

Do We Really Need Libraries In The Digital Era: An Analytical Study

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Abstract:

In traditional sense, most libraries serve as huge storages of books and materials from different age. The internet's gain in stature as an information resource has been the librarian's loss. The internet itself is becoming user friendly, the user has to have some familiarity with the technology/search mechanism. It is not necessary that he should be a very good programmer but he should know the basics of internet searching to retrieve the relevant information. No knowledge pre-requisite is needed to use a library. This article describes about whether the internet can replace a librarian.

Keywords: Library – Internet - Librarians

Introduction

The internet's gain in stature as an information resource has been the librarian's loss. After all, the library isn't the first place most people think of when they need digital gateway to information.

“ The public focus has swiveled to the internet and away from libraries”, sad Donna Dinberg of the National Library of Canada. While interest in the library help desk is declining, free commercial web services such as Google, Ask etc., are thriving. With all these commercial online reference services, will the libraries/librarians become obsolete?

According to the Association of Research Libraries, University of Virginia Library, the number of reference queries handled by librarians has declined over the past two years. That decline can in part be attributed to the internet. There is no arguing that the internet has dramatically changed the complexion of providing reference and information services. The impact of the internet on the consumption of information is nothing short of staggering. But can everything be located on the internet negating the need to employ librarians? The

explosion of internet has led many budget cutters to replace people with technology. But could an internet and other intelligent software agent do what, say, a librarian do?

It would be virtually impossible for the internet to replace librarians for several reasons. In practice, a librarian has traditionally meant, “friendly, helpful, knowledgeable person”. They are information therapists who analyze problems as well as find answers.

A skilled librarian can focus the search and other possible areas of interest to patrons. This occurs through artful conversations that librarians call “reference interviews”, which would be impossible to duplicate or at least time consuming and incomplete if done through keyword search.

Librarians can seek information even when their patron’s can’t figure out just what they want. A management consultant described how he needed to get a feel for the size of a new industry; whether it’s smaller than a bread pocket, bigger than a house – just size it. Perhaps someday internet/software will exist that can evaluate such a request. But not today. Librarians understand that information wears all sorts of disguises - as financial data, scientific articles, analyst reports, news, product reviews, standards and patents, just to name a few. Unlike internet, librarians can judge the reliability of sources, estimate and find materials with a particular slant or perspective. They also think of useful things that the patrons wouldn’t think of themselves.

Another service that would be impossible for the internet to perform is to read and weed out, what librarians call ‘false drops’ or ‘junk’, citations that technically match search criteria but actually have nothing to do with the patron’s needs. Not having to slog through, there is a blessing for busy people trying to compete in today’s competitive world. But perhaps, the most valuable service, the librarians perform is to act as guides to the information niches in cyberspace. Librarians were among the earliest computer users even creating of the first international standards for databases, so that bibliographic data could be transferred around the world. Because of their experience with technology and information searches, librarians can quickly adjust to the rapidly changing landscape of internet resources and online databases.

Unlike the average cyberland, librarians understand when a database is returning noisy results because it has not been updated or the index terms have changed. They are also able to save

patron's money using the most cost-effective databases and by using the right combination of keywords to focus a search.

Library Vs. Internet : *Information Retrieval*

We all know that one of the biggest problems on the internet is finding out what we actually want. One can think of the internet searching as dumpster-driving for information. There just might be something will be there, but one has to dig through the garbage to find out. It's so hard to know that one might find and what is missing?

There are many other deceptions lying internet retrievals. One of which we the librarian are familiar is the spelling problem. We all know that many users can't spell and also make keyboarding mistakes. When the user is doing a keyword entry, this makes a huge difference. The additional problem on the internet is the difference between US and UK English. Unlike internet, the librarian will be able to provide relevant information even the patron's misspells the word.

Library Vs. Internet : *Cost*

The cost of the entry on to information super highway is still quite high. Internet/database feed will remain beyond the reach of some of our population. There is no entry fee for the public library. Infact, the library can come to the patron in the form of mobile libraries.

Library Vs. Internet : *Knowledge pre-requisites*

There are knowledge pre-requisites to using the internet. For all that the internet itself is becoming user friendly, the user has to have some familiarity with the technology/search mechanism. It is not necessary that he should be a very good programmer but he should know the basics of internet searching to retrieve the relevant information. No knowledge pre-requisite is needed to use a library.

Library Vs. Internet: *Authentication*

Net document continue to have authentication problem. Most do not have an author or last revision date and there is no guarantee that name is the actual author. But in libraries, the user can get only the authenticated information.

Library Vs Internet : *Privacy*

Every time the user browses web page, every time he clicks on link, a log entry is made on that site detailing that his/her computer has accessed that particular file or link on that date at that time. Those free registrations on the web are ways to link his/her accesses to a particular identity, mainly for the purpose of gathering demographic information for the site's advertisers. And the major thing is the cookies. These are small files that a web site can write to the user's hard drive and that it can read each time he/she returns again linking his web activity to an identity.

Libraries protect patron's privacy and confidentiality. In fact, the patrons don't know that the libraries /librarians are guarding their freedom to read

Conclusion

The Library or the Internet??

It is not an either/or. The library and the internet need to coexist because they each have something to offer. As a matter of fact, the combination of the library and the internet can give us a great information system.

Consider the internet in comparison to all the appliances in a kitchen. The internet might best be compared to the microwave oven. There are something it does quite well and almost without exception faster than traditional methods. However, one can use it to bake bread, cake, grill meat or make coffee or course not with the same taste. It adds to the convenience of food preparation, but it is not intended in any way to replace an oven. We continue to need and use food processors, toasters and other modern gadgets, which in tandem with the microwave oven make out lives much more convenient. Convenience is a word often applied to the internet, so this is a good analogy.

Libraries have always had a hard time providing access to very up-to-date or fast challenging information. There is information that changes so often that the user can't even get it to paper. Thus our reliance on radio and television for news and weather etc., are ideal for this kind of information.

Libraries are able to help people to find information they need by tailoring information access systems to the local user community. The question, 'Why is the sky blue,' have different meaning to a child than to an astrophysicist, but a computer can't make that distinction.

The library can provide the context and background for the current events that are delivered over the computer. The library and the internet need to be connected by their hyperlinks that allow users to move from the latest news to the many centuries of history and thought that have preceded this moment. And we still need libraries. Although, the internet look attractive, it alone cannot replace libraries. But rather complements them as one more potential information resources.

Nothing can replace advice from a live human being who knows the strengths of a particular library and who has helped hundreds of patrons like YOU!!

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