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Is the face of library changing with the onset of digital technology?

Libraries around the world play an important role of providing information, education and knowledge to the society. Libraries are complex institutions which have evolved over the years to have multiple roles. They have become a cultural, recreational and a life long learning center. Different building types such as schools, offices, manufacturing sectors etc. are all changing to accommodate the fast developing technology. It is only natural to expect that the library is keeping up with it as well.

The main purpose of a Library is to provide access to information and moreover to trustworthy information. Digital technology which has pervaded every aspect of human life has started a revolution in libraries not only in how data is stored but also how people search and get access to it. So our information-seeking behaviors and habits are changing significantly. This brief research paper looks into the impact of digital technology on the traditional libraries in three main categories:
1. impact on resource sharing
2. impact on people
3. paper vs electronic holdings

I have looked into the Beaverton Public Library for information on how digital technology is affecting its workings. My research is based on the interviews of users of the library and the staff (librarian) working there. Beaverton Library was completed in the year 2000 and has 70,000 Sq.ft library space.

Libraries and resource sharing:

   Be it in a formal or informal way, libraries have always shared their resources across the globe. With the founding of American library Association in 1876 resource sharing within America has slowly strengthened over the decades. The great increase in publications over the years and limited library budgets gave way to online computer library center (OCLC), research library groups (RLG) and Inter Library Loans (ILL's). These have led to the formation of Library networks, Forums, Consortia. This helped develop the infrastructure for resource sharing and formalizing the ILL's to state level and international levels.

   Beaverton Library is a part of the OCLC and the ILL's system. The library carries a set of books and documents that can be read online. The administration updates the online gallery and increases its online collection every year. These online books are available to members of the Library system and can be downloaded onto their iPods and Kindle readers.
Resource sharing is important for 3 main aspects- (a) To avoid duplication (b) to solve financial problems in collecting information and (c) to provide the library users access to a variety of information beyond the limits of just one library.

   With the traditional libraries people had to put a hold on books and had days of wait before the document was actually delivered. In the Beaverton Library the use of computer systems has made access to information so fast that a document which is required urgently can just be scanned and a copy can be delivered within minutes. More and more information is available in the digital form which is easily retrievable in no time.

   Hence digital technology has improved resource sharing by breaking time and distance barrier to efficient data delivery.

People and Technology:

Digital technology has affected a lot of people. With more and more data available online people find their physical visit to the library unnecessary. Information can be accessed from their computers at home or work space.

Beaverton library has an increasing budget every year to collect more digital media. They have approximately 65% of books and 35% electronic media now and are working towards increasing the latter collection. The electronic media that the library carries are DVD's, CD's , Audio cassettes and VHS. On an average their records suggest that adults check out more digital media followed by books. Children check out more digital media followed by graphic novels.

When interviewing a few people at the library I found that most of them prefer DVD's and Cd's to books. But I still found a few people who have remained loyal to the print media. Fiction novels and glossy magazines seem to be preferred in paper than the digitized version. One of the recurring complaints that people have with rapidly changing technology is to learn to use them to get effective results. Many people find it hard to operate and learn the system to seek and access data online. This could be the lack of understanding of computer systems and search engines, language barrier and the inconvenience of reading on a small computer screen.

Thus the libraries print based resources may be less in demand than digital resources but still they are in some demand. Even though the digital technology swept libraries in less than a decade many libraries carry valuable holdings which are not yet digitized and are still being actively used by people. Simply put, even a revolution as rapid as this still needs some transition time.

Paper Vs electronic media:

Libraries have traditionally been store houses of information. In other words they have been store rooms for paper containing information. But with the

onset of digital technology and with the face of library changing the very existence of library can be questioned. Paper media needed space for storage but can we believe that there will be no need for a physical place called a library in the future given that everything to do with information is possible over computers?

Electronic media definitely take up lesser space and the architectural design of libraries is changing. But do electronic media need no space at all? Technology itself is causing a fair demand for space in many areas of a Library. The need to have computer workstations for public and staff, other equipment such as network servers needs specialized and additional space that was not required by the traditional libraries.

The other major cause of concern with digitizing information and free access online is the issue of copyright. The users may be unaware of copyrights and make illegal copies out of it, but this is not possible with traditional libraries which housed paper media.

Conclusion:

The face of library is definitely changing with the onset of digital technology. But the change is not as rapid as the onset of digital technology itself which swept the globe in less than a decade. Digitization of libraries has made access to information easy as it has stepped beyond the limitations of time and distance. Thus workings of a Library and its architectural design from now will have to have their practical and functional value to accommodate changing activities and user needs. Libraries in the future should satisfy the needs of a more digital world.

Works Cited

Beaverton Librarian (Children's Desk). Personal Communication.