shows clearly the link between libraries, librarians and information technology—a useful boost to the professional image.

"The idea that the British Library is a thrusting science and technology business information resource would be news to most people . . ."

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To sum up, the LIS profession is getting a mixed bag of articles covering its activities, some positive, others less so. How then, can LIS organizations and individuals get themselves into print? The following four examples show different ways of attracting positive publicity.

The simplest example is a letter written in reply to an article appearing in a particular publication. Greenfield's article cited above produced the following response from P. Morton and J. Jones of Thames Polytechnic: "Our course, which has evolved over the past 15 years, produces graduates of the kind imagined by Dr Greenfield—eagerly sought after by industry, commerce, and research establishments."⁸

Unfortunately their two column-inches of free publicity are committed to the promotion of a BSc in computing science rather than a course in information science. Clearly an LIS department could have seized the opportunity to publicize its own courses.

Another method which could be used by the LIS profession is to publish articles in non-LIS professional journals or in in-house newspapers or magazines. *Transport*, the journal of the Chartered Institute of Transport, ran such an article in June 1986. The Institute's own Librarian, Sue Woolley, contributed a one-page article describing the seminars and resources offered by the library. All LIS workers in whatever organization ought to be able to write something like this: "Since its formation in 1926, primarily as an aid to students, the library has grown rapidly and it now provides a service to corporate members of the Institute to enable them to keep themselves informed of current transport developments . . ."⁹

Best of all, though, are articles in widely-read newspapers and magazines. The British Library did well to invite journalists to the launch of its strategic plan *Advancing with knowledge*. This resulted in an article in *New Scientist* by John Lamb. He quotes Dr Maurice Line: "The idea that the British Library is a thrusting science and technology business information resource would be news to most people and I want to get this across . . . People want information not documents."¹⁰

This excellent, positive article covered information brokerage, the Knowledge Warehouse project (a store for full text information held in computer files), and facsimile transmission by satellite. Regrettably such articles are few in number. Perhaps other LIS organizations could attract similar good and positive publicity for themselves.

Equally effective are personal contributions. This channel for LIS promotion was well used in a recent article by Fiona Hamilton, an information consultant,

printed as the lead article on the General Appointments page of *The Times* (12 June 1986). Referring to past articles concerned with training for the information future, she writes:

"Many of the articles appearing in this space have emphasized the need to alter the perspectives of management education. Although mention is made of the importance of information to the manager, no mention is ever made of the importance of the information profession, or the contribution which could be made to management education by its members.

"How to access information should be an essential part of any course purporting to provide education and training in management skills. It is a low priority or missing entirely from many courses, but it is a risk which can—and should—be swiftly remedied."¹¹

More articles like this could—and should—be written to promote not just LIS courses and training, but LIS work in general.

Promotion of a new product is vital, even if the target market is already well-informed as to the nature of the product on offer. For example, people understand very well what a car is, but new models offering new features still need promotional campaigns to sell them. People need to be encouraged to have higher expectations and to demand more of their cars—stimulational marketing. They need to be persuaded that only the latest model can possibly satisfy their needs. However, if the target markets show little or no knowledge of the nature of the product on offer, then good promotion is even more important. It has to educate as well as simply inform. In this situation, the car promoter might have to go so far as to explain what a car is, so that the horse-and-cart-buying public sees that its ideas are totally out-of-date. LIS workers know that there is more to information work than stamping books and tidying shelves. The general public needs to be made aware that its ideas on LIS work are out-of-date and need revising. Some articles are being written and published which satisfy this requirement. More should be written to promote LIS work and to make people aware of the value to society now, and in the future, of the library/information science profession.

Articles in the press are, however, but a start. The LIS professional bodies—the Library (pity about the Information Services) Association, the Institute of Information Scientists and Aslib—need to make a concerted effort to improve the professional image and to increase awareness of the role of LIS profession. However, whilst such a campaign will be a great help, perhaps the greatest effort needs to be made by libraries and infor-

Table 2: Articles containing library/information science keywords²

Search term	Times/Sunday Times
Library/librarian	9 (18%)
Information science/scientist	1 (2%)
Information technology/technologist	40 (80%)
TOTAL	50 (100%)

(Terms only counted once for each article: they may occur more than once within each article.)

mation units throughout the country: how friendly and welcoming are these places and their staff? What sort of impression of LIS work do they give the potential recruit?

What opportunities are given to the public to see the many LIS activities which go on invisibly behind the scenes in LIS organizations? Marketing theory shows that promotional campaigns are only worthwhile if the products they offer to the consumer are worth having. Local and national government leaders and civil servants have to be convinced that the LIS profession is worth supporting. The LIS profession needs, and deserves, promoting. It is a task for all its members.

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