Feature Article

THE LIBRARIAN AND THE NEW INFORMATION ORDER

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Introduction

May I begin this work by reciting Crawford and Gormon's (1995) credo, "we believe in libraries. We believe in the enduring mission of libraries. We believe that libraries and librarianship have a future and that future is there to be seized by those with insight, realism, and yet daring.... Clinging to the past for the sake of the past is as futile as sweeping away the past for the sake of a delusionary future". Having stoutly enunciated their credo, they went on to advocate...." A straight and narrow path between the librarianship of the nostalgia and the ill-informed embrace of any technology that happens to capture the magpie fancy of the moment". This note of caution definitely raises the question of how much of the successive information related technologies is technolust and how much is evident triumph of futurism. The question also arises, why in spite of the enormous information technological break throughs, the book or the print media have refused to die.

The Relevance of the Old Order

The task or mission of the library runs through the old and the new information order. Libraries exist to acquire, give access to and safeguard carriers of knowledge and information in all forms and to provide instruction and assistance in the use of the collections to which their users have access. Libraries exist to give meaning to the continuing human attempt to transcend space and time in the advancement of knowledge and the preservation of culture. The difference between the old and new order lies in the means of achieving the mission or solving tasks.

Information and Knowledge

In order to buttress the role of the librarian in the information industry, it is necessary to briefly go into the semantics of information and knowledge. John Naisbitt once asserted that we are drowning in information but starved for knowledge. Mortimer Adler (1986) has made a useful distinction of what he calls "the four goods of the mind, namely information, knowledge, understanding and wisdom. He emphasizes that they are not equal, but ascend in a scale of values, information being the least value and wisdom the greatest. These values have been existing all along and are managed by librarians. The difference now is that ours is a time in which the computer dominates and its speed is seen as its most valuable characteristic, thus conforming to the time tested dictum that when the only tool you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail. It is understandable, therefore, that the least valuable good in Adler's scale of values, information, which also happens to be the most amenable to computation should be seen as the most central. Adler emphasizes that as we move higher up the ladder of learning, the human mind is vital and the role of the computer is consequently diminished. Knowledge can be defined as information transformed into meaning. It can be recorded and transmitted, but the computer is by no means the ideal medium for such transmission. Understanding is knowledge integrated with a world view and a personal perspective and exists entirely within the human mind, as does wisdom which is understanding made whole and generative. Libraries are therefore not wholly or primarily about information. They are about the preservation, dissemination and use of recorded knowledge in whatever form it may come so that human kind may become more knowledgeable; through knowledge one gains much understanding and achieve wisdom as an ultimate goal. The collection and absorption of data (discrete, facts, numbers, etc) and information (organized data) is often countless and spasmodic. It may have utilitarian purpose but has no enduring meaning unless the information so acquired is fitted into an intelligible structure of knowledge. Data and information are building blocks to knowledge. It is knowledge creation and dissemination that poses real challenge to the librarian and calls for his professional ingenuity. Dosunmu (1981) also addressed this issue tangentially in his discussion of problems of information flow.

The librarian of the New Order

Whatever may be the professional ingenuity of the librarian, there is no more doubt that the environment of the libraries of nostalgia has changed considerably and librarians have to change with the times. The dynamics of ICT have made tremendous inroads

into traditional skills and operational environment of the librarian. Okebukola (2006) emphasizes "...the recent developments in the area of information technology (IT) have redefined the traditional understanding of the practice of librarianship across the globe. The spectacular speed with which information is generated, stored and transmitted for the purpose of advancement of the frontiers of knowledge are no doubt critical to our determination to build a virile quality assurance system for our libraries". The digital revolution has caught up and the vogue is the establishment of virtual libraries. It was Nancy Schiller who coined the term virtual library in 1992 and defined it as "libraries in which the computer and telecommunication technologies make access to a wider range of information resources possible". It is today variously referred to as 'electronic library', digital library, community network', or simply 'library without walls'. It is called virtual because in a good electronic wide area library network, the user enjoys the euphoria of being in distant libraries, and yet he has not physically moved, an experience in virtual reality. One of its features is that its emphasis is access over ownership of collections. It is therefore a collection of library resources in electronic format at various locations which can be accessed and used with great ease using IT for academic purposes and decision making. It is a conglomeration of databases of information from standard library resources. Daniel (2006:4) has outlined some aims and objectives of the National Virtual Library as

   i.   To create an unlimited information database.
   ii.   To join effort to purchase.
  iii.   To share resources more efficiently.
  iv.   To improve the quality of learning, teaching and research through provision of current journals, books, etc.
   v.   To enhance access to global library and information resources.
  vi.   To enhance scholarship, research and life long learning through permanent access to shared digital archival collections.
 vii.   To provide libraries with guidance on applying appropriate technologies used in the production of digital library resources.
viii.   To advance the use and usability of globally distributed network information resources.

The Internet with its strengths and problems is now a familiar facility, and libraries are already subscribing to e-journals, in view of the rapidly changing information environment the librarian has to be computer literate and familiar with electronic storage and retrieval strategies.

Automation has become imperative even if it means the acquisition of selective modules to at least provide cataloguing and acquisition records and OPAC services.

The Changing Face of the Invisible College
The old invisible college referred to by Robert Boyle as "that assembly of learned and curious gentlemen who.... At length gave birth to the Royal Society" has taken new shape. They used to exchange their thoughts in letters and privately printed pamphlets circulated to the select few. The Internet has changed all that. The Internet is a populist, anarchistic, quirky intellectual playground in which ideas, data, insults, comments, drafts, comments on drafts, etc. are exchanged. Rather than the old letters and corridor meetings, the exchanges are made on the Internet.. Teleconferencing is already a reality. This adds a new dimension to the librarians' task of providing relevant information especially by S.D.I.

Conclusion
This paper has tried to review the librarian's role and environment from the old to the new information environment. It is the writer's view that at each stage the librarian has remained very relevant. The difference has been his tools and his vehicle for conveying his invaluable 'goods'. It is the writer's view that with relatively few exceptions new technologies complement and change the older ones. And when they do displace them, they do so over time and to the extent that the new technologies offer demonstrable advantages. The technology of communication is not excepted. Print did not destroy oral tradition it extended its reach. Cinema did not destroy live theatre. Radio news did not destroy newspapers, and Television did not destroy radio. The conclusion one is drawing is that the I.T. especially the virtual or the digital revolution is not going to obliterate the book or print media. Librarians should advise against total exclusion of the traditional library in favour of the digital library. However, librarians must brace up to the realities of the digital revolution and prepare themselves to be technical masters of both fields. Otherwise the new and emerging information technocrats will take over. The ferocity of the predators is alarming and the helplessness of the victim will be pathetic if he does not act fast.

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