



Amaze Them With Library Science

I remember a brief period back in the mid-2000s in which the meme “She blinded me with library science” was floating around M.L.S. discussion forums. (See the archived image, from the Questionable Content webcomic: [web.archive.org/web/20061109105719/http://www.jephdraw.com/random/libraryscience.png](http://www.jephdraw.com/random/libraryscience.png).)

I was recently reminded of the fact that we info pros often fail to appreciate the magic we wield with our library science. A prospective client called me recently to talk about his concerns that the investment professionals in his firm were not efficiently gathering the right information about their industry. He wanted help in designing a better environmental scan. What got my attention was his model for an effective news monitoring program—a print clipping service he remembered from his first job out of college, distributed by the corporate library. While longtime librarians wince at the memory of photocopied tables of contents, there’s a lesson here: Our patrons valued those print products because they provided curated, relevant, reliable news. Now, our clients are dealing with an overwhelming amount of news and a dearth of good filtering tools. They are yearning for a 2021 version of the trusted, customized news filtering service that info pros know how to provide.

When I mentioned to a colleague my client’s memory of news clippings, she described a conversation she had just had with one of her clients. He was reviewing the results of her work—a collection of public records, along with a summary of what those records mean—and told her that, while he could get an intern to retrieve the records, he valued her ability to make sense of what was found. Yes, he recognized her librarian superpower, the ability to take what she found and transform it from a data dump into insightful, actionable information.

As information managers focus on identifying open access datasets, negotiating text and data mining licenses, and navigating the challenges of an increasingly remote workforce, we may lose track of the value of our traditional library science skills. Yes, the cataloging operation now involves identifying enterprise-specific ontologies and licensing metadata. A literature search now involves knowing where grey literature is likely to appear in addition to creating effective search strategies for traditionally published content.

But more importantly, we information professionals have the ability to see the possibilities in information. Just as a sculptor can look at a stone and see the sculpture’s final form, so we info pros can look at a dataset, a news platform, or the results of a query and see what we could do next with

the information. Our users, conversely, are struggling to find reliable sources, stay current in their field while not getting overwhelmed with repetitive or irrelevant information, and efficiently distill and understand the meaning behind the information they have.

How might we look at our roles with an eye to rediscovering and resurfacing our library science superpowers?

Information acquisition: Info pros know how to evaluate both the reliability and the cost-effectiveness of information sources, whereas our users are often less skilled at evaluating an information resource and determining its suitability. We can teach our users what to look for in an information source and how to compare free vs. fee-based sources, and we can reintroduce them to the library’s licensed content.

Information retrieval: While everyone believes they are above-average searchers, info pros really can get better results from Google than most folks. One way of getting around the assumption of expertise is to offer short video tutorials that show users new approaches for finding in-depth information in their field of interest, or customized search portals to help make the library’s power search tools no more intimidating than a Google search box.

Information management: Most users assume that, once a project is completed, they no longer need to retain that specialized dataset and its APIs or keep archived copies of web content. We can help build information management best practices into research projects by raising issues of retention and backup at the beginning of the project and offering guidance on the importance of information retention and interaccessibility.

Information tools: While users may know us as information experts, they may not realize that one of our superpowers is the ability to help users learn about new information technology and tools. We can create virtual labs and LibGuides that point users to the best resources in an emerging field, such as AI or blockchain.

As we look at how information professionals can best meet our clients’ information needs today, it helps to remember that they may be struggling to find and manage their information sources, without realizing that all they need to do is call on their local librarian superhero.

Mary Ellen Bates (mbates@BatesInfo.com, *Reluctant-Entrepreneur.com*)
still thrills at the sight of a well-constructed Boolean query.
Comments? Email the editor-in-chief (marydee@xmission.com).