



Essay

Librarianship, After the Information Shock

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ABSTRACT

In 2019 I wrote of the need for a new librarianship centered on knowledge, and the learning conversation. While that argument holds seven years later, I did not anticipate that those conversations could be held with a non-human conversant. This is causing an Information Shock whose impact goes far beyond the synthetic documents AI can produce, only an extension of the last shock. The deeper disruption is that AI can now instill beliefs, true and false, without accountability. This goes well beyond current efforts in AI literacy. It calls for a full embrace of the new librarianship and a new role for librarians as the accountable conversant in these AI-Human exchanges, standing on the side of the person to ground understanding in evidence and culture. We must claim that role now, because whether this shock unfolds through opaque commercial systems or something for the public good remains a choice.

KEYWORDS

Artificial intelligence, Information Shock, Conversations

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My 2019 piece (Lankes, 2020) was, in essence, one long argument that we needed to reconceptualize librarianship around knowledge and how people learn. Librarianship had transformed around the society it sought to serve. For Dewey, it was an engine because all around him was an industrial age driven by steam. In the last third of the twentieth century, the library was an information organization, retrieving documents and answering queries. The time had come, so I asserted, to acknowledge that the center of everything a library did was a person seeking to make their life better through being smarter (learning, building knowledge).

I think those arguments, which I won't take the time to repeat, hold up. Twenty-first century librarianship can be seen as a move toward the individual who, as part of a community, seeks to build knowledge. Reference has transformed from matching a need to a resource to an instructional encounter to build a better understanding of a topic. Collections have transformed from owned print collections to hybrid tools ready to deploy to a community need.

Some of this transformation has been rhetorical, but we also see solid examples. When Oslo built their new central library in the heart of downtown, it culled its collection by 50% to make room not for future growth of materials, but for their neighbors to come and work and convene. The TU Delft academic library built a wall of collections more as inspiration to the stacked workspaces of students than as a direct service.

However, what I did not see in 2019 was that the groundwork for this new librarianship created a perfect platform for a new type of knowledge-building interaction. An interaction that I argued was fundamental to librarianship, the learning conversation, has now met a new moment: an Information Shock brought on by generative artificial intelligence.

Information Shocks², while rare, have occurred throughout history when the means of information production is disrupted and/or transformed. You are living at the end of the last shock that occurred at the end of World War II with the massive influx of scientific and technical information amplified by the introduction of the digital computer. It was this shock, still disrupting over 80 years later, that transformed librarianship into Library and Information Science. It was a shock that moved the document into the central place of the field over the book. It led to new tools like information retrieval and the search engine. It forced us to confront issues like information overload and the scourge of disinformation.

Today we face a new shock from generative AI, but it is not the one you are probably thinking of. Yes, AI can produce masses of new documents (reports, songs, code, essays, books). And yes, AI can absolutely produce slop and aid in misinformation campaigns.

However, that effect of AI is just an extension of the previous shock. That is still producing document-like objects that can be identified, interrogated, and collected (or dismissed). That form of AI authorship is the reason this journal has an AI policy that is all about output (what words did it produce, what was the prompt, what was the tool). That aspect

of AI is the reason for AI literacy. But that form of AI authorship is actually accounted for in the 2019 article and the move of collections as secondary to learning.

The real shock from AI can be seen in an assumption right there in the middle of the 2019 article, the assumption that the parties in a knowledge building conversation had to be human. While I stand by the assertion that knowledge is inherently human (it can't be recorded or shelved and I am far from convinced it lies in a Large Language Model), I can no longer say that the conversations that build knowledge have to be wholly human.

It is the second form of AI authorship that is causing our current Information Shock. Now when a person seeks to learn about something and they go to Google, Google doesn't present them with a list of possible resources; it gives an answer. What's more, that answer is followed up by a list of questions. A person answering those questions can now refine, push back, argue, and ask for more. And here is the important part, so can Google. Google (or more precisely Gemini) does not have to be conscious to do this. We don't have to wait for the mythical artificial general intelligence for this to happen. It is happening right now.

When I called for a librarianship based on learning and conversation, I didn't foresee a conversant that could not only pass the Turing test, but one that did so by ripping apart the contents of the internet (and a lot of copyrighted materials without permission) into tens of billions of parameters. When one of our community members searches with Claude or ChatGPT, they are not being presented with documents to pick from, they are being presented with a stochastic reply based on a non-deterministic training process that engages a person. A process that builds rapport and has been shown to create affective relations.

In my 2019 piece, I talked about the limitations of information literacy. Here we see the limitation of AI literacy. Sure, students can use these tools to cheat and write an essay. But we see people turning to these tools for medical advice, voting advice, even for companionship when lonely. The results of these conversations are not a document that can be checked; they are the medicine taken, the candidate supported, the sadness abated. And no literacy can touch this.

All this fits perfectly with the model presented in the 2019 piece. People seek out these conversations to learn AND connect. What isn't fully stated in the earlier article is that when knowledge is built, nothing says that the knowledge is truth or correct. It is assumed that librarians standing in these interactions do so to ensure a match to evidence and community norms. With AI conversants, there is no such guarantee. In fact, we have plenty of evidence from hallucinated evidence to delusion-building cognitive reinforcement, that AI is not an accountable conversant. The shock is not the scale of synthetic documents AI can produce, it is the scale of beliefs, true and false, that AI can instill without accountability.

And so, we see the road ahead for the new librarianship in the evolution from the shock. Librarians need to build community so that all feel welcome to test out their new beliefs. Librarians must be the accountable conversant in these conversations, not be the human in the

loop. There already is a human in the loop: the person with the question. They need to be the human on the side of that person grounding understanding in reality and culture. Those hybrid collections still need curation, but as grounding for new learning, rather than as starting points for it.

Once again, this shock is happening, and it is happening now. It is happening in the change in how much time people spend on Google result pages because they are now reading answers rather than picking pointers. It is happening as seen when Pew reported earlier this year that about half of American adults are using chatbots, and most of them read the AI-written summary at the top of a search result rather than the sources beneath it.

Let me close this reflection with this. Please do not read these words as an endorsement of AI as it is. While it is happening now, it doesn't have to happen through a world of commercial companies that lack transparency and are consuming massive natural resources to privatize the internet. That is a choice. An Information Shock is as disruptive to OpenAI and Google as it is to you and me. By seeing our libraries not just as places for a community, but as an instrument of our communities' need for a greater good, we must guide the ripples of this shock toward better outcomes for those that we serve, the field, and society at large. I called for a new librarianship. Now is the time for that new librarianship to get to work.

References

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