

# Don't write the library's obit yet

The information blitzkrieg on the Net has led to people predicting the death of the library. But digitising has a long way to go before it becomes a threat to the good old library.



As part of 'the task of digital information management' (*DH Education*, July 19, 2007) digital decay is contrasted with paper decay, proliferation of gray content on the Web and how the trio factors (accessibility, ease of use and perceived utility) accelerate use of digital information are discussed. While the unpublished and the semi-published (gray) are receiving high attention in the digital world, real e-publishing is happening at a lower pace than expected.

The growth of e-journals is neither rapid nor significant as was initially expected. Today's e-journals are not real e-journals. Only paper replacements of some journals of society and hybrid e-journals of commercial publishers (both require least social and cultural changes) are flourishing without full 'electronicity' journals (see Hovov and Gray for an excellent review article on the topic in the latest *Advances in Computers*, volume 67, 2006).

In case of e-journals, without backward compatibility, institutions and libraries are at the mercy of a continually changing digital world. It has been well established that a typical re-

searcher (scientist) uses 5 to 15 journals. But the consortia deals of commercial publishers and their greedy agents are boasting that they provide access to thousands of journals, usually 10 to 20 times more than the number of journals subscribed by an institution or a library.

As far as institutions and libraries are concerned, digital access management consisting of handling license agreement, price negotiation, offer evaluation, usage assessment, etc. became new exercises wherein publishers and their agents decide and dictate terms.

Incidentally, e-books are yet to take off. Digital Rights Management (DRM) is the main issue. Having not been able to resolve the copyright issue, more and more gray literature like theses and dissertations and copyright-free old books are getting digitised. Yet we do not have confidence to discard old dilapidated printed material after digitising, but try to make copies to continue preserve and / or use.

Yes, technology (ICT) has enabled instant access to enormous information any-

where anytime. One serious consequence of this "access to excess" problem is the reversal of the traditional sequence of selection and then accessing information in the new digital world. That is traditionally libraries were first selecting the material and then allowing their users to access them. Now the users have to access and retrieve a large chunk of material and then start sifting the mass for selecting the required information from thousands and at times, millions of hits. In other words, the filtering responsibility got shifted to users and the value addition of libraries is lost.

We have witnessed a communication revolution in the recent past with tremendous increase in speed as well as frequency of use. But we have forgotten that the density (or value) of information communicated is inversely proportional to the speed of communication. Our recent modes of communication like mobile phones and e-mails are too fast, but the contents passing through them are proportionately diluted.

The cost of sharing and distribution of information is low and negligible in the

digital world. But sharing is a complex human process subjected to the psychology of the individual and his professional and cultural predisposition. Despite certain drawbacks, problems and adverse predictions, a close runner-up position accorded to Wikipedia by *Nature* in a comparative study with the traditionally strong *Encyclopedia Britannica* is a triumph for collaboration and open access movement.

It is well known that the forces and objectives behind resource sharing among libraries and forming a consortia include: 1. Existence of unutilised spare capacity of resource, 2. Optimum utilisation of resource, 3. Budgetary crunch, and 4. Avoiding duplication. It is difficult to say that these objective are much better achieved in the new digital environment, particularly in view of the content boom, enormous duplication and unutilised resources as well as huge expenditure indirectly incurred by centralised agencies towards consortia subscriptions.

As said earlier, ICT has enabled information sharing and collaborative working. But the collaborative evaluation of content in the Internet has become a marketing tool. Amazon uses evaluation and views of customers to rate books and present to others to further its commercial interest. The information management community requires is that technology learn users' likes and dislikes over time in order to dynamically and consistently deliver the right content to users.

With the technology-driven changed scenario of causing a power shift and computers becoming

household appliances, all kinds of information are within the reach of the common man. Then, are we heading towards the end of libraries is the question often raised. Information is everywhere and everybody needs information. But as usual, libraries are continued to be used by a small subset of the population. Hence it is meaningless to compare libraries with Google. With the invasion of the Internet, no doubt the number of reference queries to libraries have declined and the innovative personalised service like 'Ask a librarian' on the Web has also been made redundant by auto answering services of the popular search engines.

One prediction is that libraries, particularly public libraries, may stay and become "intellectual commons" or community centres in the future. Another survey (of course, in the West) revealed that libraries continue to be graded as top among community services. Yet another study showed that there is no change in the number of construction projects of library buildings over the years. As early as the 1970s, experts predicted a paperless society by the 1990s. Now, there are a few wishfully predicting that libraries will die soon. Neither did a paperless society arrive nor are libraries becoming extinct. Every technology has to become old and has to be modified or occasionally replaced by some better newer technology. But the basic issues remain the same with need for some refinement.

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