

Chapter 68

Cybrarians at Last?

The Impact of Technology on the Professional Identity of Librarians

Deborah Hicks
University of Alberta, Canada

ABSTRACT

This examines the three main themes throughout the book: us versus them, technology as tool, and library as place. Us versus them highlights the relationships that librarians have with their various user communities and even with other librarians. Librarians use technology to position themselves as technology experts, which places users in a subordinate position. Amongst themselves, librarians use technology to distinguish between those who are concerned with patrons' needs and open-minded about the best way to address them and those who are closed-minded and anti-technology. Additionally, librarians use technology to distinguish themselves from LIS faculty members by claiming that faculty members are too distanced from the actual uses of technology in the profession. Technology as tool is perhaps the most dominant theme throughout the book. By understanding technology as just a tool, librarians end up defining themselves by how they use technology, thus limiting not only their use of it, but also placing inadvertent limits on how it can be used within the library itself to provide services. Lastly, technology has changed how librarians understand the library as place. The library, in the face of technological change, has become a place that needs protecting. Librarians, as a result, have become the protectors of the library as place. They use technology in a controlled way to manage this.

INTRODUCTION

Through the last ten chapters, the impact of technology on the professional identity of librarians has been explored from a variety of angles, including the specific impact of technology on librarianship from a historical perspective, to the more abstract impact it has had on professional ethics, the gender makeup of the profession, and popular perceptions and representations of librarians. Technology has impacted librarians in more ways than have been examined here. For example, how has technology impacted the interactions between librarians and patrons on the reference desk? How has it changed the way librar-

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ies are managed? What impact has electronic purchasing had on library acquisitions? And how has it impacted the library's role as a preserver of information? The influence of technology on librarianship is so strong that there is seemingly no end to the questions and topics one can explore. Previous chapters focused the aspects of the work and roles that librarians do and have on a regular basis. These topics have brought to light a few recurring themes that will be explored in this final chapter.

The first theme is described as "us versus them." This theme was first articulated in chapter eight. There, it was used to highlight the discourse that surrounded Giles as a representation of the profession. For some, Giles represented a negative stereotype of librarians and pitted so-called real librarians against those who did not understand their values. For others, Giles represented an internal divide in the profession—librarians who embraced technology and librarians who feared it. This theme, however, occurred throughout the book. In chapter six, for example, the characterization of students as young and tech-savvy, if occasionally deviant, placed librarians in an almost antagonistic relationship with librarians cast as the expert (us) versus the often less-than-engaged student (them). And, again in chapter five, Library and Information Studies (LIS) faculty members were depicted as the them who were ruining the education of us (librarians) by placing too much attention on information technologies at the expense of core foundational values. There is even an us versus them argument within the profession between male and female librarians (chapter seven).

The second theme that to be explored is "technology as tool." This theme may appear trite on its surface. In chapter one, technology was defined as the application of mechanical knowledge for practical purposes, or machinery and equipment. Technology is, by definition, a tool; however, throughout this book, alternative understandings of technology have been discussed, from the approach to technology taught and researched in iSchools in chapter five to the social construction of technology (SCOT) approach examined in chapter nine. Librarians, however, have tended to use technology as a way to improve services, from MARC as a way to make shared cataloguing a reality (chapter three) to the provision of Internet access to ensure that patrons have as much access to information as possible (chapter ten).

The third theme is "library as place." Technology has, in some cases literally, breached the walls of the traditional library. Radio Frequency Identifications (RFIDs) have made the tracking of library items, both inside and outside the library, much easier (chapter nine), the Internet has offered librarians new ways of communicating with each other (chapter four), as well as offered new ways to teach what used to be known as "bibliographic instruction" (chapter six). This has resulted in two divergent approaches to the library as place. One is an attempt to protect the library as place in a figurative manner. In chapter five, for example, it was argued that ALA accreditation was mainly used to protect traditional library territory. Another approach was to expand the understanding of library spaces to include digital spaces through Library 2.0 (chapter four) and even promote a librarian-centric understanding of the Internet through information literacy instruction (chapter six). This final chapter will take a closer look at these three themes and try to unpack what they mean for the professional identity of librarians.

US VS. THEM

Us versus them may initially seem like an antagonistic descriptor for this theme. When librarians interact with their patrons, it is not a hostile activity. As Harris (1992) argued, librarianship, at least traditionally, eschewed the "expert knows best" approach for a service approach that ceded control to the patron; however, as the discussion on information literacy instruction in chapter six indicates, this relationship is

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