Changing Expectations of Academic Libraries

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INTRODUCTION

The digital age has fundamentally changed how academic libraries operate. With the advent of electronic resources the job descriptions and duties of librarians have expanded to include many of the same roles that IT professionals traditionally play. These roles include dealing with computers and software on a scale not seen before, as libraries attempt to stay current and relevant by adding computers to their building. How each library has risen to meet these new challenges may be different, but there are a few things that remain consistent among them. Academic libraries in the modern age are expecting a different type of education and experience from their librarians. The administration expects them to deal with virtual materials and virtual resources, which requires different skills and expertise. These libraries have also adapted their mission statements and functions to reflect the change in their resources and personnel. Some of these changes have come slowly over the last two decades, while others have come fast, but they will not be the only changes that libraries will have to endure. Technology is continuing to change at a pace not seen before in history, and patrons are expecting the library to embrace more and more of it.

BACKGROUND

Most people would say that the digital age was born with the internet. However digital technologies are much older than that, dating back to computers built in the 1960s. Libraries at this time were using MARC records, which were digitized and are still in use today (Arms, 2012). Though digital databases and e-books were still far in the future, libraries began using this technology early on to improve the quality of the services that they were offering their patrons. Technology was used to streamline libraries on both the back end and the front end, from the records that catalogers used to the way that patrons found materials in the library. Card catalogs became obsolete as computing power increased and those records were able to be digitized. The libraries still had tons of physical materials for people to use in their research, but the digital catalog helped make it easier for people to find those materials.

In addition, telephones, not traditionally considered digital technology, helped the library answer questions without patrons having to be in the library. This was a marked change from previous interaction with patrons, because much of the traditional reference interview relies on the body language of the patron and picking up on clues that they do not know they are giving off. Without the visual cues, librarians had to sharpen their ability to hone in on problems. Just because the patron was calling with their question did not mean that they were certain about the information they needed. This remote-access librarianship paved the way for other methods of contacting librarians, including e-mail, instant messenger, and chat services. Learning from what they had done with regards to telephone interactions, librarians were able to adapt their reference interactions to serve their patron populations through these methods. While this greatly increased the contact librarians had with patrons, it did decrease the

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number of people coming into the library, and that was only the start.

Technological advances led to even more new horizons for the library. When the world wide web and its contemporaries were established, they brought with them a new type of resource, the web page, which librarians had to learn how to vet for accuracy and timeliness (Arms, 2012). Though there were many contenders for what would become the internet, the World Wide Web persevered as the accepted software, albeit with many changes over time. These changes included the addition of colors and images, as well as behind-the-scenes information that could be registered within the properties of the web page, but there were still questions about the authenticity of the information being presented on many webpages. Because anyone could build a webpage, this led to misinformation and confusion among library patrons, a problem that still continues in various forms to this day. Academic libraries in their research capacity especially struggled with this problem as students began incorporating webpages into their research. Confusing the matter were many valid websites which held information that could not easily be accessed in other ways. Organizations and government departments began releasing content on the internet. Access became easy, but tracing the source became hard. Furthermore, studies at this time showed that, while students knew that the library had a webpage, and had access to the internet, those surveyed felt that the library and the internet were two separate things (D'Esposito, 1999, p. 458), leading to more concern that students were not getting the best advice when it came to research materials. At the academic library, researchers, in this case students, also had to contend with professors who would not let them use online resources for fear of misinformation. This practice of barring that type of resource led to students not fully understanding how to vet sources on the World Wide Web for their own everyday use.

Then, databases began forming to house materials that were both available in print and digitally. This led to database aggregators such as Ebscohost, JStor, and CSA. Libraries found themselves having to allocate more and more of their budgets to these electronic resources. In some ways, these database aggregators made things easier for the academic library, because digital resources were available in packages that did not initially require much thought from the librarians. However, as libraries continued to sign agreements with these aggregators, they found that there was considerable overlap in the various collections, and that dropping parts of these agreements would increase the price of the packages, essentially giving libraries less information for more money (Zimerman, 2010). However, libraries could not afford to just drop out of the digital age entirely; students, now familiar with web searching, began expecting resources to be available to them online, without them ever having to step foot in a library. Digital technologies allowed the universities these libraries were associated with to offer classes online for the first time, swelling their enrollment numbers. However, academic libraries saw a decline in their patron numbers even as enrollment continued to grow. This juxtaposition of events required a response from the academic library.

ACADEMIC LIBRARIES RESPOND TO THE DIGITAL AGE

Early in the transition, academic libraries realized that they would need to change to continue to stay relevant. Some of these changes were relatively simple, and included adding the most popular databases as they first began, or offering technology classes for their students who had missed out on those opportunities in high school. However, as public libraries and school libraries increased their technological advancements, academic libraries found themselves having to go ever farther to keep up with the demand of the digital age.