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Abstract

In the face of need, libraries have learned that in order to survive they must evolve if they are to remain in existence. As a result libraries as a whole have received an overhaul in regard to image, role, content, and a variety of other aspects. One of the most noticeable changes in recent years has occurred with the aspect of collection development. Collections are transitioning from print to digital. The transition is, for the most part, good and inevitable. As a service provider though, it is important to evaluate this transition from an ethical standpoint. This paper seeks to discuss the way in which the transition to digital collections has resulted in inaccessibility for some patrons.

*Keyword*s: collection development, ethics, equitable access, digital collections

LEAVE NO PATRON BEHIND

Introduction

Library professionals worldwide understand that the basis of a collection is to serve a community and its needs, whatever those needs may be. As a result, libraries are like a living organism--ever changing to grow along with a community and serve its needs. This could mean a number of things for libraries depending on the community. For some it may require a change in the library's content, but for others it may actually require a change in the format of materials. There is no denying that our current culture is dependent upon technology. We see evidence of it every day: almost the entire country seems to have a phone held to its head, or a laptop perched upon its lap. It is because of this that libraries are undergoing a complicated transition from that of housing strictly print and tangible collections to offering completely digital, or at the least hybrid, collections. This switch is inevitable. For the most part it is welcome and anticipated by many patrons. It is wonderful that libraries are able to fulfill those users' needs. There is a lingering question though, of whether or not certain groups of users are being left behind in this switch. It is arguable that the shift from traditional library collections to digital collections has certain unethical implications in that certain groups of users may be inhibited from being able to access a library's collection. The job of the library in this situation however, is to appeal to the majority of its community, but still reach out to the minority.

Building a Collection

Creating a collection for a library is, simply put, incredibly complicated. It would be wrong for library professionals to assume that users everywhere need the same types of resources. In an ideal world, library staff would be able to do a community analysis then develop a collection based on those needs. That is not the case, however:

Unfortunately we do not live in an ideal world, or even in a world in which ideal concepts are easily applied. Most public libraries have more than one audience. In fact, almost every public librarian could likely identify five, or even ten, disparate intended users of the library's services. Therefore, a public library collection cannot meet only the needs of one single audience. In its mere existence as a publicly supported institution, the public library must be held accountable to multiple users and *non*users alike (Disher, pg 3).

Instead, it is safer to commit to collection principles. In fact, one only needs to elore a library's website, or ask a librarian, in order to find out what the collection principles (or collection policy) are. While the items acquired by libraries will differ, a few collection principles tend to remain constant. One example is to anticipate the needs of different audiences. Most libraries realize this and create multiple collections within one institution:

Libraries today have a variety of 'collections'. The most obvious is the collection of tangible objects that the library owns and houses. There is also the universe of such collections owned by other libraries to which the library has access by means of union catalogues, inter-library lending programs, document delivery processes, etc. Then there are the intangible objects (electronic documents and resources) for which the library pays (by subscription or otherwise). Lastly there is the universe of intangible documents that are available to the library and its users by means of the computer access provided by the library (Gorman as cited by Clarke, 2011).

Another thing to keep in mind is that "libraries are institutions with a long-term perspective and collections are built up not only for immediate use but also to meet future needs" (Lor, 2011). This is another crucial collection principle to follow. Combine these two principles,

and what is left is a commitment to creating collections that serve the needs of many now and into the future. This is why many libraries are transitioning to digital or hybrid formats. Digital and hybrid formats are found appealing for a number of reasons. One reason is that they are easier to physically maintain. Digital collections will not mold, have pages torn out, get broken spines, or be spilled upon. Another reason is that they are easier to update. To update a digital collection one must still perform a type of weeding process, but it is not as manually intensive as it would be to update a print collection. Finally, another example of their appeal is that they can be utilized by more than one user at a time whereas the use of print items is limited to the number of copies. Going digital seems logical if a library wants to remain a relevant resource to its users.

After a library has decided how to go about building its collection, the next important step is to ensure access to it. After all, what use is a library if it cannot be utilized? The term "access" is very broad. It could refer to whether or not patrons can physically get to the collection,. It could also whether or not relevant information is being supplied for use. Regardless of the use of this term, library professionals have enacted a code of ethics that serve as a basis for all action within a library.

Factoring in Ethics

Library professionals follow a code of ethics provided by the American Library Association (ALA). The first part of this code states, "We [library professionals] provide the highest level of service to all library users through appropriate and usefully organized resources; equitable service policies; equitable access; and accurate, unbiased, and courteous responses to all requests" (ALA website). In regard to the argument being made about the accessibility of digital collections, the focus within this point is on providing service and equitable access. The

topic of equitable access has been one of concern for some time:

>Equality of access, as one of the core values of the library profession, can be traced back to the very beginnings of the public library movement in the UK, following the European enlightenment movement. The fundamental Enlightenment ideals which saw reason, knowledge and education as progressive forces of society underpinned very much the conceptualization of the public library and framed the Public Libraries Act of 1850 in Britain. It was also these ideals which lent legitimacy for public libraries to be supported by public funding and to be open, at least in theory, to all (Black as cited by Clarke, 2011).

As libraries have evolved, so have ideas about access. This may not seem problematic at first, but as many library professionals know, there are always unforeseen roadbumps. Michael Gorman expands upon this idea by elaborating on S. R. Ranganathan's Five Laws of Library Science. What Ranganathan essentially said was this, "every reader his book" (as cited by Clarke), which means "that collections should be developed to appeal to all areas of society and as many individual tastes as possible" (Clarke, 2011). Michael Gorman's expansion includes "equality of access to recorded knowledge and information' which involves 'ensuring that all library resources are accessible to all overcoming technological and monetary barriers to access" (Gorman as cited by Clarke, 2011). Where before it just meant ensuring that patrons were able to find their print materials, now it also includes ensuring that they are able to access digital materials.

>Technological and monetary barriers are incredibly problematic in regard to digital collections. This shift in technology has affected many users. As library professionals it is important to recognize this, and propose solutions to ease the transition.

A New Way to Access Information

Web 2.0 has fundamentally changed the way users retrieve information, and accordingly changed the ways in which they perceive and utilize library resources.

Consider one facet of information retrieval: journals. With the introduction of online journals and plaintext databases, the printing of journals has vastly declined.[1] This is of no surprise, considering that since 1999 the online journal has replaced the print journal as a desired means of accessing the information contained within even when both alternatives are offered, with one minority exception being academic faculty, who still slightly prefer print journals.[2] The Web 2.0 technologies behind the online plaintext databases, not to mention the various individual subscriptions, package subscriptions and aggregators, are preferred over physical plant access and loaning.

Statistics indicate a preference for online information retrieval. Between 2002 and 2004 alone the average number of transactions at American libraries declined 2.2%.[3] The University of California Library system saw a decline of 54% in circulation through the 1990s to 2000s of 8,377,000 to 3,832,00 books.[4] Libraries have attempted to cope with these changes by digitizing their collections and contributing to OPAC, but as usage continues to decline so does funding. Cornell University, facing budget cuts to library funding, recently sold off 95,000 print duplicates to Tsinghua University in Beijing. Doing so freed up space, stabilized the funding crisis and expanded access to digital collections.[5] Other libraries have redistributed their resources to become completely digital in hopes of cutting losses, doing away with their physical collections entirely.[6] In many ways the days of print appear numbered, a situation only exacerbated by the looming economic crisis which falls the hardest on educational institutions. Libraries are finding a compromise between losing their collections entirely or keeping them and

cutting other portions of the budget: digitizing. The future of our discipline may involve adopting

the interactive technologies and "findability" (to mime Morville) of a Wikipedia with the

wisdom and professionalism of librarianship.

One 2006 study indicated that 70% of college freshmen, 60% of sophomores, 72% of

juniors 63% of seniors and 75% of graduate students conducted a remote search (Google,

Wikipedia etc) rather than go to a physical place (library) or ask a person for assistance in

answering a research question. Subsequent attempts at information retrieval were even less likely

to involve a visit to a library with the exception of graduate students: while 19% preferred a

library as their first place to go for information retrieval, 21% preferred a library for a subsequent

attempt.[7] A 2007 study indicated that only 2% of students surveyed visited a library for research,

although 23% did visit a library website.[8] Other resources filling the gap included asking

professors, consulting course materials, using Wikipedia and search engines. These trends are

even more pronounced when referring to the general end-user population not involved in

academia, who tend to be outdated, negative or confusing perceptions of the "library," ignorant

to the vast electronic and multimedia resources many libraries now offer. [9] This demonstrates a

general disenchantment and uncertainty about using library resources, as well as a general

disinterest in visiting physical plants. The convenience of online research prevails over whatever

expertise could be offered locally as it lies outside of the realm of perception.

While libraries had in previous decades met the local needs of the community with

excellence, today they struggle to adapt to our new Web 2.0 world. Herein is a story of many

libraries across the nation, who waylaid by the lightning tempo of technological trends, must

offer new services on increasingly limited budgets, and adapt traditional methodologies to new

norms or else lose their utility altogether.[10] It is not enough in our day, as we will see, to perform

the legacy functions of a library: house and maintain physical collections of records. These anachronistic institutions are dissolving, changing their fundamental nature or closing their doors to the public. The story of the local library is a story of our times, a reflection on how changing technology has possessed and manacled our actions to novel expectations.[11]

<div align="center">How Patrons Get Left Behind</div>

Yet while digital access and Web 2.0 technologies are trending and have captivated a new generation, a thorn remains in the side of the public good. A barrier exists between new and increasingly standardized digital information sources and the patrons who are want to use them, often due to socio-economic and educational reasons. Herein lies the concept of the "digital divide," and it is responsible for leaving a notable minority of patrons behind.

The digital divide manifests in a number of complex and often interconnected ways. At the most elemental level the digital divide can imply inequality amongst a population in lack of access to computer equipment, internet and the ability to use such systems.[12] In this sense those who have access to technology systems profit and are able to enjoy digital collections, while those who lack such means often find themselves on the outside. Yet the digital divide has also been called an indicator of more complex social issues: poverty, racism and inequity. Lisa Servon (2002) argues that the digital divide is not merely a technical hurdle to overcome, but is married with the development of the greater society's welfare. Servon contends that the digital divide is a superficial aspect that accompanies generalized social ills.[13]

The digital divide has also had different treatment historically. When the term came into fashion during the Clinton administration and implied basic gaps in access to technology within the United States, by the time of the George W Bush administration the digital divide being referred to as a global, international issue between nations and within the scope of globalization.

While the national dialogue (and the literature) may have shifted to this context, the digital

divide continues to persist as an American problem and is leaving patrons behind, even in a post

E-Rate (Schools and Libraries Program of the Universal Service Fund) society. Indeed, while E-

Rate funding helped boost public school access to internet services from 14 to 95% from 1996-

2005, low socio-economic status communities continue to suffer from lack of access.[14] It must

also be noted that where internet and computer access is made available students often lack the

skills, particularly in regard to information retrieval, to use the technology properly. This is

another major facet of the digital divide; the gap does not strictly limit itself to material

deprivations, but also inability to use information technologies. This latter problem manifests

itself significantly with the older generations, and that demographic requires the attention of

various educational institutions (including libraries) to aid in information literacy in order to

ensure enduring access. These points will now be examined at some depth; it will be

demonstrated that the digital divide, contrary to contemporary political rhetoric, still is an

eminent issue in contemporary American society. And whereas the digital divide is eminent, so

is poor access to digital collections.

One way in which the digital divide is still alive and well is in public schools. A recent

study found that 58% of schools restrict internet and computer access to class assignments, while

78% were found to have been using filters to restrict access to any non-school related websites.[15]

Such a restrictive access to information surely tends to stifle information literacy, especially for

those from lower socio-economic strata who might very well not have access to computers at

home, the means to visit a library or otherwise be impeded from accessing information

elsewhere. To compound matters while computer and internet technology has become prolific in

the public school systems, information literacy and information retrieval skills amongst students

are abysmal.[16] While the new generation has embraced interactive social media services, they

have trouble differentiating trustworthy information sources from hogwash, and often do not

understand how to navigate the digital world. While Dresang (2005) argues that this may be due

to poor information system design and a failure of librarians and information specialists to cater

to the Web 2.0 generation's preferences, it still stands to reason that many students are incapable

of using information technology properly.[17] This speaks to the need of librarians to act as

educators and leaders in information literacy and is a realistic way in which we can minimize the

digital divide. Indeed, empowering patrons to embrace self-learning may be the key to

overcoming individual lapses in information skills for those who otherwise have access to

technology but are unable to use it properly.[18]

Yet another way in which the digital divide continues to plague our country is in poverty

stricken, non-white and non-English speaking communities. Kinney (2010) found a growing

disparity in lack of computer and internet technology within such communities.[19] Martin and

Robinson (2007)'s findings corroborate Kinney, also finding *increasing* inequality amongst

lower economic strata in regard to internet and computer use.[20] While explosive penetration of

internet and computer services was observed during the E-Rate years, such expansion has

quickly slowed in the past five years, leaving millions of Americans without access to computers

and internet technology, only exacerbated by contemporary economic downturns. Furthermore:

"While income inequalities among PC owners (households) have decreased between 1994 and

2001 in all regions and states, the magnitude of this inequality has declined more rapidly among

whites compared to African Americans."[21] Technological inequality continues to be prevalent in

rural areas and in particular the American south, with 50% of country people making less than

$30,000 per year, and being distanced more so from libraries and higher education institutions

than those living in metropolitan centers.[22] One way in which the digital divide can be bridged is

to appropriate public funds to create public computer centers in key areas which suffer from such

inequality, as was successful in at least one case study, amidst a variety of other solutions that

are outside the scope of this paper.[23]

A key group which is afflicted by the digital divide is older adults (aged 60-88). A recent

study found that only 50.7% of older adults used the internet.[24] A marked trend for

communication rather than information retrieval presents in older adults, often compounded by

poor health. In communities with a high proportion of older adults, digital collections are clearly

out of place, as virtually half of the patron base does not use the internet or have familiarity with

computer systems, to say nothing of something as complex as navigating through a digital

library. Such a figure puts the libraries which have completely digitized their collections into a

stark and illuminating light: these institutions have potentially disenfranchised a huge portion of

their patrons. As with students, older adults must be mentored toward embracing proper

information retrieval methods, and yet this issue returns to the central thesis of Servon, that

greater society ills underpin the digital divide; poor health encumbers the access of some older

adults. Another prominent issue affecting the elderly is a lack of information literacy amongst

females; males are significantly more apt to use digital resources while females tend to exhibit

disinterest or inability in using such technologies.[25] While research shows that older adults are

enthusiastic about information literacy, in that "they preferred to learn more about the Internet if

such classes were offered at convenient locations," it stands to reason that there is still an extant

large portion of seniors (over 50%) who are unable to properly access digital information

systems.[26] These factors must be considered in the face of any serious push toward digital

collection development.

Discussion

The continuing prevalence of a digital divide amongst the lower economic strata, as well as amongst the elderly reveals the fallacy of the fad. Because digital access has been heralded by information specialists as the wave of the future we often fallaciously assume that the vast majority of patrons are capable or even interested in accessing information the way we intend to present it. Unfortunately this fallacy has informed the logic behind funding decisions in contemporary years, essentially prioritizing digital services over traditional library services and collections. With new services offering unique functionality over traditional media, and often being produced in an exclusive manner, we run the risk of disenfranchising millions of Americans from access. Accordingly digital collection development must be considered against a myriad of factors, most prominent of which are   demographics, means and type of patron present in the community.

Digital access may be an attractive option for information specialists, but it often is prohibitive to a community with varied socio-economic strata. Ultimately digital collection development is not always a wise course of action and is best utilized as a companion rather than a replacement for more conventional media. In the contemporary age the librarian can help alleviate the digital divide by continuing the push for public computer access at our institutions, furthering educational initiatives to empower and not program our patrons, lobbying for allocation of public funds to alleviate the social ills alluded to by Servon and by being a keen observer of surroundings. While librarians cannot solve the entirety of the social issues which facilitate the digital divide, we can at least do a small part to assuage it, within our own domain.

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