FACILITATING ACCESS TO INFORMATION IN A MODERN INFORMATION SOCIETY

Merely pointing someone at information is not enough in today’s society to be considered facilitating access. Libraries and librarians should facilitate access/instructions with technology, training, and counselors to achieve the desired access. To meet the changing needs of the modern information society, libraries and librarians should consider establishing and building business networks that enhance and engage the community – a modern information-based “mesh” business. Libraries and librarians have an opportunity to integrate more deeply within their communities while facilitating broader access to information through the creation of adjacent centers of information counsel and partnerships. This could lead to additional sources of revenue, possible increased utilization of the library’s physical resources and buildings, and enhanced community engagement.

One of the persistent challenges of today’s society is in managing information. Numerous techniques have arisen as librarians have sought to keep up with the volume of information created and made available to consumers. Traditional media (print, photo, video) forms have given risen to whole new classes of media (blogs, tweets, web pages, social, etc.) which have multiplied the quantity of information to be managed and maintained. These new formats and technologies have led to yet more varied and novel mechanisms to access this data, which in turn give rise to new techniques in cataloging and accessing that information. At the moment, it falls to the library and the librarians to teach patrons to use those technologies and to successfully access the information sought, rather than the users receiving formal training by the school systems in bibliographic methods and utilities. Training and advising in using these new
information access techniques and content types establishes the library as a ‘one stop shop’ - the place where information seekers will come to have their questions answered. This will create and deepen the social linkages between the seekers and those that facilitate the access to that information. This creates an opportunity where the library can foster a role of ‘Information Counsel’ to the users; and possibly establish a side business of providing storefront space to one or more information counsels as a means to deepen that engagement within the community.

In “This Book is Overdue”, M. Johnson points out how the librarian showed her the technique needed to save content as a web page, a process of which the author was totally ignorant even existed. (Johnson, 2010, p. 18) This is a simple example of the idea that librarians will teach the tactics of accessing information in the form of technology and techniques. The does not imply that libraries will taking over the position of teaching; even school teachers can teach an entire subject but not always to an expert level. And it is not a new idea: as early as 1982, C. Dusenbury made the statement that:

"The realm of the teacher is the content of the discipline; the bibliography of the discipline is the realm of the librarian. It is the content that is different, not that one group teaches and the other does not. Librarians are the logical candidates to teach the subject of bibliographical control. Instruction in the types of sources should be a progressive process at all educational levels". (Dusenbury, 1982, p. 102)

An essay by Gardner, Napier, & Carpenter, (Reinventing Library Spaces and Services: Harnessing Campus Partnerships to Initiate and Sustain Transformational Change, 2013) suggests that colocation of various consultative “storefronts” could increase the level of service provided by the library and increase the level of usage by that society. Gardner, et al. use the example of the planning undergone by the Noel Writing Center and the campus library at Eastern Kentucky University. After relocating the writing center from across the campus to the
basement of the library, the writing center transformed from a mere supporting role to one of “enacting institutional mission” (Gardner, et al., p144). This was not just a simple move across campus; the writing center adapted its offerings to suit the changing pedagogical needs of the students as the curriculum changed from an individual assignment style to one that was more group assignment and creatively focused. This shift meant that the writing center moved closer to the center of academic life, pedagogically speaking:

“Utilizing creative campus partnerships, alliances, and mergers, libraries can move from a traditional role to a more participatory role that actively engages a university’s academic mission. Libraries, as centralized, politically neutral hubs for information, can serve as catalysts for collaborative planning that paves the way for creating innovative campus spaces and services in conjunction with other academic or general campus units”. (Gardner, Napier, & and Carpenter, 2013, p. 135)

The library’s role in a modern information society is expanding to encompass new duties and responsibilities on the part of the librarian, while slowly discarding some of the traditional ones. The shift from managing a physical information collection to a hybridized form of physical books and periodicals, combined with digital items of photographs and videos (part of the internal library collection) and electronic versions of books, periodicals, journals, photos, videos, etc., (the external collection) mirrors the changes within society at large. As an example, the high-tech industry often talks about “the journey to the cloud”. In this context, the reference is to a business’ tendency to move information technology (IT) workloads to an external vendor who provides access and maintains the information, usually for a fee, under the auspices of a Service Level Agreement (which governs the kinds of performance criteria the vendor has to meet). This movement is very similar to the idea of off-shoring or out-sourcing work. Shifts such as these have long been a part of society and will not be discussed here; they are used as examples and metaphors for the shifts that are underway within the library systems of today.
In a speech delivered by Forest Horton at Wuhan China, on October 21, 2008 (Horton, 2014, p. 3), regarding his ideas and concepts of professional career opportunities for library science professionals, he suggests the idea of providing an “information counsel” (Horton, 2014, p. 8) service similar to that of a financial advisor. Indeed, with the expanded reach of library systems (whether public or privately funded) over the internet, understanding the bibliographic index of the broad information set available will be not just desirable, but necessary. Consider the connection between the M. Johnson’s example about saving a web page (where the author did not know that saving a web page was even possible) and the idea of needing a priori knowledge of the various information databases which might be relevant to the researcher. This is similar to having accurate navigational charts in order to sail an ‘information ocean’. In this context, searching for a particular piece of information in the information ‘ocean’ is equivalent to M. Koll’s Information Retrieval discussion about searching for “a known needle in an unknown haystack” (Koll, 2000). Creating spaces where these Information Counsels can work and engage with the public could address many of the service needs of the community.

As society moves further into the information age, libraries will be challenged to keep pace by virtue of their information collections. Librarians will be facing traditional challenges with new wrappings: reductions in government spending will reduce library budgets and force a commensurate reduction in library collections. College and university libraries will be similarly affected; declining enrollments, reduction in public funding of state educational systems, and endowment issues will force a steady state (or worse) issue in research collections, which diminishes their reputation as research institutions. According to M. A. Griffin,

“Libraries can pursue two different directions in the matter of the collection: 1, rely primarily and invest most heavily in a collection-in-residence, and service it as intensively as possibly so as to derive the greatest amount of gain (i.e., user satisfaction) from items acquired; 2, maintain a
collection of well-used and basic items, but rely increasingly on supplying information on demand. (Griffin, 1985, p. 286)

As librarians seek to balance the operation of the library against the need to focus on the user community and develop services and capabilities to meet the needs of that community, librarians will see that “the form in which information appears will change, [but] the function of effectively providing information will not” (Griffin, 1985, p. 286).

There is a danger for librarians and libraries – if they follow the direction of supplying information on demand, the risk is that the library’s collection and perceived value of the library as a source of information will become increasingly commoditized. There is a lesson here for libraries as they approach equality of information access: “If collection-based uniqueness is diminished, strengths must be developed in other areas [emphasis mine] in order to maintain the vitality and utility of library operations” (Griffin, 1985, p. 288). The key take-away from this is that “Public services librarians and, more specifically, reference librarians have the potential for being real agents of change” (Griffin, 1985, p. 287).

We have established that libraries are faced with the traditional problems of collection management, user/community engagement, valuation by the community and the politicians that fund public services, etc., but now dressed in very different clothing of changing community needs: perhaps a larger immigrant population has changed the demographics of the user community or an aging population means they are less familiar with technology. This is equivalent to a pedagogical change in the student curriculum; or a reduction in funding or changed Board of Directors forcing a shift in collection strategy—from an internally managed collection to one of supplying information on demand, with its attendant risk of becoming less differentiated in its information collection and less valued by the community. The old idea of
providing access to information might be solved in a new form – that of an Information Counselor.

So what to do about it? If we think of the library as an key item in the public community, it is part of a larger system of public services and thus a candidate to be considered a “Mesh” business (Gansky, 2010, p. 245). According to Gansky, Mesh businesses share four characteristics:

- **Sharing**, where the core offering is something that can be shared within a community
- **Advanced Web and mobile data networks**, used to track goods, aggregate usage, customer, and product information
- The focus is on sharable physical **goods**, making local delivery of services and products valuable and relevant
- Offers, news, and recommendations are transmitted largely by word of mouth, augmented by **social network services**. (Gansky, 2010, p. 245)

In an information society, information is a good which can be shared; if printed in physical form, it would be a physical good (such as a book or DVD). It is still information. “All mesh businesses rely on a basic premise: when information about goods is shared, the value of those goods increases, for the business, for individuals, and for the community” (Gansky, 2010, p. 288). Taking the opportunity to combine the ideas from Horton—Information Counseling—and Gardner, et al.—colocation of resources—we can envision a set of “storefronts” colocated at or near the library where information counselors can set up shop, provide value-added services, and integrate more deeply with the community. Such Information Counsellors (ICs) would not exclusively focus on traditional librarianship or bibliographic matters:
“their domain must extend to media, telecommunications, communication, problem solving, analytical thinking, brainstorming, and other areas. ICs would have to be skilled in Information Literacy, Media Literacy, Computer Literacy, Digital Literacy, and the other so-called twenty first century literacies” (Horton, 2014, p. 8).

Imagine an Information Counsellor (IC) marketplace with varying specialties:

- “An IC at the top end of the occupation who could do theoretical research to advance the IC concept and to train ICs to learn best practices.

- “Second, an IC who would specialize in a certain field, sector or area like Health, Employment, Small Business, Education, Citizenship, etc. Thus we would have, for example, a Health Information Counsellor.

- “ICs who team with “sister” Counsellors like those in the finance area, so that the team, operating together, would be stronger than each performing independently.

- “Fourth, ICs should specialize by audiences served. Thus we should have Immigration Information Counsellors. (Horton, 2014, p. 8)

Libraries and librarians can demonstrate a form of community leadership by fostering a marketplace of Information Counsellors. This is in keeping with the primary mission of facilitating access to information, particularly in response to the changing information and pedagogical needs of the community.

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1 Note: According to Horton, the concept for an Information Counsellor originated with Professor Dosa: “Professor Dosa presciently forecasted the need for this new occupational category in the 1950s. She foresaw a wide array of specialties under that umbrella category”.

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Works Cited


