

Editorial essay: A librarian by another name

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Abstract: Now that content is increasingly born digital and residing somewhere in the ether, what will become of the library? And most importantly to all of us in the profession, what will become of the librarian? We're seeing the convergence of information – content, data, knowledge capture – collapsing more deeply and resoundingly into the digital domain. We have finally arrived at the juncture where the role of the librarian must diverge into areas of specialization. Not the kind of specialization that limits a person's potential, but that leads to areas of focus and increases their value.

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Now that content is increasingly born digital and residing somewhere in the ether, what will become of the library? And most importantly to all of us in the profession, what will become of the librarian?

We've all been pondering those questions, with no real answers or consensus. Meanwhile, people – particularly young people – are sidestepping the library, and librarians are facing the prospect that their value will be forgotten. Legacy thinking has gotten us nowhere in solving this dilemma. Some say we have a branding problem. But if it were that simple, we could fuel a massive rebranding campaign. Branding is about perception. We're dealing with something more foundational. We're seeing the convergence of information – content, data, knowledge capture – collapsing more deeply and resoundingly into the digital domain.

The librarian role has been traditionally perceived as being about limited collections and user communities constrained by location and time. Librarians have been seen as generalists, forced to know a little bit about everything that's relevant to their world. Even as digitization crept in and information technology was being implemented, the generalist approach persisted. Today, technology is evolving very rapidly and digital content is growing exponentially. The generalist can no longer keep up in a meaningful way.

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I have seen this shift for some time now with business, law, government and universities. The demand for generalists is diminishing, being replaced by the need for specific skills and greater depth of experience in knowledge management, research and analysis, subject matter expertise, user interface and accessibility, outreach, education and technical services like metadata and taxonomies.

As general skills are usurped by specialization, maintaining the library “plant” is being viewed as an unnecessary burden. The costs of facility management and use of library real estate are eyed critically. Books are being eliminated or stored either off-site or on floors not frequented by users. Library space is being repurposed and library services are being delivered and managed in new ways.

This journey has been a bumpy one. The transformation is upsetting the status quo and unsettling to the librarians whose livelihood and purpose have been directly affected. But as new people enter the profession and the changing of the guard accelerates, things will shake out, because they always do. Today’s college student population may be the first generation that is truly disinterested in the library field of the past. Many are simply not interested in being in a “library,” period. They consider themselves part of the information management family as opposed to foster children abandoned by their library parents. They are interested in approaches that are flexible and interdisciplinary, with a great emphasis on technology.

Our colleges and universities understand this. I'm a member of the External Advisory Board for the University of Michigan's School of Information. Those students interested in becoming traditional librarians make up the smallest percentage of the school's population. The degrees conferred in this program no longer include the word librarian or library, nor do the program descriptions, which claim to prepare students for "*emerging careers that meet the rapidly growing information-management needs of an increasingly interconnected world.*"

One of those needs will continue to be the "self-serve" model, facilitated by search engines, Library as a Service and other technology. It is simply too impractical not to leverage these tools. We should be thrilled to offload the burden of answering simple questions to Google. While it has disrupted some work and taken away a service that some librarians found satisfying, it also frees up time and energy for more challenging knowledge and information work for those who are willing to make the leap.

So let's stop wringing our hands over the status of the library. As long as there are traditional books, there will be traditional libraries. Otherwise, the new digital collections of content, data and other information will be given new names and lead to new opportunities for specialized roles and jobs.

As for the people who do this important work, we might simply say, "They once were called librarians."

