Rewriting our Role: How Digital Publishing Creates Challenges for Librarians

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Madeline McIntosh, a publisher from Random House, believes that “what makes a library important is defined by physical books, in a physical space, connected to its community by…coming together.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Traditionally, libraries are defined by storage and access; patrons visit the library, consult their librarians and catalog for assistance with finding information, and search for the physical location of the item on the shelves. However, this notion of the library, and the librarian, is evolving. The very means through which we access the information that libraries provides is changing, and rapidly.

With information becoming increasingly available electronically, the role of the librarian is challenged by a need for change in providing and sharing information. More specifically, the librarians must alter their relationship with information and their users because of digital publishing. Although electronic access is now considered “the pre-eminent means of obtaining scholarly information,” digital publishing raises significant, complex challenges for librarians.[[2]](#footnote-2) These challenges include ensuring scholarly, authentic, and authoritative information, becoming an expert and educator in technology, and assisting patrons outside of the traditional library. By addressing these difficulties, librarians will ensure the relevance of their positions in society.

In print collections, librarians expect that their scholarly information comes from a trusted source. They can presume that what they share with their patrons is authentic and authoritative, because they have purchased it from a reliable periodical. With digital publishing, their needs of remain the same, but they are more difficult to fulfill. The very ways that the digital information is stored—on computers—is never permanent because of the short lifespan of software and programs.[[3]](#footnote-3) To preserve the availability of these resources, librarians need to regularly update and protect the software, unlike in print publishing, when librarians did not consider the issue of materials becoming obsolete. In “Preserving Digital Resources: Issues and Concerns from a View of Librarians,” Golnessa Galyani Moghaddam argues that regardless of the chosen strategy, permanent access calls for “continuous training” and action, meaning that the job of the librarian is never finished.[[4]](#footnote-4) With electronic publishing, the librarian must work with others outside of the traditional library realm and maintain a constant relationship with information technology professionals who create, update, and troubleshoot the software.[[5]](#footnote-5)

While librarians work to keep their digital information permanent and available, they also must ensure that the scholarly information is authoritative. Because digital publishing creates the opportunity for those outside the world of academia to share their work digitally, librarians face the obstacle of verifying the authority of information. To solve this, Mercer and Smith in “It’s the Content, Stupid,” recommend that librarians not only work with information technology professionals; they should also cooperate with archivists, the scholars themselves, and other organizations such as LOCKKS (Lots of Copies Keep Stuff Safe) from Stanford to maintain scholarship.[[6]](#footnote-6) Librarians must be proactive; they guarantee the authority and scholarship of digital publishing by working with other professions and organizations. By providing authoritative information in the beginning steps for scholars in research, they promote an atmosphere of authority, encouraging new scholars and writers to make their own information credible and scholarly.

Further, Smith and Mercer argue for a “wider conception of scholarship so that we are not inadvertently hampering progress by a slavish adherence to outdated or nonsensical hierarchies and pecking orders.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Librarians can sustain the scholarly and authoritative atmosphere of information in digital publishing both by being proactive and embracing the changing definition of scholarly information itself. Yes, digital publishing poses a difficulty for librarians when it allows amateur or unscholarly sources to be available for library use. However, librarians can work to assist users in their first stages of writing and research, and they can be sure to educate users on what information is (and is not) scholarly with databases such as Ulrichsweb.

In a 2008 study, findings showed that over half of all researchers surveyed said they access 75% of their articles of books electronically.[[8]](#footnote-8) Because users expect librarians to be responsive to this shift in publishing, librarians need to be experts in digital information and retrieval. Being an educator is now another facet of the role of the librarian. Online access requires a level of comfort and knowledge; one cannot simply type in a keyword to get the exact information needed. Because digital publishing is becoming the predominant means of publishing, users rely on librarians to help them navigate the plethora of information available. Before helping their patrons search for information, librarians must first teach them how to search and access information (through Boolean and keyword searching), and before that, they must educate users how to master the technology. Education can begin at a very basic level. In “All Hat, No Cattle: A Call for Libraries to Transform before It's Too Late,” La Rue reiterates that “it isn’t our job to make it harder for the public to find the content …it’s to make it easier.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Librarians need a solid grasp on the technology from using the computer to the navigating the database to determining what information is scholarly. Librarians will improve the library through education; teaching users promotes library services and improves their quality. In turn, users will be more comfortable using library services and using them often, insuring the librarian’s role in society.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The internet now allows users to access information anywhere, which means they will often want to complete their research outside of the library. Studies have found that electronic journal access “has greatly accelerated remote and home working” so much so that one fourth of research is accessed outside of traditional working hours.[[11]](#footnote-11) Librarians need to anticipate that users will most likely approach barriers in their search such as no available link to a text, needing a specific password for a periodical, or payment issues, prevent users from accessing the information they need.[[12]](#footnote-12) Librarians can promote easy access and avoid technical issues by providing patrons with updated, user-friendly library databases. Although they cannot always prevent these issues, they still can provide users with other assistance, such as online chatting through Skype, the library website, or online tutorials. Providing library tools outside of the library is one way librarians can address the challenges posed by electronic publishing. Although digital publishing encourages users to search and access information outside of the library, it does not mean that librarians are becoming irrelevant.

When we define the library, we know it once was considered to be a compilation of both the information—books, newspapers, periodicals, music, movies, et cetera—in the physical building and the people who share that information. With digital publishing, that definition has shifted. Most information is now readily available online, raising users’ expectations of immediate and vast results. Despite the fact that digital publishing has encouraged many users to independently search for information, this has actually encouraged more use of the local library. From 1994 to 2004, visiting the local library increased 44% and circulation increased 28% in a local study.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Librarians face difficult challenges with digital publishing, but their job is becoming even more important for society than ever before. Librarians need to work harder to provide scholarly, authoritative information that is accessible and permanent. Further, librarians must interact more intimately with other professions. Further, the role of the librarian has evolved from a librarian to an educator; it is the duty of the librarian to educate patrons on all levels of information retrieval, no matter if they are at the reference desk or in their own homes. Digital publishing does not eliminate the librarian; it merely reiterates that librarians must be accepting of—and responsive to—the constant changes in society.

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