



Able to Leap Info Silos in a Single Bound

AI looms as “the end of life as we know it” for information professionals and libraries. Your smart speaker can already answer your questions without you lifting a finger, so who needs librarians? Smart home devices create a new level of comfort by expecting algorithms to figure out what we’re asking for and then retrieve it for us. As a result, people are being trained to accept “good enough” answers, and that has information professionals—rightly—alarmed. Even more alarming will be the impact on information-seeking behavior as today’s kids in Generation Alpha—growing up with robot toys as peers—join the workforce.

Parents are being advised to teach their children to call that cute educational robot “it” rather than “he” or “she” to help them differentiate between a device’s algorithmic intelligence and the creative intelligence of the person who designed it. Likewise, info pros can use the ubiquity of smart devices as an opportunity to have conversations within our organization about what information resources and services really are. Smart devices are great for answering straightforward questions that have unambiguous answers, but they’re useless when presented with a query such as, “How are political trends in southern Europe going to affect our supply chain?”

We info pros need to position ourselves not just as a friendlier search engine, but as a trusted expert in bringing insight to information. We have to find the most strategic role we can play within our organizations, where we can best deploy our librarian superpower—the ability to see the enterprise-wide info ecosystem and recognize what is needed, where, and by whom.

This superpower comes into play as we evaluate, acquire, and manage content portfolios, both within the library and elsewhere in the organization. We understand why “mere” full-text content may not suffice and why we need to explore ways to semantically enrich the digital resources we acquire. And we look for opportunities to partner with IT and user groups to map internal and external digital content with specialized tools and resources to enhance discoverability and create new insight.

Info pros can leverage their information resources in creative ways. I recently interviewed the director of a research institute library, who described her use of bibliometric reporting tools to expand her library’s offerings. Based on a commercially available bibliometric service the library subscribes to, she identifies the impact of the published authors within the institute. Her annual compilation of that infor-

mation has become the standard within the organization for evaluating researchers’ influence and awarding bonuses. As she said to me, “I really wanted to expand how the library was viewed within the institution, to find ways to integrate ourselves into the systems that measure the organization’s most important activities. When we are integral to the compensation system, we don’t have to have a conversation about whether we need a particular resource.”

Another critical aspect of our librarian superpower is the ability to create central connecting points for groups and knowledge that otherwise get siloed. Info pros think broadly and look for opportunities to leverage content acquisition and enhance the information flow within their organizations. Recently, I talked with a library manager who organized regular meetings of all the data scientists in her organization who used a particular dataset. The scientists found it tremendously valuable to learn how other groups were using the dataset, and they identified new ways to collaborate and share insights and APIs. (An added benefit of the library manager’s data scientist meet-ups was that she got the scientists to provide her with stories that described the value of the dataset they were all using, which she used to justify her budget the next year.)

As AI becomes ubiquitous to the point of disappearing from our awareness, info pros need to be much more proactive in teaching everyone—in the workplace, within the family, with friends and neighbors—the distinction between machine intelligence and human intelligence. I foresee a time when online access to the world’s information will become universal, and there will be some advanced interface that will appear to be as authoritative and personalized as Google does now. (Raise your hand if, like me, you dream of a time when you can search for information the way Tom Cruise navigated through holographic computer screens in *Minority Report*.) But there will always be a need for info pros to bring to the project what algorithms cannot. Our superpower enables us to see questions like these: “Why?” “Why not?” “What’s missing?” and “Where’s the hidden bias?” All of these questions go beyond the ability of any AI system. The role of info pros will continue to be to maintain the presence, value, and wonder of human intelligence in every information-seeking activity.

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uses her librarian superpower only for good.

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