

Mock Comprehensive Exam

How Public Libraries Can Maintain Relevancy Through Adaptation

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LIS 5033-995: Information and Knowledge Society

May 7, 2017

Maintaining relevance is a difficult challenge for many organizations, but is crucial to the life of a non-profit, whose existence requires support but message cannot easily be altered to fit viral trends to maximize short-term cash flow to fund its operations. While a profitable business might adjust its product, a non-profit such as a public library is typically serving a specific need and does not have the flexibility or means for a quick change. It is often under the construct of governmental oversight or a Board of Trustees, and subject to the desires of the public before making big decisions. Change can be slow, and quick pivots at signs of distress to the bottom line are unlikely to be a viable option. Instead, public libraries must find a way to maintain relevance while embracing their core traditional values and moving into the future without jumping into costly trends and forgetting who and what they are. This balance is nearly impossible in a 21st Century whose needs and desires make rapid fire changes in a matter of hours, but makes that balance even more crucial in creating a sustainable and impactful environment. A public library must be steady and reliable in an age of uncertainty and confusion, but must also adapt to embrace new policies and take risks to stay relevant and fresh in the eye of the public.

The most obvious means of staying relevant in an increasingly digital world is through digital information access. While libraries have long been known to provide access to physical information, and are increasingly becoming digital hubs in their communities (or, at least in communities that can afford the costs), the amount of digital information that we increasingly have access too can create multiple problems. Sorting through that information is increasingly difficult. The hashtag #FakeNews is rampant on Twitter and Facebook in response to the amount of misinformation, and *blatant* misinformation seeping across the most used facets of our digital worlds. The accessibility for users to add content to the internet through sites like Wikipedia or

inexpensive webhosting also implies an onslaught of information to be presented as we educate and provide access to the internet for more people. Zipf's Principle of Least Effort¹ indicates users desire to find a direct and quick route to the information they seek- which means a vast majority of public library users are going to use a general search engine such as Yahoo, Google, Bing, Altavista or DuckDuckGo to find the answer they think they want. While trained Librarians, academics, and information professionals know that these are great resources for a quick taste of information, they are not always accurate at targeting reliable information for an information seeker. So how do we, as public library stewards, provide accurate and reliable digital information access in an obtainable, *easy*, way for mass consumption?

It would be nice to think information policy could solve the problem- and while a policy of outreach and education to patrons about more reliable sources could certainly help alleviate some of the misinformation, there is no way to absolutely ensure use of scholarly sources over something that might have been presented by a random internet troll² or another misinformed person. Enforcing a policy that, for example, blocked sites such as the search sites would be inefficient and present an additional barrier to information access that only widens the digital gap between accessible information and needing a PhD to access any sincere information. Not everyone has the time or technological know-how to figure out search words, key terms, and the navigation to go several links deep to find the database (or have the knowledge of which database is best for each instance) to search in. And all these issues come up before we even

¹ Zipf's Principle of Least Effort states: *human behavior is governed by an attempt to minimize the probable average rate of work required to achieve desired goals.*

² A person who hides behind the anonymity of the internet to slander, enrage, or misinform others with the purpose of having a negative impact

arrive to the ethical responsibility of public libraries to seek a censorship-free environment for their patrons, as much as is possible.

The digital divide is rampant, even in America. The use of public library computers and resources, the mass desire for publicly available WiFi, make it obvious that not everyone has home internet or the devices to access it if they did. Minimum wage makes these things a luxury if you are not in the right socioeconomic class, and the expense can be too much for even those who might be considered middle class. Rent is high, Capitalism has companies seeking to maximize profits by keeping wages low or using cheap materials that may require replacing sooner than is economical, and technology is moving so quickly that by the time many can truly afford what was once the newest technology, there have been so many strides that that software is no longer supported widely and is all but irrelevant. Student loan interest is nearly impossible to pay off, and widely used banks such as Wells Fargo are undergoing scandals for victimizing their users by opening new accounts that could hurt their credit and be costly to them. Public libraries often go underfunded, leaving staff struggling to provide material or keep the doors open, much less lead classes or provide individual help to information seekers about how to navigate the vast swamps of digital information.

As stewards of information, Librarians value access to that information. It is the reason we preserve and classify it. The reason we promote it. We value the knowledge that information can provide, and we see the value in multiple points of information. We see the value and power in analyzing different viewpoints and contexts to pull the most-likely-to-be-true conclusion from it as a way of engaging and understanding our world. It is why information professionals fight to keep libraries open and provide this access to the public in the first place. They want to explore the world and take others with them. It is the ethical implications that come with core library

values and the power of providing that information that makes it difficult for libraries to strike a balance- Librarians value good information and decry censorship. More available information and access to information decreases the ability for Librarians to verify every source independently. So public librarians find themselves in a conundrum that makes them desire to hold to traditional values like card catalogs and non-public browsing of the collection to decrease misinformation, but also wanting to provide open access uncensored to all. The desire is to provide better sustainability of open access regardless of race & social structure (Honma 2005) while still providing a quality experience and protecting patrons.

It is a nearly impossible task, though there are steps that public libraries and their Librarians can take to move forward over the course of the next half decade to move as closely towards that idealized goal as might be possible.

As mentioned earlier, part of the conundrum is in library funding. The required outcomes and data tracking to justify their own existence and continue to provide desired information for users, as without tracking what is being used, Librarians have a hard time determining what is needed or might be needed in the future. This data tracking adds to the ubiquitous information society that can make personal privacy vulnerable (Karhula 2010), creating an ethical dilemma to Librarians who wish to protect personal information but also continue to justify the spending of funds for programming and materials (or, in some cases, hours that the door is open). The key is ensuring anonymity as much as possible. Collecting data, but leaving names or identifying information from it. Track books that are checked out and checked during the same checkout period, but not necessarily books that are checked out to the *same person* at the same time. Creating an information structure that is guiding in overall trends and behaviors, but does not create personal identifiers for individuals. Have users' complete surveys from a single computer

that does not require a log-in or collect paper surveys that are then all entered anonymously to a single database.

Libraries can combat the overwhelming amount of information by providing users means of navigating that information. Whether that is in classes provided by staff or simple posters explaining the FART test³. Providing one-on-one assistance when able, and encouraging the use of more than one library resource (whether all digital, all physical, or a mix of both). Libraries provide value as a resource- not just *to* information, but in navigating that information, and when Librarians find time and ways to increase knowledge and the ways to navigate it, they also prove themselves a more valuable resource to their community, and a resource that that community will return to because of the positive experience and the knowledge they left with. Provide access, with guidance, where patrons want it or will allow it. And unfortunately, accept that not everyone will want that guidance or to utilize the tools, and that is simply an unfortunate dark lining to providing open access to information.

Guest access is as important in public libraries as patron access is. While libraries can provide guest access for shortened periods, limited amounts, or at a nominal fee, making library resources accessible beyond regular patronage is key to not only continuing to encourage wide use of libraries but reminding people of their value- libraries benefit everyone, though there might be member perks. Libraries across the country have opened access to their collections through Interlibrary loans and collective sharing of resources as a consortium. This sharing requires a membership to at least one of the involved libraries, and connects people and information across the country. Currently, digital rights management may limit the share-ability

³ The FART test is a tool taught to middle schoolers as a means of identifying reliable sources of information on the internet: Is the site Friendly to the eyes? Does the Author have Authority? Is the information Repeated somewhere? Is the information Timely?

of digital resources interlibrary, but the mass popularity of these programs with physical items promises a future for digital items to eventually join the game. Digital information is, after all, just as important as physical items. While some library stakeholders are not particular to digital or physical items, or are capable of navigating and utilizing both, there are those who have exclusive stakes in one or the other (Pomerantz and Marchionini 2005). While some older patrons may not have the technological training to access digital content and rely on physical items, others still might require the ability of a digital reader to zoom in on text to a far larger level to read. Some patrons may not have internet access and require physical items, but still others may be in remote areas where getting new physical items is a burden and digital information is far faster and more convenient.

A nationwide network of access to shared digital content among library users (a federally funded, nationwide subscription for all libraries to a database providing digital copies of magazines, or an e-book service such as Overdrive, for instance) is unlikely to occur, but it is an idealized goal that could be moved *towards* in the hopes of providing better digital access to all as a way of staying relevant in an increasingly digital age. This, of course, would need to be paired with the continuation of shared physical items- an open access to the new and fast-growing digital world, but also the physical items that have withstood the test of hindsight and value beyond a fleeting trend.

Relevancy of public libraries is an oft mocked idea on the internet. It can make embracing digital spaces frightening and threatening to some libraries, yet information professionals understand the importance of maintaining this connection to patrons. Therefore, Librarians and information professionals must continue to do what they do best- take information, all of it, and carefully classify it. Navigate it. Use it. Librarians must move forward

while taking the best part of information traditions with them, and finding a place for both fiction and non-fiction on the shelves. They must make way for physical materials and digital spaces to provide a bridge across the digital divide that does not drop patrons off in unfamiliar territory without a way back to comfort and familiarity that makes them more comfortable exploring the new spaces available to them. Libraries must composite their traditional values with their power as information stewards to provide the best possible environment for sustaining themselves- they must learn best practices from the past but continue to trudge along with society into the digital age. They cannot be left behind.

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