The Book – It’s all in the Delivery

Essay #2 – Nancy Jansen

Changes in the way people receive information are transforming the library – particularly in academic libraries. Digital lifestyles, the power of search engines, communication methods, and remote learning have led up to a decreased reliance on physical materials and local collections. The future of the book in academic libraries is already shifting away from paper-based; however public libraries are not embracing this change as quickly. Libraries, academic libraries in particular, must act now to make the shift from physically owned materials to digitally accessible materials to meet the needs of their current and future students and patrons. This shift should have a positive economic affect on the library and promotes a positive ecological affect for all.

I recently posed these two questions to the Executive Director of the Luther College Library: What is the mix of electronic resources vs. hard copy materials? How is this changing? He responded that the library at Luther has begun an intentional (but gradual) draw-down in the purchase of physical materials. They have reduced their monograph allocations by ten percent, and will be using a portion of the money to support programs in information literacy. They actively seek out electronic reference materials, have a wide-range of electronic databases, and purchase eBooks that link to full-text through the web. He also stated that the Luther Library’s physical collection will not grow again, and that it will be downsized as virtual materials become available.¹

Students now expect their college experiences to be digitally enabled. “..it is vital that our on-line resources and services be highly integrated and transparent to end users. High school

¹ Christopher Barth (Executive Director Luther College Library), e-mail message with the author, October 2010.
and college students interact more freely with such technologies than most libraries – despite our training as information professionals. In fact the technologies are largely transparent to them; they are simply a part of how the world works.”\(^2\) To a patron growing up with today’s technology, e-Books, on-line reference materials, and digital text books will be the norm; a physical book may be considered antiquated, inconvenient, and cumbersome.

Confronting the tradeoffs between print publications and digital resources are “as distinct from one another as they are different from the past.”\(^3\) Libraries must make changes and progress from being perceived as institutions of the realm of the book, to institutions that provide pathways to high-quality information in a variety of media and information services. Libraries must determine which journal subscriptions and physical acquisitions to cancel. Time must be allocated to negotiating licensing agreements with digital partners, acquiring relevant databases and digital collections, and implementing new software to promote federated searching. For public libraries, the mix of the ages and computer literacy of their patron base will also be a factor. With this trend toward “non-book” sources comes the problem of managing and archiving these resources. “Data that can be copied, pasted, mixed, adapted, recast for evolving purposes and new modes of understanding has very strong appeal in today’s information environment, particularly for young people. The problem of managing and preserving knowledge produced in these shifting realms of digital proliferation is enormous, and it is one that librarians need to be integral to solving.”\(^4\) In addition, libraries must market themselves and


their services to become indispensable to their patrons (students, faculty, etc.), provide access to materials beyond their own walls, and provide common space to foster academic community.

“The library of today can be considered an open system that receives input from the outside, absorbs it, transforms that information, and then transmits it back into the environment.”

To be successful, the library, and its employees must change, grow, and bend with the needs (inputs) from their patrons and the environment outside its domain. Library staff must include those that have strong technical skills, including supporting the advancing technology to adapt to the ever changing electronic and digital resources. Library management must embrace change and they and their staff must not focus on how collections and information gathering were done in the past or are being done currently, but what this process will need to be in the future.

In the area of reading for pleasure, there is also a shift from the physical book. The trend toward eBooks is becoming more prevalent as these resources are becoming easier and more affordable to acquire. This change is affecting publishers and well as libraries. “Certainly, going digital gives us ways to reach more readers more efficiently by removing the costs of physical production….There are ecological and financial efficiencies.” A book can now become more than what is between its covers – it can become a digital experience that can include video interviews, blog posts, and messages from authors. Libraries need to embrace this new wave of e-Reading and be able to support this medium.

As with all service professions, libraries must keep up with their current and future customers needs. Technology must be embraced and utilized to the advantage of their patrons to

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bring the most current and accurate information in the most efficient, concise, and cost effective manner. The future of the book depends on this. Who knows – by 2040 everyone may be curling up with their favorite author using some type of e-Reader!

Works Sited


