

Libraries—Perspective and Prospects

Aparajita Suman

Manager, Information and Content Delivery, Indigene Pharmaceuticals, Hyderabad

ABSTRACT

The tremendous growth in the area of information technology has revolutionised the potential of information access and dissemination. Information professionals are now able to use more sophisticated tools to communicate with the users and fellow professionals. The development of information technology tools and their widespread use has lead to a basic question: whether information professionals are out of business, do we still need libraries and librarians? The article attempts to answer these questions.

1. INTRODUCTION

Information technology (IT) is becoming the nervous system of physical world, though it has not replaced it totally. The implications of the tremendous growth of IT are being felt in the area of information accessing as well as in the dissemination. Although present libraries are able to support the hybrid environment, but a gradual shift to digital from paper and other tangible formats has already begun.

Information professionals today have more sophisticated tools to communicate with the users and fellow professionals. But the problem now on their hand is of diverse groups with diverse needs; one publication or media format cannot meet the needs of all. *Critics feel that with the development of IT tools and their widespread use, information professionals are out of business. On the contrary, the professionals are in for a bigger role now: reaching out to support the collective cognition of particular communities.* They will require systems to support the creation, circulation, and transformation of particular genres of materials, setting up and configuration of mailing lists or more sophisticated tools for shared thinking. The

idea will be to enable, both face-to-face and remote assistance. The need of an information-based profession has never been felt more than before in this information-driven economy.

2. FUTURE LIBRARIES: CHALLENGES GALORE

Challenges facing library and information science (LIS) profession are both multifaceted as well as multi-natured. Lack of resources, constant change, need for flexibility and effective communication are some of the challenges galore for LIS personnel. Earlier, the nature of information services used to be purely service-based with philanthropic approach, but that is not the case now. The need for marketing the library and information services has added an interesting angle to this whole gamut.

The present technology enables wide-based communication. There is no agreement on how the libraries of the future will be? Will these have an actual physical existence or will these be a virtual site only? Some are of the opinion that it may turn out to be the latest technology that will enable sharing of information!

A high expectation from information professionals adds to the problem, they are expected to do too much—to be too many things to too many people. Although present technology enables wide-based communication but the cost of implementing new technology delivery channels is very expensive. The new forms of 'electronic broadside' have moved beyond the elite. Now, millions are able to communicate with their peers and friends using blogs, wikis as well as a large number of personal websites. At the same time, there is a tremendous increase in the number of e-journals and e-books. But these have hardly served as 'saviour for libraries concerned with STM fields' and are not emerging as a replacement for print journals. Rather these are sought in addition to their printed cousins. Therefore, concept of true 'free electronic distribution' continues to be at least partly a myth.

The specific challenges that the future libraries will face can be enlisted as:

2.1 Emerging Information Access Technologies

Librarians have been pioneers in adopting new technologies for the betterment of services, but the scenario now is very volatile. A quick search for new technologies on popular search engines yields thousands of results. But the irony is that these headlines, books and articles become part of the past the instant its successor comes. So, the follow up and updation becomes very difficult.

2.2 Dynamic Resources

The resources have become dynamic also. These change as and when new ideas and new technologies emerge. For that reason, librarians need to visit the websites of core publications and professional organisations, so that one is updated for the most current information. To meet the challenges future will bring, libraries need to identify critical issues, formulate a vision for future, make strategic choices, and create a plan to meet each system's unique situation.

2.3 Increasing Volume of Information

With the arrival of new information and communication technology, the creation of new digital information and instructional objects has become very easy. Web publishing has allowed to express views, but has created the problem of establishing credibility of information before putting it to use. The amount of information being generated is such that it is impossible to even try to acquire all of it. Libraries are, therefore, grappling with the load of managing the information. To handle the situation, libraries have started supporting new directions in scholarly communication like open-access publishing and self-archiving partnerships between libraries, university presses, publishers, software developers, and the creation of institutional repositories.

2.4 Increasing Cost of Information

Libraries are experiencing record increase in the cost of scholarly information, with six to twelve per cent annual inflation in the prices of journals alone. Besides, libraries have an imperative to invest in technology infrastructure to support the delivery of digital contents, and to create high-tech, user-friendly environment.

Also, libraries are always under considerable pressure to reduce staff while increase the services and access. How are we going to address these changes?

2.5 Changing Information Culture

Information is an idea that builds a bridge between the states of artifacts and meanings in people's lives. It implies that not only the users' needs, but also the way in which they access information are changing gradually. Earlier, libraries used to organise orientation programmes to make the user 'information literate', and 'information competency' used to be the exclusive domain of LIS professionals. But now the scene has changed, the term 'information fluency' is now being used to describe the set of lifelong learning skills. A new trend has picked up with the advent of information economy; information-searching skills are not only limited to information

professionals even information users are finding these useful.

Therefore, libraries will have to metamorphose from storehouses and study halls to networks and services that support an evolving curriculum and pedagogy at the same time.

2.6 Changing Face of Libraries

Future libraries are going to cross beyond the walls and reach users. Successful libraries, therefore, will have to make their own luck. Instead of being apprehensive about the many changes they face, librarians should take an active role in dealing with them. *The ideal approach would be the one that uses technology to enhance the value found in buildings, print materials, and knowledgeable staff.*

3. IT TOOLS: POSSIBLE IMPLICATIONS FOR LIBRARIES & LIBRARIANS

Libraries will have to modify their mission in order to survive in the digital age. Librarians have to be diligent and thoughtful in all that they now propose to do in future. Judicious use of IT tools along with following organising principles and transformative actions can offer a hopeful future:

- ✕ Libraries have to be user-friendly as more and more library systems evolve. The metadata and data mining concepts will be of highest influence. The technological infrastructure needs to be developed in libraries to be more efficient and able to access information in all types of media. For this purpose, professionals need not have an in-depth knowledge of the computer technologies but should know enough to use the technology for gathering and disseminating the required information
- ✕ The future libraries will combine the best of print and digital resources. Libraries have to employ multiple instructional strategies such as technology-based formats, learning communities, residencies, experimental/service learning,

learning with peers, and individual learning. The relative roles of electronic communication and non-electronic communication (print, sound recordings, film/video, etc.) have to be defined clearly. Electronic methods have to be used for 'housekeeping' and for giving access to data and small discrete packets of textual, numeric, and visual information (such as those found in many reference works). Print-on-paper is and will be the pre-eminent medium for the communication of cumulative knowledge

- ✕ The future of collection development is unclear because nowadays professionals are concentrating more on buying access than on building archives of print resources. But another facet of the same issue is the cooperative funding of large digital archives. For the purpose, five technologies, viz., search engine capabilities, web TV, push technologies, electronic commerce, and connected CD and DVD use are going to play important role in near future
- ✕ Librarians will have to transform their own roles and units to make significant contributions to the transformation of their parent institutions. The proposed changes will give libraries an opportunity to restructure their organisations around partnerships with other professionals and with other institutions also. This will help in developing new learning environments, teaching methods, resources, and technologies. Even organisational systems need to be transformed. This includes how and what they count, how they reward and allocate, whom they serve, what they provide, and how they are structured to do this. The transformations have become mandatory in changing scenario and work towards the benefit of both library and its users
- ✕ Libraries have to evolve as a gateway/portal to digital information, regardless of their location. Libraries must formulate effective acquisition and license policies in relation to digital information, and ensure that their users can access all the

information that they need for their studies or research. However, this transformation will require strong leadership, risk taking, and a revolutionary vision

In addition to points discussed above, reference librarians and information specialists need to review what is available in the area of digital information and then accordingly adjust acquisitions to demand. Being able to adjust supply and demand should result in making effective decisions about which digital information should be acquired under license, and which should not.

Libraries are in a unique position to contribute leadership, ideas, and skills to the transformation where institutions will be looking for ideas and models to deal with the problems.

Following trend-setting models can be followed to affect both the design and delivery of library and information services in virtual mode:

- ✕ Continuing consortial efforts and remote storage
- ✕ Buying materials 'just in case', rather than 'just in time'
- ✕ Believing digital is 'just another format'
- ✕ Streamlining existing processes and eliminating work that can be outsourced or given up
- ✕ Developing robust collaborative frameworks for the management, access, and preservation of information resources in all formats
- ✕ Bringing about significant changes to the scholarly communication process, copyright laws, licensing practices of information vendors, and intellectual property policies
- ✕ Instead of being a hoarder of information containers, the libraries must become the facilitator of retrieval and disseminator of the same
- ✕ Empowering individuals to work more independently, cooperating with each other to develop shared print repositories, working with vendors to

receive shelf-ready books, increasing the amount of information available electronically, and reducing staff at service points. The transformation will create new environments and resources for learning, scholarly communication, and information access

Libraries have to be prepared to invest in human resources if they want high-quality, flexible staff. To meet the demands of new information-based economy, libraries have to make sure that their staff have sufficient possibilities to acquire new knowledge and skills in the area of information provision. Information professionals should understand that they need relevant information to be effective in their positions and that practical up-to-date information is readily and openly shared at conferences, in publications, listservs, and websites.

One of the biggest challenges over the next five years will be to attract new professionals to replace the retiring ones. New-age librarians are expected to organise and validate the flood of information and serve as conduit for users to gather and analyse the information they receive. Lifelong learning activities need to be encouraged at the same time because librarians serve as a key point of contact in gathering of the information. They require skills in training adults and young people alike and at the same time continue to upgrade their skills to be on top of the technology. This becomes mandatory for those who work on the front line.

Librarians need to think of innovative ways of service delivery, viz., extensive online tutorials and the use of online chat programs for orienting the users for using the digital resources. Virtual or online reference services provide individual help at the time of need, no matter where a user is located. The motto becomes: *servicing information wherever it occurs; whenever required.*

Information professional needs the skill set for future in his/her armory. The ability to guide, both as a leader and a follower is desired because librarians need to be flexible

and able to adjust priorities. The understanding of organisational and personal core capabilities is also essential.

The need to understand that information management extends far beyond the stewardship of traditional print collections; in future it is going to include provision of intellectual control, standards, and lasting digital environments for a universe of materials that were previously outside the library's purview. The resource list now includes locally created learning objects, pre-prints, research reports, data sets, gray literature, and institutional data. *This change in focus is not a choice for libraries, but an imperative.* The libraries will still have to maintain unique and wonderful special collections, but our primary investments for the future are going to be in access systems.

LIS professionals will serve the mission, rather than a specific job description. They will have to train themselves to fit in the new roles as knowledge managers and help in creating an enterprise-wide knowledge management system.

4. CONCLUSION

When we look into the future world, it appears to be more dependent on libraries, but not the libraries of today, rather transformed libraries built with a shared vision. This is because libraries will involve citizens in planning and delivery of information and learning services; they will provide local and virtual space for research, education and problem-solving; and will be responsive to the information and learning needs of each local community.

Way to think about information is the professional objective of librarianship. Every profession has its object: for law everything is a case, for medicine everything is a disease, and for librarianship everything is information.

Tomorrow's libraries will have to change their role from "information storehouse" to "idea stores", complete with cafés, crèches and multimedia offerings.

Libraries in the future will be accessible to all who wish to use them. Collections, online information, learning services, public programmes, and public space will be accessible to all without the limitations of their location, hours, availability of support services, languages, formats and contents. Libraries of the future will be available to people at home, in the community, and in the workplace as well as in traditional main and branch library buildings, and will serve as centres for the communication of ideas, needs and resources, both locally and world-wide. The future for libraries have not been so bright before. The LIS professionals just need to see far and take up the challenges to demonstrate the benefits of digital information. They need to revolutionise their own professional training even if it requires turning their own field upside down.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. [Http://www.libr.org/PL/12-13_Agre.html](http://www.libr.org/PL/12-13_Agre.html) (visited on 25.10.2005)
2. <http://www.metronet.lib.mn.us/forlibs.cfm?id=176> (visited on 15.09.2005)
3. <http://www.library.ca.gov/LDS/refrenda/> (Visited on 15.5.06)
4. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/2859845.stm> (visited on 11.11.2005)
5. <http://cites.boisestate.edu/v5i11c.htm> (visited on 08.11.2005)
6. de Stricker, Ulla. New information technologies: Possible implications for libraries. *Computers in Libraries*, 1998, 18(2), 61-65.
7. <http://www.lff.org/> (visited on 11.11.2005)