When so Much Information is Available for Free on the Internet, Does the World Still Need Libraries?

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Abstract. Libraries have traditionally been repositories of information, whether the media was clay, papyrus, velum, paper, or electronic. The main work of librarians has always been to organize and to locate information. In this new era of expanding information technology and communication (ICT), of advances in the use of the internet, and of the expansion of social media, the world has created new roles for librarians. Libraries are shifting orientation from being repositories to institutions specializing in information access and information services. In the past librarians largely controlled the content, organization, and access to information in their libraries. With the advent of new technologies, increasing volumes of information are becoming available to the inquiring public, in new and different formats. In addition to the traditional library skills, librarians at all levels of the hierarchy have expanded their ICT skills to keep pace with new electronic media. In this article we explore how the role of librarians is changing in this new era. Our particular focus is on libraries and librarians in the Palestinian Territories, now and in the future. We suggest different ways Palestinian academic libraries and their work force can expand their roles vis à vis their academic readers. These suggestions may appeal to a broader international audience.

Keywords: Academic libraries, Librarians, Information repositories, Electronic resources, Future of libraries

1   Introduction

Academic librarians serve two very different communities: while they may be regarded as service providers to the academic community, they also support a discipline in its own right. As information professionals, librarians engage actively in academic life.

I.   *Create* -- Librarians create collections for their university readers, based on a defined need, finances and other available resources, and time allotted. Librarians also create scholarly literature about librarianship and library operations for readers interested in their subject matter. As part of their research, librarians issue surveys, tabulate data, and report their findings like any other evidence-based research group within a discipline.

II.   *Communicate* – A key element of librarianship is the belief that information was meant to circulate. A book that lies on a shelf unused, or a database that researchers do not know about, is a waste of space, effort, time, financial investment, and intellectual opportunity. The library plays a critical role in educating users and supporters about the expanding capabilities of the library as an academic, educational, community, national, and cultural resource.

III. *Collaborate* – As creators, purchasers, and providers of information, librarians work with a broad array of collaborators, both inside and outside their discipline. Librarians know that more heads are better than one. Working together is essential for the best ideas to emerge, to reach diverse audiences, and to make collective decisions in order to make good decisions about their investments in time and money.

In this new era of expanding information technology and communication (ICT), the advances in the use of the internet and the expansion of social media, the work and functionality of libraries are changing. Libraries are shifting from being repository-oriented to access- and service-oriented. In the past librarians largely controlled the content, organization, and access to information in their libraries. With the advent of new technologies, increasing volumes of information are becoming available to the inquiring public, in new and different formats. In addition to the traditional library skills, library staff at all levels of the institutional hierarchy have expanded their ICT skills to keep pace with electronic library tools and to search for information in electronic form.

2 The Changing Nature of Libraries

The preceding discussion reflects a view of library work as seen by librarians. How are libraries viewed from the world outside librarianship? Every academic knows that the world of information has been shifting from print to electronic format since computers and the internet became common tools. It is fair to ask, when so much information is available for free on the internet, **does the world still need libraries?**

Libraries have traditionally been repositories of information, whether written on the clay tablets in Sumer, scrolls in ancient Alexandria, velum in the Monastery of St. Catherine in the Sinai, paper on the stacks of university libraries, or in electronic format and accessible through computers inside and outside modern libraries. In the physical world, libraries have been selective about the quantitative resources they collect because they are limited in the space they can devote to their holdings, with competing demands for computer space, group meeting space, and quiet study space. Budgets are an inevitable constraint. Libraries may specialize as to subject, for example, a law library or an engineering library, but even they have similar constraints. Libraries also select for quality, based on the interests of their readers and the library's mission. Not all information is free. Academic libraries pay for access to journal articles in print and/or electronic format, just like they pay for books and other media, to provide collections for the benefit of their faculty, researchers, and students. Libraries have also been developing their "special collections", that is, collections that distinguish their university library among its peers. For example, in the West Bank, Bethlehem University has created the Turathuna Center of Palestinian Heritage. Al Quds University has a collection of exquisite Korans, donated to the library by local families. These library collections are intended for in-depth research, as a complement to other library resources under the same roof. The research purpose of the Special Collections department distinguishes it from a museum. Many libraries now create and host electronic collections of items in their special collections, including scanned images of their physical holdings, and this trend is increasingly common [1]. Google launched a book-scanning project [2]. Libraries are keeping pace with the changing formats of information.

3 The Changing Role of Librarians

If the world needs libraries until all information is free, **then do we need librarians?** While the internet may be considered an infinite "place to look for information", that information is not uniformly organized; it does not discriminate as to quality; and it is not comprehensive. These three features distinguish the value that librarians bring to libraries, including electronic libraries. Librarians study information science to learn philosophies of organizing and finding information. Traditionally, librarians worked with books. In our modern world, they also work with electronic information. The key concept is not the format of the work but the content.

In the university, librarians may be compared to "ministers without portfolio" because their work is essential to all academic fields and it cuts across all disciplines. Academic librarians acquire and organize information so it may be found. Academic librarians look for and buy the best information they can afford that is relevant to the research and educational needs of their readers. They rely on input from faculty and collaboration with other library staff locally and around the world to make purchase decisions, so that not every library pays for and houses the same information. Librarians are partners in education with both faculty and students.

The electronic world has created new roles for librarians. In the "paper days", librarians controlled the content, organization, and access to information in their libraries. With the advent of the internet, increasing volumes of information are becoming available to the inquiring public, in a new format. In addition to the traditional library skills, library staff have had to expand their computer literacy to keep pace with electronic library tools and to search for information in electronic form [3-4]. They now negotiate the purchase of aggregated units of electronic information that complement the paper resources already in their collections. They manage the online public access catalog, create new catalog records and links, and teach new users how to find and ethically use electronic information. The introduction of information on the internet has transformed the traditional roles of librarians by adding an electronic facet to their work.

Internet information is not organized in the same way as the traditional library. Many internet searches are conducted using relevant terms or phrases, while libraries have been organized using a structured order by subject, for example, the Library or Congress or the Dewey Decimal System. With the introduction of this electronic chaos into the world of information, there is an increased need for librarians to teach efficient research process

and source evaluation techniques for information in the electronic and paper formats. Some of the internet information is of questionable quality, is not current, and may be hard to find. Not all of the information available on the internet is truthful. Students in the current information culture may never have learned about traditional library organization, research techniques, and evaluation criteria. With the expanding universe of information and new users, the role of librarians is increasing. To answer the question, do we still need librarians, the answer is, Yes.

4 The Future of Libraries and the Libraries in Palestine

The future for libraries and librarians will continue until all information is available electronically, all users know how to find the information they are seeking, and they know how to assess it and use it ethically. Fourie and Meyer [5] summarized the situation like this: "Without librarians, libraries can do nothing; without library users, librarians have achieved nothing. Without libraries and librarians, users can do very little". Given the easy accessibility to information that is currently available and increasingly affordable, there does not seem to be a shortage of information seekers and users in the foreseeable future.

This discussion has considered libraries and librarians in the abstract. Let us consider more local and immediate concerns. What is the role of academic librarians in the Occupied Palestinian Territories? Like librarians everywhere, they acquire and organize information in order to make it accessible. They also conduct research in their own discipline. As new generations of information seekers come of age, they too will need guidance about evaluating the information they find and using it wisely [6].

A more interesting and forward-looking question is this: **What more can academic libraries and their work force, do for their academic readers in Palestine?** Following are three suggestions from the authors of this paper. While these examples concern libraries in Palestine, they may appeal to a broader international audience.

1. **Palestinian librarians can contribute to the creation of a cultural database online about Palestine.** The earliest written record of Palestinian history may be a clay tablet discovered outside Hebron, written in cuneiform [7]. In the last century, Palestinians were subject to Ottoman, British, and Israeli administrations, several physical relocations within their traditional homeland, and emigration to other areas of the world. Whether by force or by free will, objects of Palestinian culture have also been separated from their homeland. In the age of digitization, there is the opportunity to repatriate images of an object or of a work of literature, even if the object itself is not repatriated [8]. The electronic age offers an opportunity for Palestinians around the world to discover and enjoy their heritage, culture, and identity in a virtual setting. Other cultures have engaged in this process, with particular attention to respect for the communities concerned [9-10].

2. **Palestinian librarians can continue their efforts to regain possession of their former library holdings.** The trend to repatriate of personal property and items of national heritage is a world-wide phenomenon [11-12]. Library items currently held outside the West Bank and Gaza that rightly belonged to Palestinians fall under this umbrella, as do items held in Israeli libraries that belong to Palestinian families [13].

3. **Academic librarians in Palestine can collect data that is helpful to administrators as they allocate funds and make strategic decisions about resources.** On the one hand, today's librarians are in the ideal position to see where needs exist: they encounter change and opportunity in their daily work. On the other hand, strategic planning and funding are lengthy processes, so the librarians are not likely to influence the course of their own careers. Their observations, opinions, and aspirations may safely be considered among the goals for Palestinian academic libraries and not a bid for personal gain.

   In the spring of 2018, a survey was issued to library users in the Masri Library on Al Quds Campus in Abu Dis. The goal of the survey was to collect information from library users about library issues that impact users' daily work and careers. That data is currently being compiled and evaluated. The intended outcome is a report directed to the heads of academic units within Al Quds University and other in-

terested parties, as soon as it is ready. It is our plan for this pilot study will become the basis for a survey of all academic libraries in Palestine, so the result may be made available to interested administrative bodies.

These examples are just a few of the opportunities for libraries to participate in creating an educated and informed population.

5 Conclusions

Libraries and librarians continue to serve a valuable purpose in the information landscape. Increasing access to information in cyberspace opens the opportunity for libraries to adapt and redefine their role as democratic and accessible institutions for their users. Librarians collaborate with each other, with faculty, with administrators, and with government agencies to keep pace with increases in available information, within the parameters of costs, resources, and opportunities for the users. The core roles of the librarian, to organize information and to find it, have expanded in the electronic era due to the increasing need to teach users how to evaluate information in all its forms and use it ethically. As faculty, librarians also create information. The library staff is essential to universities, even when so much information is free, because they serve the changing needs of students and scholars in academic centers. One of the library's major roles is to communicate and educate the public about the resources, the services, and the benefits they bring to society, including the Palestinian society, so the public is aware of the value librarians contribute to education, culture, and national identity.

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