



Mad Men and Research Librarians

Libraries have been getting mixed press lately. The New York Public Library ran a fantastic advertisement on Black Friday last November. “Holiday Savings: All books are free at your local public library. For an unlimited time only!” it proclaimed. I appreciate the NYPL’s creativity, and I admire the generosity of the anonymous NYPL trustee who paid for the ad. But then I read an article in January discussing Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg’s testimony before Congress and the failure of some Senators to grasp basic technology concepts. A former congressional staffer was quoted as saying, “It’s like *Mad Men*. You’ve got the secretary who does the typing and the librarian who does the research.” Ouch! (To add perspective, the last episodes of *Mad Men* were set in 1970, just two years before Roger Summit launched Dialog as a commercial online information service and librarians brought online research into their organizations.)

Whether we like it or not, libraries are still often seen in fairly traditional ways. And while most special and academic libraries still maintain at least a small print collection and librarians still “do” research, libraries and information centers need to examine their messaging from their clients’ points of view. The meaning of the word “research” has changed, and many of us forget that, outside of academia and R&D settings, “research” connotes using a search engine to find information. We info pros can object to this devaluation of the word—“No, really... Research involves far more than a Google search!”—but we might as well be yelling at the darned kids to stay off the lawn.

As information technology evolves and our users’ familiarity with analytical tools increases, libraries and information centers are called on to expand in a variety of areas. Public libraries are creating makerspaces, encouraging civic engagement, helping workers build new skills, and finding new ways to help local organizations connect to their communities. Academic libraries support text and data mining projects, help acquire research datasets, and lead the open-access discussion. Corporate and other special libraries are involved in data analytics projects; they monitor social media; and library staff serve as embedded info pros outside the library proper. Sure, libraries all support research in one way or another, but we info pros have to use a different vocabulary if we want to continue to be seen as relevant within our organizations.

Librarians and information professionals facilitate the acquisition, organization, analysis, synthesis, management, and distribution of information. I see our role as somewhat

analogous to an organism’s circulatory system—monitoring needs, gathering resources, distributing them as needed, and clearing out detritus. That function looks different in a bee than in a barracuda or a bear, but the underlying purpose is the same. To stretch this analogy, libraries and information centers have evolved and speciated into organisms with vastly different needs and evolutionary niches. During times of environmental upheaval, the adaptations that helped us thrive in the past may no longer serve us.

The premium resources that we rely on also need to adjust to the new info-environment. Free and advertising-supported information resources are driving down the perceived value of online services, and “good enough” is seen as sufficient. Not only do users believe that Google search results automatically put the most reliable results first, but smart devices are teaching us to expect a single answer to whatever we ask them. This trust in Google’s relevance algorithm is great if you want to know the length of a Martian day or who won yesterday’s game, but a bad habit if you ask a more nuanced question, such as the potentially disruptive threats to your industry or best practices for handling a particular chemical compound.

The premium information services that we rely on must continue to improve their service to remain competitive. Their user interfaces need to feel as intuitive as Google. Just as search engines use machine learning to continually recognize new synonyms and overlapping concepts, our users expect a value-added service to offer some form of intuitive, natural language searching. And there should be as few clicks and obstacles as possible—users avoid paywalls as effortlessly as the internet routes around damage. Info pros must become information enablers, identifying gaps and blockages within their organization and finding the best way to improve the information flow.

As the information industry encompasses new technologies and our profession requires new skills and proficiencies, info pros must continue to focus on our underlying role as the informational circulatory system within our organization. How can we continue our mission to support the acquisition and use of information by our clients, while adjusting our services to reflect the evolving critical information needs of our clients? What will the informational circulatory system of 2020 look like?

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