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Back to basics

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In this chapter we look at:

- the reasons for establishing a library and information service
- whether information is all there on the internet and free
- what information is
- who needs information
- authoritative and validated information
- the roles of a library and information service.

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Reasons for establishing a library and information service

Many organizations, especially small ones, get by without a library and continue to survive or even to thrive nevertheless. Communities such as societies and other non-commercial bodies often appear unable to afford to establish a library or the post of a qualified information specialist or librarian. So what is the reason why an information centre or library should be set up?

If you have been asked to set up a new centre then maybe that question has already been asked and answered under present circumstances. However, it would be as well to know the answer, or the answers, as sooner or later circumstances will change to the point where the existence of the

service will be challenged, and that time is not the moment to go searching for the answers. If you are within an organization that is showing the signs of the need for an information service, then read on and see how much that service needs to be set up. Does your organization or community:

- hold many copies of the same information?
- spend money on acquiring it?
- lose it or discard it when it has been used once?
- spend money on acquiring it over and over?
- have staff who spend time trying to search for information without knowing if it is validated and authoritative?

It is all there on the internet and free isn't it?

Why would any organization want to set up its own information service? What advantages could there be in doing that? And what, therefore, does it think it wants you, as the information service provider or manager, to do what other members of the organization cannot do for themselves?

Information is after all widespread and pervasive. There is certainly more information in existence than at any time in history (by definition, when you think about it), but more than that it is increasing in quantity at a faster and faster rate. Estimates suggest it is doubling in little more than two years, and that people today can acquire more knowledge in a day than was known in a lifetime by people little more than a hundred years ago.

Along with the pervasiveness of information, the view seems to be increasing that managing this information and knowledge is a skill that takes no special ability or training, and that there is no problem in dealing with this mass of detail provided that this or that software is purchased and put to work on the organization's intranet. Not only this, the argument goes on, but there is at least one page on the internet where somebody has put all that anyone needs to know on any important subject, and that page is accurate, reliable, authoritative and timely – and available free of charge as the internet represents a kind of information-based virtual philanthropic institution. All such pages are flawlessly indexed by Google (for there is no other search engine), which can be relied on to place them at the top of the list of items retrieved no matter which term or synonym is entered. So it follows that there is no need for any information service in any organization or community, because now that internet access is

universal all anyone needs to do is to navigate to Google and use the results to inform their business, social and educational decisions and opinions.

Somehow, we don't think so. The problem of course is that when the argument is set out like this an information professional recognizes at once how shallow and inaccurate it is – yet many people who are responsible for organizations or communities actually think like this. So you may have some work to do to convince the person or people who put you onto the creation of an information service that this is a serious job, and if that person is a convert then you may have to give them the evidence to contradict others who argue against having the information service.

The intention of this book is to do this by describing how to create and operate the kind of service that will meet the real information needs of its users, and provide a continuous reminder of the difference that library and information professionals make. In time you will acquire your own stock of stories and anecdotes that illustrate this value within your own community – for the time being you will have to rely on ours!

What is information?

We use information constantly and do not often stop to define it. Information is delivered in all kinds of containers. Libraries and information services have long collected a wide range of materials, typically books and journals, but more recently they have started to collect audiovisual materials and electronic materials. Have you considered every format that your customers may want to use? Identify them and compare with our list below, which includes just some of the ways that information can be stored. Recently the focus is not so much on collection as it is on access – so that it is not always necessary for the information service to own a physical copy of every item that its users want, but for the staff to know where and how to obtain it.

Often therefore the important thing is to know not what a customer has asked for but what information he or she is seeking. This can mean enquiring what the person is trying to achieve in order to identify the information that they need rather than want, and then in turn the source of the answers. The information could be factual, or the enquirer could be seeking a range of opinions or interpretations of a subject to support their studies. In other words, while there could be a single factual answer to an

enquiry (for example, ‘The sun sets tonight at 9.30 p.m.’) there could also be a range of answers (‘The causes of World War 2 were . . .’) and those answers could be controversial. This view of information counters the proposal given above that all necessary information can now be found through internet search engines without the need for a library or for an information professional.

There are numerous information sources, including:

- books, reports, pamphlets, etc. (one-off, print on paper)
- journals, newsletters (print on paper, serial)
- newspapers
- computer databases (full text, bibliographic, statistical)
- electronic journals and electronic books
- legislation (primary, secondary)
- guidance, codes of practice, official circulars
- research results (not necessarily collated or published)
- films, videos, DVDs
- press releases
- standard specifications
- advice
- encyclopedias, handbooks
- datasheets
- translations
- microfiche and microfilm
- CD-ROMs and DVD-ROMs
- computer disks (hard and floppy)
- software
- organizations (commercial, government, associations, federations, trade bodies, etc.)
- training materials.

Who needs information?

The clients of an information service may be closely defined, for example if the service is provided for a company or for the members of an organization. On the other hand you may find that the customers can be anyone from anywhere, as with a public library or enquiry service. Although you might be able to say that the primary customer group of public services

will be drawn from people who live in the locality, they are open to all and you may find yourself dealing with telephone callers and e-mail correspondents who are far removed from where you are but have an interest in your local history or have a family connection that they want to trace.

Authoritative and validated information

Although many people and organizations seem to be convinced that all the answers they need are there online and can be accessed using Google, it is remarkable how easily they will accept the results of a search without questioning the authority or the validity of the information that they retrieve. There are many reports of people caught out by the convincing but bogus websites that have been built by fraudsters trying to obtain banking details from individuals and corporate bodies. Alongside the websites of many organizations there are spoof versions that are designed to mislead and discredit the genuine bodies. Sites are created that give inaccurate or biased information in order to dissuade customers or to do financial harm to their targets.

Information can often be inadvertently misquoted. Do you work in a specialist area where it needs an informed eye to recognize an error? Would your customers check the results of a web search before they used them – maybe with measurements quoted in the wrong units or a misplaced decimal point? Would they look for corroboration before passing the information or basing a business decision on the information? If you cannot answer yes to all these questions then you need to tell people about the value of a professional information service!

Authoritative information

Figure 1.1 shows what are apparently two websites for the World Trade Organization – but which one is genuine: **www.wto.org** or **www.gatt.org**? It is now easier to tell them apart than it used to be because one is updated more frequently than the other, but it would be easy for the unwary to confuse the two. One is in fact a rogue website designed to discredit the WTO, but it draws heavily on the design and the graphics of the genuine website.

6 SETTING UP A LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SERVICE FROM SCRATCH

The image displays two screenshots of the World Trade Organization (WTO) website, illustrating a potential phishing or spoofing attempt. Both screenshots feature the WTO logo and navigation menus at the top, including links for 'on this site', 'register', 'contact us', 'THE WTO', 'WTO NEWS', 'TRADE TOPICS', 'RESOURCES', 'DOCUMENTS', and 'COMMUNITY FORUMS'. The top right of each page includes 'A-Z list' and 'Site map' links.

The top screenshot shows a news article titled "Historic Complaint For 'History's Biggest Subsidy'". The article text reads: "Six developing nations have lodged a complaint against the US, calling the Iraq War 'history's biggest illegal trade subsidy' and 'market distortion on a gargantuan scale.' 'In a free market, companies like Halliburton and Exxon should be funding their own market expansion projects instead of depending on their government for help,' said a spokesperson for the consortium." The page also features sections for "Frequently Visited" (with "IN THE WTO" and "What can we do?" links), "IN TRADE TOPICS" (with "Problems" link), "IN COMMUNITY FORUMS" (with "Interact with WTO" link), and "DOHA DEVELOPMENT AGENDA" (with links to "Negotiations, implementation and development: the Doha agenda", "The Trade Negotiations Committee", and "The Ministerial Conference, Qatar"). A "Watch this space ..." sidebar on the right lists "User survey: what do you think of our website?", "E-commerce seminar", "Agriculture background: updated to include 12-month 'modalities' deadline", "Violence background: updated with new information", and "New Publication: World Trade Review".

The bottom screenshot shows a news article titled "Arthur Dunkel long time Director-General dies at 72". The article text reads: "Arthur Dunkel, former Director-General of the GATT, died today (8 June 2005) aged 72, in Geneva, after a long illness. As Director-General of the GATT during 1980-1993, Mr Dunkel was at the helm of the launch of the Uruguay Round of multilateral trade negotiations in September 1986 and steered the multilateral trading system to the doorstep of what is now known as the World Trade Organization. [News page](#)". The page also features sections for "Frequently Visited" (with "IN THE WTO" and "What is the WTO?" links), "IN TRADE TOPICS" (with "Disputes" link), "IN COMMUNITY FORUMS" (with "Interact with WTO" link), and "DOHA DEVELOPMENT AGENDA" (with links to "Negotiations, implementation and development: the Doha agenda", "The Trade Negotiations Committee", and "July 2004 package"). A "Watch this space ..." sidebar on the right lists "Register to receive WTO news", "New pages: Netherlands Trainee Programme, DG designate, Results of website user survey, Appellate Body Repertory (in French), WTO 10th Anniversary", and "New publications: ITC magazine: New edition, Regional Trade Agreements, Handbook on the GATS Agreement, Statistics CD 2004, WTO Basic Instruments 1996, The Future of the WTO".

Figure 1.1 Which website is genuine?

Even the best journalists can be fooled. In December 2004 the BBC website ran a story to mark the twentieth anniversary of the Bhopal disaster based on an interview with a 'spokesman' for the Dow Chemical company who said that the corporation had admitted liability and set up a compensation fund. In fact the story was entirely spurious and could be traced back to an organization known as the Yes Men. The problem appeared to be that the

interview request had been sent to an e-mail address linked to the website **www.dowethics.com**. A check of the registration data would have shown this not to be owned by Dow Chemical or the Union Carbide company that previously owned the Bhopal factory, but by an activist located in Bhopal. The language of the website should also have set warning bells ringing among the journalists covering the story.

Griffiths (2001) describes other case studies showing the possibilities for error if information is used without corroboration.

These examples show the importance of using validated and authoritative information. If you need to convince your organization of the need for an information service, provide evidence that relying on the internet and on search engines alone can be inadequate and sometimes downright dangerous.

The roles of an information service

Whether they are serving a community (such as a local area, a school or college), a commercial or public organization, or an academic community, information services are an essential element of that community. Library and information professionals carry out a wide range of activities apart from simply providing an enquiry service or a lending service. Information services also provide electronic information services to their users; they identify and purchase publications for their clients, and they create and manage websites and intranets. Information services provide their users with regular information updates on topics of interest, or monitor websites and publications for mentions of the organization or community that they serve.

Library and information professionals analyse and sift information and compile publications that inform their clients by keeping them in touch with developments in their community, or academic subject, or areas of interest. They record information so that it can be retrieved, through cataloguing, indexing, abstracting and database building. They provide links to the information either by organizing the collection using classification schemes that link to the information centre's catalogue, or by hyperlinking to internet resources. Not least, if they don't have the answer they find

out what it is, or put their customer in touch with the expert. In short, they provide their communities with a range of unique services that put information at the centre of the community's activities.

Summary

We have seen that:

- Many organizations waste money and time by obtaining multiple copies of the same information.
- There are many sources of information, but not all of them can be trusted.
- Information certainly isn't all free and on the internet.
- Library and information professionals have a special role to play, putting users in touch with information and providing a range of services to support that role.
- The skills of library and information professionals are needed in many organizations, and the information centres they create are a valuable resource.