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Russell Shank and the nature of the information disciplines

Russell Shank, who died on 26th June 2012, was a prominent figure in American and world librarianship. Professor Emeritus at the University of California, Los Angeles, he was university librarian of UCLA for many years, and latterly vice chancellor for library and information services planning. He had a first degree in electrical engineering, leading to a long-standing interest in the application of computers, batchelors and doctoral degrees in librarianship, and an MBA.

His professional interests were wide-ranging. His obituary in *American Libraries* magazine [1] describes him as "a renowned leader who made his mark in academic, special and public librarianship as well as in intellectual freedom and international librarianship." An equivalent obituary in the *Los Angeles Times* [2] notes that he was "a staunch supporter of First Amendment rights in all libraries and an early proponent of technology as a way to enhance library services".

In several respects, Shank's career exemplifies the characteristics of the information disciplines. He shares with many library/information academics and practitioners an initial grounding in another subject, although his own background in the physical sciences is, perhaps regrettably, less common in recent years. Although best known as a practitioner and a manager, he had a strong academic base and scholarly interest. The breadth of his contributions, from computing and technology to ethical and political aspects of the freedom of speech, while more extensive than that of most of us, well illustrates the way in which the very diverse aspects of the information environment may be integrated.

There is a often-expressed concern that the information disciplines do not have much substantive subject matter outside a narrow set of professional skills; and a equally prevalent concern that theory and practice never mix. *Journal of Documentation* has a long history of publishing material which refutes both of these worries. The careers of people like Russell Shank encourage us to believe that that such concerns are as groundless in the world of practice as they are in the world of the academic journal.

David Bawden

[1] http://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/inside-scoop/library-giant-russell-shank-dies

[2] http://articles.latimes.com/2012/jul/14/local/la-me-russell-shank-20120714