

Citation:

Borgman, C.L. (2001). Where is the librarian in the digital library? *Communications of the ACM*, 44(5), 66-67. Special issue on digital libraries.

## **Where is the librarian in the digital library?**

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Digital libraries offer immense opportunities to provide more information, to more people, in more ways, in more places, in more time zones. Individuals already can search, use, and create new information resources from home, office, or hotel room, and soon may be able to do so from planes, trains, automobiles, and beaches. A variety of questions are arising about how best to provide information services. Can digital libraries provide necessary or sufficient services to satisfy most information needs? Can we or should we do without the librarian in digital libraries? Alternatively, what roles can or should librarians play in digital libraries?

In the abstract world of computing, the “real-world” clues are gone, replaced by pull-down or pop-up menus, screen displays, searching tools, and lists to browse. Users must map their goals onto a digital library’s capabilities without the safety net of human assistance. Instead of the librarian who listens carefully to an ambiguous question and responds with, “I see, what you may be looking for is...,” the options for assistance may be an automated help system, an email query, or a telephone help line. Rarely are these acceptable alternatives.

Despite early predictions that disintermediation would prevail in the online world, the opposite is coming to pass. A plethora of small companies are emerging to offer niche services that fill in gaps between consumer and provider. Librarians continue to provide intermediary services, whether in libraries or through entrepreneurial ventures. When users retrieve tens of thousands of matches from digital libraries, many realize that searching and filtering information can be a complex task worth delegating to a professional. Selecting the matches that are most relevant, most current, and of highest quality requires considerable expertise, despite continuing improvements in the search refinement capabilities of digital libraries.

A more subtle concern is that while librarians are playing ever-larger roles in making information resources available, their work is becoming less visible. Librarians (who may have job titles such as “information architect,” “digital asset manager,” or “content specialist”) are the professionals behind the scene who are selecting, collecting, organizing, preserving, and providing access to digital libraries. Few people who search the collections of their corporate, academic, public, school, or other type of library are aware of the amount of professional effort that is spent in choosing the resources, making those resources searchable in an organized fashion, and keeping them available through changes in hardware, software, and storage media -- not to mention negotiating contracts, setting policy, and the myriad other tasks involved in maintaining digital library services.

Most library funding for digital library services is devoted to providing high-quality scholarly, business, technical, medical, legal, or other institution-specific resources. Many of these digital resources are available only through institutional subscriptions; most are far too expensive for

individuals to acquire. Libraries also provide gateway access to many valuable free sites and services on the Internet, investing professional expertise in selecting and maintaining sources appropriate to the organization's mission.

The success of digital libraries had led some organizations to make blithe statements such as, "soon it will all be online and we won't need the library anymore," or "of course, the new campus won't have a library." One shudders to think what will become of the information collections and services for organizations with these attitudes. Wiser organizations are hiring additional information professionals, in what has become a very competitive job market.

Lastly, we should not underestimate the value of libraries as physical spaces in which to gather with other people, to read, browse, and use materials in many media, to discover new ideas serendipitously, and talk to those helpful librarians. Concurrent with the growth of the Internet, grand new library buildings are being constructed in many parts of the world. Libraries continue to be very popular physical places. In addition to supporting work and academic pursuits, they offer opportunities for recreation, personal growth, information literacy, and discovery. They are venues for providing corporate, educational, governmental, and community information and for local events. Some people come to the library to borrow a book, and learn to use the Internet. Others come to search a digital library, and leave with a book.

In sum, digital libraries hold great promise for improving access to information, but they will supplement, not supplant, the information services provided by physical libraries and human librarians.

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