

“What does it mean to be a complete information professional?”

What Mike Eisenberg so wittily likes to call our “information-colored glasses” is what makes informational professionals different from the rest of the world, and also what we have in common with each other. The glasses are a cute but very apt metaphor; as in poetry and literature, a figure of speech easily communicates ideas which can hardly be expressed in plain speech.

I started to say that only for information professionals was information more than a means to an end, but that is not true. Information is not the end; the user is. Although we study, as no one else does, information and the technologies and processes which surround it, we are always conscious that our purpose is to serve the end user, whoever that might be.

Ironically, I think I would have found it a lot easier to write this essay two weeks ago, before starting the class. Then, I thought I knew all the answers; now I know that not only do I not know, neither do my professors! (Some of them pretend to believe their answers, but none of them deny that almost everyone else disagrees with them on one point or another. I respect their honesty but nevertheless wish for more certainty and stability.) I don't even know what information or a document is any more. If an antelope is a document, and an information professional is someone who deals with documents, is a zookeeper an information professional? That is, of course, a ridiculous example, but it illustrates the fault in any attempt at definition.

In class we attempted to define a librarian but succeeded only in description, not definition. Since the question concerns itself with information professionals, not librarians, I shall have to confront that definition myself. “Professional” is easy enough; a professional is someone for whom the specified vocation is a source of revenue (for example, a professional baseball player). An information professional, therefore, is someone whose job it is to deal with or process information. This is a true but too-broad definition.

The user-oriented perspective is one of the most important aspects of an information professional's job. The purpose of storing, organizing, and retrieving

information is so that it can be used in some way. Use itself falls outside the information professional's domain, as it depends on the user's needs and goals, but both use and user must be constantly in an information professional's sights. The difficulty with a user-oriented approach is that the spectrum of uses and users is extremely broad. Therefore, an information professional's specialty is not in any one subject area, but in the arena of information itself as well as the mechanisms which surround it.

An information professional can be the database engineer who designs the cataloging systems for a national archive. An information professional can also be an aging librarian who provides reference service at a small-town public library. Both are part of the information lifecycle which pushes information around towards the user. That is the role of an information professional.