Information, Mediation, and Users: A View of the Internet’s Evolving Relationship to Information and Library Science

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Description
In the realms of information, mediation, and users the Internet continues to have profound effects on information and library science. This article explores these effects through literature and research. It looks at whether information and library science have indeed come fully to terms with changes brought about by the Internet, or are still in the throws of contending with and adapting to this force that has taken over the field. Is the Internet an evolving force or have we already fully seen its effects on the field? If the Internet is still an evolving force to be reckoned with, then the questions for the field are many. What direction is it going? How quickly? What will mark its progress? What new kinds of information, organization, and access might we expect to see in the future? What sorts of technology will shape information delivery? What kinds of new mediation will be necessary in order to best meet patron needs? What kind of education will need to be put into place to train information professionals in this new mediation? And finally, what might we expect users to look like in the future and how will their characteristics in turn shape the field?

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Information, Mediation, and Users: A View of the Internet’s Evolving Relationship to Information and Library Science

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Editor’s Note: This article is the preliminary version of a much longer peer-reviewed piece to be published later as part of our tenth-year anniversary volume, After Internet Time.

The Internet’s Evolutionary Impact on Library and Information Science

In the realms of information, mediation, and users the Internet continues to have profound effects on information and library science. This article explores these effects through literature and research. It looks at whether information and library science have indeed come fully to terms with changes brought about by the Internet, or are still in the throws of contending with and adapting to this force that has taken over the field. Is the Internet an evolving force or have we already fully seen its effects on the field? If the Internet is still an evolving force to be reckoned with, then the questions for the field are many. What direction is it going? How quickly? What will mark its progress? What new kinds of information, organization, and access might we expect to see in the future? What sorts of technology will shape information delivery? What kinds of new mediation will be necessary in order to best meet patron needs? What kind of education will need to be put into place to train information professionals in this new mediation? And finally, what might we expect users to look like in the future and how will their characteristics in turn...
A Vignette: The New Information Consumer or Plagiarist?

A central tenant of information and library science service is to know the user. Since the purpose of acquiring, organizing, and making accessible information is to do that for the user, it makes absolute sense to understand that user and that user’s behaviors and needs. Unavoidably this is a complex task since all users are not the same and all require specialized attention. In library science we speak of the “reference interview” in which we ascertain the specific information needs of specific individuals [1]. All of this ascertaining, knowing, and interviewing is theoretically independent of the media through which a user will receive information, although more and more we must also consider mode of access and delivery as well as the informational content itself. Online media are changing information consumers in a variety of ways that are challenging as well as disturbing to information professionals. A case in point is the concept of intellectual property and the linked concept of plagiarism. Although individuals from a very early age tend to understand the idea of owning a toy, a book, a car or a house, the concept of owning an idea is less distinct. Ideas can be multiplied and distributed. Many individuals can possess the same piece of information without having any single piece diminished in the process—decidedly different that sharing ownership of a house or a piece of land. Grandma’s recipe for rhubarb pie is information which could potentially be broadcast on the Internet for all to read and use. After it has been published online, who now “owns” the recipe? Could anyone take it and create a book, for profit, that includes it in its pages? Here is where the next generation of information consumers arises, or, as the New York Times headline named them—“Generation Plagiarism.” [2] It would appear that the next generation of information consumers’ definition of intellectual property is far less clear than that of past generations. One college student on the generation plagiarism page stated that, “In the digital age, plagiarism isn’t and shouldn’t be as big of a deal as it used to be when people used books for research.” He or she did not elaborate on why this might be the case but other students have. An earlier piece in the New York Times [3] quoted students, saying that pages without author information and, in particular, articles in Wikipedia did not need to be cited because they were unsigned and collectively written, therefore “common knowledge.” The article’s author went on to state that “concepts of intellectual property, copyright and originality are under assault in the unbridled exchange of online information.” This “evolving view of authorship” was supported even further in Germany when a 17 year old author created an award-nominated novel that turned out to be a collection of materials taken (plagiarized?) from other sources. The article noted that her work was:

representative of a different generation, one that freely mixes and matches from the whirring flood of information across new and old media, to create something new. ‘There’s no such thing as originality anyway, just authenticity,’ said Ms. [Helene] Hegemann in a statement released by her publisher after the scandal broke. [4]

Is this the new user of information, who will grow up, become an adult, and supplant those of us who presently recoil at the idea of plagiarism in any form? What has happened to the idea of information property? How about of information authorship? Of creation of new ideas that will in
turn need to be organized and made accessible to others? How worried should information professions get and what kind of actions might be taken now to evolve gracefully in this world that has been decidedly changed by the Internet?

Beginnings: What Goes Around Comes Around

There have always been deep challenges to the field of information and library science. On October 6, 1876 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, a group of 90 men and 13 women, including Melvil Dewey (of the classification scheme), Charles Ammi Cutter (of a competing classification scheme), Richard Rogers Bowker (of Books in Print), and Samuel S. Green, signed a register which made them charter members of what was to become the American Library Association. The goal of this new association was “to enable librarians to do their present work more easily and at less expense.” [5] This goal has continued until the present day even as technology changes, information explodes, and users seem to be more and more happy to use the Internet rather than step into an actual library building. The question for this forthcoming article is what difference the Internet has made in information science, and if indeed we are now seeing a stabilizing of information and library science in relation to the Internet. Is the field now at peace with technology—with the way information is stored, organized, and made available for access? Has the field come to some kind of agreement—mutually agreed upon behaviors—with users of information? Samuel Swet Green, the last of those listed above, is notable for having written a seminal piece, in 1876, entitled “Personal relations between librarians and readers.” [6] Green’s central thesis was that one could not let a reader (the term “patron” was not yet in use, and “reader” was indeed appropriate since individuals did that and only that) into a library on his or her own. Readers needed the guidance of a well-trained, cordial librarian to find what they were looking for. They would be lost at the library catalog (paper cards at the time) and unable to find a print work suitable to their needs. Green gives many examples of the kind of work a librarian must do in order to help a patron find needed information. In doing so he suggested the title for this essay—information, mediation, and the user. Green’s information was in books on the shelves of the library. His mediation was in the form of the well-trained librarian, and his user was “modest men in the humbler walks of life, and well-trained boys and girls” since “scholars and persons of high social position” would not be timid about finding what they need or approaching a librarian for assistance. [7] A central question for this piece is how, if at all, information, mediation, and the user have been changed by the Internet, and if these changes are complete or still evolving.

Public Libraries

Melvil Dewey was primarily concerned about the public library—not private or subscription libraries that were selective about their clientele. The focus for this piece is also the public library rather than academic or university settings. Public libraries are at least in part funded by tax dollars and as a result bring with them the challenges of responding to citizens, legislators, public administrators, and various citizen groups that often have the opportunity to advocate for or against the policies of libraries. Drawing on research on public libraries and public library policy in Scotland, Canada, Mexico, Guatemala, and the United States, this article explores a variety of
ways dealing with information, mediation, and patrons in a comparative sense, looking at similarities and differences in style to develop potential practices and policy that might be put into effect in the public sphere. Public libraries also cover all ranges of patrons—young and old, educated and becoming educated. Information science is necessarily concerned with all patrons, not just academics in the university library.

Information

Today’s information has expanded far beyond the library’s shelves and the library itself. Libraries now often pay for access rather than ownership of online materials, and an overwhelming amount of information is free for the finding, if one knows where to look. Very often the library is no longer a place to visit but a resource to be consulted through the Internet. There is an abundance of policy questions for libraries about what kinds of resources patrons need, about redundancy of information in print and electronic forms, and about patron education as a balance to online information that is abundant but dubiously accurate. Inevitably the question of resources comes to play in this debate. Where should funds be directed in order to provide the best services to the greatest numbers of individuals?

Mediation

Today’s mediation could be in the form of the friendly librarian, but librarians today continue to lament how few people come into the library and how those who do often want to use just the computer terminals. Reference questions for onsite users have devolved for many to issues of computer settings and broken printers. Off-site use of libraries has its own set of choices in terms of telephone, instant messaging, ask a librarian, 24/7 distributed reference, websites, wireless, wikis, and blogging, to name just a few. Social media hold out a promise of bringing individuals into the library, virtually if not in person, but librarians and library schools are faced with choices about what services to provide for which users—especially potential users who might be lured into the library with the right choices.

Users

A user of today who is 20 years old or less has never known a time without the Internet. He is also probably the owner of a cell phone, can instant message, and knows how to search the Internet for information. The probability is very high that she believes that all needed information is on the Internet. More frightening is his complete trust in the veracity of information on the Internet. Perhaps most frightening is her belief that she is really good at searching and really does not need any help at all. If information professionals were only dealing with technology-savvy 20 year olds the path would be fairly straightforward. We would teach our new information professionals and equip our libraries to target this group. Instead, and rather obviously, we have babies through 90 year olds visiting the library and wanting to make use of an enormous variety of resources, sources, and services available there. How does one address the needs of so many disparate individuals? How do information professionals assess those needs and adjust present practice as users change—in skills, country of origin, language, and cultural background? It would be impossible to address questions of users without also addressing issues
of globalization and the ease with which ethnic groups can move into a community and change its demographics. If we could answer all the questions presented above, our libraries, information professionals, and users would be far better equipped than they are today to meet 21st century information needs. The answers to some of these questions undoubtedly require a crystal ball. For this paper the overarching questions concern how much we know and how smart we can be about using new technologies, predicting the directions they might go, and mustering our resources in the best possible way to keep information available to all.

Endnotes


[2] This is a social media site that allows individuals over the age of 13 to comment on questions presented by the moderator. The focus of this session was “tell us what you think about plagiarism.” Montgomery, Carrie. Are you part of “Generation Plagiarism?” New York Times, August 3, 2010.http://learningblogs.nytimes.com/2010/08/03/are-you-part-of-generation-plagiarism/


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3 THOUGHTS ON “INFORMATION, MEDIATION, AND USERS: A VIEW OF THE INTERNET’S EVOLVING RELATIONSHIP TO INFORMATION AND LIBRARY SCIENCE”

Roscoe Ascolese
on February 5, 2014 at 6:33 PM said:

Hola, un amigo mío está trabajando en una tesis universitaria sobre este tema y se necesita un poco de ayuda con un escenario complejo. ¿Sería usted capaz de ayudar a los PLZ?

Myron Gressler
on February 5, 2014 at 8:22 PM said:

Tengo 17 años de edad, jugador de fútbol, ¿?patinador, no – sesgada entre Android y iOS, ya que es el tema más controversial y escribo para mi blog: Mi guerra con Entropy

Jeane Lisby
on February 6, 2014 at 10:52 AM said:

Merci Pour ce joli Blog, C’est tres bien.