

Librarians in the 21st century

Libraries are set to become more important than ever.

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Carl Sagan, the late astronomer, raconteur and television personality, once wondered aloud how many books an individual could read in a normal lifetime. “From here, to here”, was his estimate, as he walked the length of a single, not very long, shelf of books in a US library. Sagan’s point was that our capacity to read was nothing compared with the vast volume of editions contained in a normal library.

Today, with the Internet, the librarian’s job of sorting and providing access has become even greater. Not that paper-based information has been replaced; in fact, there is more printed paper produced today than 20 years ago. But the real changes have been brought about by the so-called digital revolution.

Fortunately for librarians, the new developments in information technology that have led to such explosive growth in information have also come to their rescue by revolutionising the way information is stored and accessed. The creation of bibliographic databases, the digital catalogues to complement the trusty Kardex, and the use of barcodes to store books, are just a few valuable innovations. The new challenge is how to manage and alleviate the already existing problem for researchers of “information overload”.

The Internet and search engines like Google or Yahoo may have brought sorting and retrieval of front-line information into the living room, but deeper searches demand patience. Given the plethora of information available, the Internet has heightened the need for more and better librarians to filter the wheat from the chaff.

In addition to the more traditional information portals like library catalogues, librarians now use resources like RSS (Really Simple Syndication), which uses XML tagging to stream current news stories or information directly to the client’s desktop, mobile phone or handheld computer. The OECD Observer online edition uses this service, as it is widely used for sending the latest news stories to a user’s machine and getting around email spam. This is one reason why publishers are also using RSS to inform customers about new titles or send out newsletters.

Today, the OECD's Centre for Documentation and Information (CDI) has more than 55% of its resources in digital format, with over 55,000 electronic titles and 29,000 titles in paper format. This virtual library allows our researchers to consult the catalogues and other electronic resources provided by the centre from their desktops via the OECD's Intranet.

The centre also provides access to important sites on the web where its clients can instantly download periodical articles and academic working papers, consult databases and even print off complete monographs. Clients can also request loans of material or ask for bibliographic researches with one click which automatically sends an e-mail request to the librarian.

Another development librarians face is the WiFi market, which one estimate predicts will be worth US\$44 billion in 2008. Librarians are responding by making their catalogues and portals accessible 24 hours a day and seven days a week in formats that are user-friendly for mobile phones and other wireless handheld devices.

With the huge wealth of information available, the librarian's "teaching" role will no doubt grow in the 21st century. For instance, as well as providing guides and information on its Intranet site, the OECD's information centre organises personalised training sessions and regular demonstrations for its clients. Libraries with large numbers of clients, such as university libraries, have created online tutorials on their web sites. An example of this is the University of Sussex's information literacy tutorial, "InfoSuss".

This is a time of flux for business models in publishing; some academic institutions have already set up formal institutional repositories and are offering free on-line access to peer-reviewed articles which previously would have been published in a commercial journal. Sites like the Directory of Open Access Journals allow anyone with Internet access to freely download articles. Some commercial publishers have accepted to publish articles free on the Internet with the authors' institutions paying the publishing fee.

A recent European Commission report finds that libraries should be allocated funds to subscribe to reader-pay journals and that authors should be able to afford publishing costs for author-pay journals. The report also stresses that perennial access to digital archives should be guaranteed. A recent OECD report on scientific publishing online foresees a period of experimentation around various versions of open-access publishing based around mixes of open and subscription-based access.

The progress of open-access periodical article publishing and institutional repositories versus the traditional models will have budgetary implications for all libraries. Printed material will continue to play an important role for researchers and library users. A recent survey of the use of online textbooks found that students preferred using the printed version and only viewed online formats as a supplement to print. Physical libraries will still therefore thrive and adapt, with reading rooms for users to come and browse, consult and borrow material. If you want to find the best path through the information maze, ask your librarian.

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