



# Virtual Library Environment and Role of Librarian

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## 1. Introduction

Before commencing an examination of the role of librarians within the virtual library environment, it is necessary to understand the phrase 'virtual library'. The concept of the virtual library has developed with the growth in telecommunication networks, especially the Internet. The 'virtual library' emulates a 'real' library but is understood to be a product of the virtual world of the internet. To work with a meaningful definition within the field of librarianship, I will examine some of the definitions of the virtual library appearing in the professional literature.

The virtual library environment encompasses the digital library concept but is more than a collection of digitized resources. The virtual library provides access to an integrated collection of print, electronic, and multimedia resources delivered seamlessly and transparently to users regardless of their physical location or the location and ownership of the information.

## 2. The role of Librarian

In order to reach an understanding of the role of librarians in the virtual library environment, it is worthwhile examining the role librarians have filled in the past. There was little if any distinction between an archive and a library in ancient times. For many centuries, book collecting was an opportunity either to display one's wealth or scholarship results. It was not until the nineteenth century that library collections became more universally available. Library science began to codify standards for describing and organizing resources, and librarians began to move beyond merely keeping and preserving books. It is not enough that the books are cared for properly, are well arranged, are never lost... [The librarian] must put every facility in the way of the readers so that they shall be led on from good to better. After studying their wants, he must teach them how they may themselves select their reading wisely (Rice-Livy & Racine, 1997).

The librarian's role grew from that of a collector and preserver of information resources to a professional involved in very complex issues of the organization, the dissemination of and access to information.

The librarian's role, particularly during the past two decades, has further evolved to encompass the burgeoning technological development.

The library's role is to select, acquire, organize and make available an appropriate subset of ...resources... The library has a role here in the digital world as with print - not just in excluding access to rubbish, but in encouraging access paths to quality. This broad understanding of the role of libraries in the electronic age has gained widespread acceptance. In a 1998 report to the European Parliament, *The Role of Libraries in the Modern World* a similarly broad view was accepted: The unique function of libraries is to acquire, organize, offer for use and preserve publicly available material irrespective of the form in which it is packaged (print, cassette, CD-ROM, network form) in such a way that, when it is needed, it can be found and put to use.'

These definitions indicate the roles that librarians have assumed during the final half of the twentieth century. They acquire information resources relevant to their user population in whatever format is available and appropriate; they organize the information within the library collection; they provide a means for users to access that information, and they educate users in accessing and interpreting information resources. Librarians are moving beyond the traditional roles of collection maintenance and custodial duties to newer functions of translating, accessing and marketing resources beyond the walls of the physical library collection.

### **3. To provide intellectual access to information in any format:**

Providing intellectual access to information is a role librarians have filled for a long time. Traditionally Librarians have done this via print-based resources. During the second half of the twentieth century, the range of available resources expanded to include microform, video and audio formats. The final decades of the twentieth century witnessed a further explosion in formats, and libraries can now offer information in print, audio, video, microforms, numeric, computer programs, or multimedia composites of each. For librarians, the most important issue is to provide the information in whatever form it is packaged. As McMillan (2000) observed, librarians, do not attempt to meet users' information needs with just one format. Within the virtual library environment, the choice of format is not the most crucial issue: it is being able to provide information resources to patrons regardless of format. Librarians and patrons will no longer be restricted to 'a single entity where everything is stored', but rather librarian will be able to offer 'a range of services and collections, linked together or made accessible librarian section networks'.

In such an environment, access to information does not always imply ownership, merely that the library has negotiated the means by which patrons gain access to resources and information. This has created what Lim terms a paradigm shift 'from ownership to access. This, in turn, has created a new role for librarians - that of negotiating access rights through contracts and licenses. The development of electronic access to scholars and journals is a key example of the shift from ownership to access. University and research libraries especially find the violation of providing electron access to journal subscriptions to deal with complex multi-campus organizations where the client population comprises an increasing mixture of on- and off-campus students. While electronic access to journals appears to

be a godsend to patrons and researchers, cutting out countless hours of tedious bibliographic detective work, librarians' behind-the-scenes decisions and negotiations to provide the service are fraught with numerous complex issues. Electronic serials must be evaluated against the relative importance of content. For example, scientific journals may lack full equations, graphics, and charts. Journals within the social sciences and humanities may lack book reviews and advertisements. These content issues must be weighed against speed and ease of access issues. A further issue to be considered is the ability to access earlier issues of an electronic subscription. With printed subscriptions, libraries own and may continue to access those issues they purchase during the lifetime of the subscription. With electronic subscriptions, libraries pay for access to the journals rather than ownership. At the end of a subscription, a library may no longer have the right to access a title. Some publishers will provide access to a specific number of issues, such as the previous five years, rather than a cumulative arrangement. The need to negotiate continuing access with publishers is becoming a significant responsibility for librarians.

Providing electronic access to journal literature was one of the first ways libraries began to use the newly evolving technologies. The development of electronic reserve (e-reserve) collections demonstrates how librarians adapt new technologies to deliver services more effectively. Electronic reserves allow digitising a printed document, video, audio, or data, so that many students can access it simultaneously, without the limits of attending a library building within opening hours.

#### **4. To evaluate available sources of information.**

There are numerous free resources available on the web, to say nothing of the full-text journals now available. Whether or not to include these in the library catalogue is a challenge facing librarians in the virtual library environment. This issue became apparent at the University of Melbourne Library when a new single gateway connection from public access PCs to local CD-ROM networks, stand-alone databases and the internet was developed.

#### **5. To organize and structure information.**

Traditionally, librarians have organized and managed information resources through classification schemes. The retrieval of information relevant to a user's enquiry has been facilitated by standardized methods of describing resources, such as MARC. Ironically, organizing vast quantities of data is becoming a demanding issue for those involved in developing the internet. Mason (1998) noted that 'the more there is on the web, the harder it becomes to find...' Microsoft, Sun Microsystems, and others are now developing indexing systems' the structure of which is closely aligned to the Dewey Decimal Classification scheme or the Library of Congress Classification scheme.

#### **6. To ensure the preservation of information.**

The issue of preservation in the virtual library environment is a complex one. Librarians and archivists have long-established standards and guidelines for preserving and storing print

materials for long-term survival. The preservation of electronic and digital information resources creates new dilemmas for librarians and archivists.

## 7. Economic Impact

The economic implications of developing a virtual library are varied and complex. On the one hand, libraries face immense increases in budget requirements for the necessary equipment to provide access to electronic and networked services. Another cost, which is less obvious and immediate, is the increasing demands on librarians to develop and evaluate resources in new formats, often without a corresponding increase in staffing to offset their 'new' responsibilities. On the other hand, the ability to network resources and provide digital versions of previously printed material can reduce the costs of some help and services.

## 8. Conclusion

Librarians are professionals trained in acquiring, organization, retrieval, and dissemination of information. In essence, the practice of librarianship in the virtual library environment will not be very different from that in the traditional print-based library. The librarian's role will continue to include selecting appropriate resources, providing access to such resources, offering instruction and assistance to patrons in interpreting resources, and preserving both the medium and the information contained therein. Librarians will also continue their role in the broader arena of society in representing issues of access to information to governments and other decision-making bodies.

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