Academic Libraries and Library Professionals in the Electronic Teaching-Learning Era

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Abstract

The increasing role of technology in libraries has a significant impact on the changing roles of librarians. New technologies are dramatically increasing the accessibility of information, and librarians are adapting to the evolving needs of users that emerge from the adoption of these new technologies.

The most significant example of how technology has changed the role of librarians in the last 50 years has been the move from traditional card catalogs to online public access catalogs (OPAC). Librarians had to develop software and the MARC standards for cataloging records electronically. They had to purchase and run the computers necessary to use the software. They had to teach the public how to use the new technologies and move to more virtual working environments.

The same could be said of other technology developments from electronic databases (including the Internet) to logistical functions such as barcodes (or in the near future RFID). Many librarians provide virtual reference services (via web-based chat, instant messaging, text messaging, and e-mail), work in digitalization initiatives for works in the public domain, teach technology classes to their users, and work on the development of information architectures for improving access and search functionality.

Keywords: Traditional Library, Virtual Library, Digital Library, Technology and Education, Internet, Digitization. Academic Libraries.

Introduction

The nature of the academic library and the role they play in campus is changing. Libraries are moving towards an information commons model of service, and becoming campus community centers. They invite student and faculty socialization, learning, research, scholarship and instruction. They are most effective when

programming, services, and spaces are developed in partnership with others seeking similar educational outcomes. Academic libraries will increasingly provide information and services to their users at right time as per their requirement. Whatever the changes, the traditional roles of a library in an Academic community, especially those communities that aren't changing substantially themselves, will remain valid and important to a successful college or University.

The purpose of this paper is to make administrators, teachers, librarians and board members aware of the important and changing role of these professionals in the academic environment. Their mission to provide access to materials in all formats remains the same, but there has been a virtual explosion of materials and resources in the past few years. Not only must they be proficient with the wide range of information available but they also must be able to work with teachers to instill information literacy skills and to promote life-long learning in students.

Finally, how can libraries and librarians manage change in their own schools? It is the purpose of this paper to try to answer these questions and to further explore these issues.

Academic Information Resources in the Age of Information

Information resources in all formats with adequate depth and quantity need to be provided in the library for students' experimentation and exploration. Such resources should promote student-centered, resource based, problem-solving and independent learning. Self paced resources that enable the customization of learning and the impacting of specific skills to students should be promoted. This approach enables the student to direct his own learning while the teacher and the librarian work in partnership facilitate and guide the student along the learning process. It is a flexible system, as students do not have to read the same texts, or use the same resources in order to gain experiences and develop relevant skills. As theysee the correlation between text, graphics and sound they are then able to sharpen their creativity skills. The information age university library is a laboratory of learning where abundant information resources in all formats and their accompanying infrastructure are available for exploration and skills development.

Role of Libraries and Librarians in a Knowledge–Based Society

A major method for fighting against social exclusion is education and professional activity. In this context we mean literary and media education at the primary school level, and technological information at higher levels of education. These abilities will enable one to skillfully move through the tangle of information which one encounters during each stage of life.

Undoubtedly, in the field of education libraries find an extremely wide scope for activity. They are suited for this, because "if a well–preserved human thought (output) constitutes a piece of information, disseminating this output will mean disseminating information. The fact that the library cooperates with the development of science, economy, culture and education indicates that via library the information is provided

to the society in need of information. Therefore, the libraries were co–creating the information society long before it started to be associated with particular conceptions of society."

One might think that with new libraries awash in electronic sources of information, as well as a world dominated by common Internet access, a librarian is no longer necessary, because the process of gathering information may be performed automatically. However, this is not true. The amount of information in the world and the speed of information growth in the Internet, with the number of web pages currently estimated at 19 billion, consequently leads to the situation in which searching for information would require a great amount of time. It appears that in order to efficiently find, select, check and make information available, and understand the users' needs, it is not only a matter of a computer program or database being able to provide some sort of condensed data, but also requires an information expert such as a librarian. Throughout the centuries, the librarian's role has remained unchanged; although the tools and resources used to supply required information and transform it into knowledge constantly change. Especially now, the librarian is indispensable. Therefore, it seems necessary to reflect upon the characteristics of a modern librarian that would best serve all users in the era of the information society.

Twenty–first century libraries do not have a lot in common with the traditional model. Their dominant element is no longer books, but electronic sources of information, including electronic documents, databases, Web resources, e–books and virtual libraries. Most library–related processes are now computerized. Technological development has contributed to facilitating access to the information gathered throughout the world. It has changed methods of communication, and consequently it has altered the tasks to be undertaken by modern libraries.

Contemporary libraries should offer a widely–perceived educational activity to provide users with competencies that enable them to interact with humanity's cultural heritage as a means of preventing cultural homogenization in the age of globalization. New technologies have also made cooperation between libraries possible, with the information resources in today's libraries constituting a significant contribution to the informational potential of a society. Information constitutes one of several aspects in the context of fundamental human rights in the information society, so the right to information in the case of groups threatened by exclusion can be a basic one.

Modern libraries could be compared to information malls. Moving around them can cause certain difficulties. A very common phenomenon is that of "library anxiety, " mainly observed in higher education institutions where users feel uncomfortable about their level of knowledge. The main barrier is the fear of embarrassing oneself when asking elementary questions, or getting a negative feedback from a librarian. Another obstacle is a lack of computer proficiency, which renders searching superficial and incomplete. This leads to the perception of the library as an unfriendly place. Therefore, one can obviously conclude that the librarian is an irreplaceable link. In Singapore, a full self–service library was opened with a remote information section and a cyber–librarian, from which one could obtain necessary information at any time. This, however, has not eliminated the service rendered by the librarian. Although invisible to the reader, a librarian actually participates in the process of

searching for information; this brings to mind current hybrid libraries, which combine features of traditional libraries with those using modern technologies. Indeed, we enter the world of "hyper–reality, " with hypertexts, in which an image, a vision, or the play of signs displace real sensations and experiences. In the era of information processing, communication, and the knowledge industry, the librarian participates in building a new society.

Library Scenario in India

The diversity of the Indian library scenario is an important aspect for consideration while speaking about a vision for the 3rd millennium, since different library sectors in India are in various stages of development and no single solution or approach will be relevant in the Indian situation.

Indian library and information sector can be divided into five major areas: the National Library sector; Academic library sector; the Special and Scientific library sector, Government library sector; and the Public library sector due to various factors the scientific and special library sector is much more developed and modernized than the other four sectors.

The challenges which Indian libraries and librarians will encounter in this era are manifold but the most important challenge will be the change in the very nature of libraries and librarians i.e., the libraries must change from collection oriented institutions to service oriented organizations and librarians have to change from custodians of books and documents to information managers and disseminators. In this changing scenario IT will play the most important role. While taking advantage of the different components of information technology the libraries of each sector will have to ensure the following

- Take stock of the actual need of the library and its users;
- Bring about change in the functions of the library to make it service oriented rather than collection oriented;
- Resource sharing and networking of libraries;
- consider both preservation and access as vital components of library service;
- Marketing of information and library services;
- Development of library professionals to cope with the new environment;
- Utilization of management techniques for dealing with the new objectives.

At the decision-making level India will need a National Policy for libraries and information centers within the changed socio-economic environment keeping in mind the new requirements of the different sectors within the field of librarianship. It will now be worthwhile to analyze the present Library and Information scenario before preparing a vision for the new era in each sector of librarianship in India.

Library Networks

Other than INFLIBNET, there are a number of networks which have developed in the

past decade. These are either city networks or activity subject specific networks. Developing Libraries Network (DELNET), Calcutta Library Network (CALIBNET), Madras Library Network (MALIBNET), Management Library Network, etc., are important and useful ventures for networking and resource sharing. Future of Library Development and the Challenges in the new era. The details given above actually picturizes the latest situation encountered by Indian librarianship till the end of the last millennium.

The main challenge in the Indian situation is to visualize the present situation and bring about changes so as to nullify the observations made in the World Information Report, 1997-98, which are as follows

- The bulk of the population is not information-dependent in day-to-day work and living.
- A large proportion of the population cannot consume information, especially if it is delivered in written form.
- The vast majority of the population does not have the means to access information.
- People in general are not accustomed to pay, cannot pay or are unwilling to pay for information. In fact, information does not even figure in their list of wants.
- The existing pattern of economic activities does not favour a growth in information consumption.
- The countries do not have sufficient capacity to invest in infrastructural development

Therefore, the future of Indian librarianship lies in descending from its ivory tower of catering to only a select few and the literate minority and to create a system which will penetrate into the actual information need of the majority of Indian people. So, there has to be a major paradigm shift to deal with the information needs of the vast majority of the population who at present do not have means to access information. Specially, the public library system in the country needs to be rejuvenated and re-modeled to cope with the present situation and the future trends.

There will be need to change the following on a broad-based basis in all types of libraries:

a) Library environment
b) Fragmented and isolated services
c) Organizational structure
d) Library collection
e) Information based infrastructure
f) Information and knowledge management

The first step towards this direction has been taken to a certain extent as the Report of the Working Group of the Planning Commission on Libraries and Informatics for the 9th Five Year Plan 1997-2002 addresses some of the challenges which confront Indian librarianship The Challenges and Risks for Librarians and Information Specialists in the 3rd Millennium The biggest challenge for Indian librarianship is to bring about attitudinal change among both library staff and users.

Libraries and librarians are still the lowest priority in the decision making process and the librarians are the least visible persons. If this main challenge is confronted by librarians and libraries in real earnest it is only then that one can expect all the necessary changes within the system itself.

Libraries will also have to cope with the initiatives developed in the society in the changed IT environment. Libraries can no longer afford to remain institutionalized passive spectators. All the activities will now have to be tailored to give long distance and often home delivered information.

Opportunities and Risks

The new millennium will open up unprecedented opportunities for information professionals. Employers will no longer look for the traditional career requirements but a flexible work force which can take on different roles and responsibilities as and when required. In this context the following changes are to be brought about in India:

- Change the teaching curricula in the field of library and information science.
- Utilize the traditional expertise and apply them effectively in the new situations by understanding the actual requirements and applying these skills.
- Content generation to suit the new fields of study with the help of IT.
- Play the role of information managers by utilizing the new technology to give access to the rich resources available in libraries.

Tomorrows information professionals will be knowledge navigators instead of information collectors. In the Indian situation the new generation of librarians will have to face these challenges and risks to remain in the information business in all the sectors. Inter-changeability and capabilities to adjust from one sector to the other will be the biggest challenge for Indian librarians.

Conclusion

India is on the threshold of major changes which will be possible only if a worthwhile and modern information system is set up at the right time, with the help of right infrastructure and is administered by the right type of qualified people.

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