Librarian to Cybrarian : Changing Roles and Responsibilities of Library Professionals

Anil Kumar Dhiman

Emergence of digital libraries is posing a different kind of conundrum Librarians, where the traditional gatekeepers of knowledge are being bypassed. Likewise the role of library professionals is also changing, they have to act as Cybrarian instead of Librarians. Changed and expected roles & responsibilities of Librarians and library professionals are discussed in the paper.

1. Introduction

Necessity is the mother of invention, which led a continuous development in any field. ICT or so called Information and Communication Technology is also developing at a faster rate since the starting of 21st century. And this has also resulted the development and advancement in the library field (Dhiman, 2003, Dhiman & Rani, 2005). The Digital Library or Virtual Library brought in its wake new flavours in the form of digitizing not only printed material but also pictures, maps, scenarios, paintings and sounds and presenting them all in a lively show on the globe that has brought people so close that the phrase "Global Village" is coined to describe the scenario. Digital libraries are not only digitization of physical resources, but also thoughtful organization of electronic collection for better access. Such organization provides coherence to a massive amount of shared knowledge base. While the method of access provides convenient information retrieval for a wide range of global user, essentially a digital library deals with organization and access of a large information repository. Institutional repositories are also emerging as useful resources in digital libraries (Dhiman and Sharma, 2008 a & b). Moreover, now a days, we are moving towards Library 2.0 and 3.0 services using web 2.0 and 3.0 facilities.

2. Traditional Versus Online Library Environment

Traditional libraries are the libraries, where the access points such as, library catalogues as well as library collections are print based and their management is by and large manual (Dhiman and Goswami, 2008). The term modern or digital library is diffuse enough to be applied to a wide range of collections and organizations, but, to be considered a digital library, an online collection of information must be managed by and made accessible to a community of users. There are significant differences between the traditional on-campus and online library environments that enable Librarians to expand their roles to

provide more effective information literacy among the users. Basically a digital library differs with that of traditional one in terms of access to resources, broader scope of enquiries and nature of communication as under.

2.1   Access to Resources

In the traditional environment Librarians would need to attend all resources to get the same background information and understanding of the problem. Ideally, the Librarian may be trained in a particular discipline and would have a degree in that subject, however this is seldom possible and most Librarians have responsibility for some subjects that they have never studied. Because Librarians have access to the variety of resources in digital environment, they have a greater understanding of the discipline and consequently, their users' needs. Thus they can provide better services to the vast community of users and its degree increase in digital environment very much.

2.2   Broader Scope of Enquiries

One of the major differences between the traditional library and digital library is the broader scope of enquires and it is that the Librarian can often identify when a user's approach to the learning process is problematic even if the user is unaware of the inadequacy of their information or skills. On-campus users or the access of physical or traditional library needs to know that they have a problem before they can receive the help. Even then, there may be little indication as to which part of the process needs improvement. However, in case of digital libraries, no body is there to assist them, but online help is there for them in case of facing difficulty at any step.

2.3   Nature of Communication

The need to conduct almost all communication in writing is often perceived as a chore by both users and Librarians, but there are benefits also. By the time users have expressed their problem in writing, they often have a better understanding of what they need to know. Similarly, Librarians have time to think about the problem and an appropriate response in traditional libraries. Unlike the library reference desk, there is a record of the interaction in digital libraries, which enables both parties to pick up from where they left off without either Librarian or user's need to backtrack. Another advantage of the medium is that replies and instructions can be copied and pasted from one user to another without reducing the quality of the personal interaction. This lessens the tedium of the repetitive nature of many reference questions without decreasing the effectiveness of the response in digital environment.

3.   Changing Role of Librarians

The environment in which Librarians work is changing in terms of greater access to a range of information, increased speed in acquiring information, greater complexity in locating, analyzing and linking

information, constantly changing technology and adaptation, lack of standardization of both hardware and software, continuous learning for users and staff, and management of financial investment for technology. The role of Librarian in the new environment is also exponentially growing as the Internet and World Wide Web is changing. The rise of digitized information is an opportunity to elevate the role of Librarian and leads to the emergence of a new breed of Librarian – the Cyber Librarian or Cybrarian, a specialist in locating information on the Internet (Hathorn, 1997).

Librarians have traditionally been concerned with certain functions in the print era i.e., collection development and acquisition, classification and cataloguing, circulation, reference service, preservation, conservation and archiving. Most of these have their parallel roles in the internet information era also. For example, in the traditional library, acquisition of documents involved a decision between either buying a physical item, or not buying it. For the electronic information available on the Web, "acquisition" offers a spectrum of choices such as – download, print or store on disks and facilitation to make electronic information available on a local area network. The distinction between types of library, defined by the nature of their collection may change with the availability of Internet and World Wide Web.

However, there is no denying that this is a new global library environment in which Librarians and Information Professionals are still finding their way. Also, the foundations of the profession and the skills and roles associated with it will help to ensure Librarians survival. The core skills traditionally were associated with Librarians/ Information Professionals which include information handling skills, training and facilitating skills, evaluation skills and concern for the customer are all still relevant. These skills cover cataloguing, classification, indexing, enquiry work and user education all functions which if managed by Librarians will help to make the Internet an easier place to navigate.

Lancaster (1997) correctly states that in order to justify its existence in the electronic world, "the Library must continue to perform one of the most important functions it now performs in the print on-paper world – to organize the universe of resources in such a way that those most likely to be of value to the user community are made most accessible to this community, physically and intellectually." The vast amount of information available in a networked environment suggests that there is more than ever before a role for trained intermediaries with search skills, abilities to analyze and evaluate resources and match needs with sources.

The role of the Librarians in digital environment is to help the users to find the information they require then provide them with the tools to assess and use the resources for their individual needs. Creth (1996) suggests that Librarians achieve this by "actively seeking out users in a variety of settings" and by making "full use of information and multimedia technology" and by offering instruction in a variety of formats including Web based instruction and online tutorials. New era Librarians and Information Professionals should be able to manage the Digital Information System as this encompass the overall competencies

(knowledge, know-how, skills and attitudes) necessary to create, store, analyze, organize, retrieve and disseminate digital information (text, images, sounds) in digital libraries.

4. New Era Librarians

The role of Librarian and Library professionals is to facilitate the interactions between the potential information user community and the body of recorded information. The traditional information access and management roles played by the information professionals is expanding, particularly in the design and development of new information products and services and of tools to support information seeking and selection, the analysis and synthesis of information content on behalf of users, and information user instruction. The new era Librarian is a Technology Application Leader who works with other members of the information management team to design and evaluate systems for information access that meet user needs. Where required, he provides instruction and support so that end users can make optimal use of the information resources available to them.

Nageswara Rao and Babu (2001) have mentioned various roles of Librarians in digital environment – Librarians as Search Intermediary, Librarian as Facilitator, Librarians as End-User Trainer/ Educator, Librarian as Researcher, Librarian as Web Site Builder or Publisher, Librarian as Interface Designer, Librarian as Knowledge Manager/ Professional and Librarian as Sifter of Information Resources. As such, there are numerous opportunities for the Librarians in digital environment, particularly in Internet and Web environment in providing information services easily, timely and appropriately to the users. These according to Nageswara Rao and Babu (2001) are listed as under.

- ⮎ Universal Accessibility of Material – Same electronic document can be viewed by multiple users simultaneously, which eliminates the waiting periods for popular documents in the library. Rare and fragile historical documents can be scanned and stored for electronic viewing by numerous users around the world for indefinite periods.
- ⮎ Patron Initiated Inter-Library Services – In the cyber library links are to be provided for searching electronically stored material as in the traditional method by author, title or subject. Once the appropriate material is located, users can view at their terminal. If the desired material is not located during the search, the user will electronically forward a request to the Librarian to arrange the document on inter-library loan from another library.
- ⮎ Book and Reading Lists – Reader's advisory services have not disappeared from the list of functions libraries traditionally perform. Web versions of book and reading lists are available for users.
- ⮎ Online Catalogues – The catalogues of many of leading libraries these days are available in Web-based formats to platform independent easy browsing.

⮱ Local Databases – Creation and provision of access to local information by the Librarians has taken new life on the Internet.

⮱ E-Newsletters – Communicating the news of the library to its users of both physical and virtual collections takes many forms such as electronic newsletters-bulletins, etc.

⮱ Virtual Reference Desks – Earlier, Librarian was available in person, or on phone. Because of the Web, Virtual Librarian is available via e-mail or through a Web form for providing reference services to the users. Many find that this facility is highly useful as it replaces the rigidity of sticking to timings for person-to-person contact.

⮱ Virtual Tours – Virtual tours are also created by the Librarians to describe the physical library.

⮱ Web Forms – Web forms increasingly allow online provision of services formerly reserved for inside the wall transaction like Inter-library loan form, book and journal requisition form, suggestion form, etc.

⮱ Cooperative Cataloguing – Librarians use the Web to assist in cooperative catalogue of Web-based resources.

Besides, Distance Education Support, provision of access to E-Journals, coordination of Electronic Bulletin Boards, posting guides, and hosting of online tutorials are some of the other opportunities for Librarians in the Web environment.

So the new era Librarian must be capable of working in the hybrid world of print and electronic media and providing the best mix of information resources in the most appropriate formats for the environment. In addition, the new era Librarians have to play a key role in developing information policy for the organization ensuring that access to all information resources - from internal records to external databases is provided in the most strategically- effective and cost-effective manner. The new era Librarian also plays another important role in ensuring that contractual, legal and ethical obligations regarding information use are met. The electronic information age provides new opportunities for organizations to produce as well as use information products. New era Librarians, given their familiarity with the information marketplace, can be key contributors to the development, marketing and use of information products also.

### 5.	Competencies Needed

New era Librarians are supposed to be the essential - by responding with a sense of urgency to critical information needs, they provide the information edge for the knowledge-based organization. For this, new era Librarians require two main types of competencies - professional competencies related to the special Librarian's knowledge in the areas of information resources, information access, technology, management and research and the ability to use these areas of knowledge as a basis for providing library

and information services. Other is personal competencies which represent a set of skills, attitudes and values that enable Librarians to work efficiently, be good communicators – focus on continuing learning throughout their careers, demonstrate the value-added nature of their contributions, and survive in the new world of work.

Though Librarians are not scientists but they know how they can apply new technologies to make knowledge more widely available. In this way, they have to work as Library Manager. In addition to being Library Manager, they also have to act as Technical Processors and so on, by taking care of information quality. They should know how to manage and deliver appropriate information services to meet information need of the user. They have to ensure that user/staff know how to access relevant sources of information. And for delivery of information to their users in an appropriate manner, they need to be competent as a good Developer and Designer for appropriate systems.

6.   Conclusion

So in digital environment, we need libraries and Librarians more than ever before in order to make effective use of the information that is available. We need them to identify quality information, to preserve it, organize it and to make it accessible by cataloguing and data management. But as traditional custodians of information, Librarians need to be aware of the implications of these changes and develop technological and managerial skills, which will enable them to make effective use of information and to meet their organizations changing information need. Despite of a lot of ambitious projects, the vast majority of human knowledge still exists in print, not in electronic form. But the library professionals have evolved to include electronic information in the same way as societies have evolved in using such information in digital environment.

Thus, the role of Librarians has changed in the digital library era. It is, therefore pertinent on the part of the Librarians to acquire new skills required for developing and managing the digital libraries. The Librarians and library and information professionals are required to acquire such knowledge and skills as the library is one of the highly IT influenced service profession. And the empowerment of library and information professionals with IT skills is aimed at providing services that are expected of, from the clientele in the new environment.

References

1.   Creth, Sheila D. (1996). The electronic library: Slouching toward the future or creating a new information environment. Paper presented at Follett Lecture Series. Available at http://www.ukoln.ac.uk/services/papers/follett/creth/paper.html.

2. Dhiman, A.K. (2003). Basics of Information Technology for Librarians and Information Scientists. 2 Vols. Ess Ess Publications, New Delhi.

3. Dhiman, A.K. and Rani, Yashoda. (2005). Learn - Computer Basics and its Application in Libraries. Ess Ess Publications, New Delhi.

4. Dhiman, A.K. and Goswami, R. (2008). Conventional or Traditional Libraries in Digital Era. Library Progress.28 (1) : 129-37.

5. Dhiman, A.K. and Sharma, Hemant. (2008a). Institutional Repositories: the Emerging Gateways of Accessing Knowledge in Networked Environment. University News. 46 (5): 100-03.

6. Dhiman, A.K. and Sharma, H. (2008b). Access of Scholarly Publications through Institutional Repositories. Pakistan Journal of Library Science. 9 : 97-111.

7. Hathorn, C. (1997). The Librarian is Dead, Long Live the Librarian. PRETEXT Magazine. Available at http://www.pretext.com/oct97/features/ story4.htm.

8. Lancaster, F. W. (1997). Artificial Intelligence and Expert System Technologies: Prospects. In: Libraries for the New Millennium: Implications for Managers. Library Association Publishing, London.

9. Nageswara Rao, K. and Babu, K.H. (2001). Role of Librarian in Internet and World Wide Web Environment. Informing Science. 4 (1) : 25-34.

About Author

Dr. Anil Kumar Dhiman, Information Scientist, Gurukul Kangri University, Hardwar
E-mail: akvishvakarma@rediffmail.com,