

Libraries: mobile phones — the elephant in the room

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The main platform for using the Internet and obtaining and reading information is the smartphone and this is especially the case for young people. In fact, ask a young person about their library and they will point to their mobile phone. So, the writing is clearly on the wall for physical libraries. Of course, it was not so long ago that the 'platform' of choice was the physical library so what does this mean for them? After all, this affects their core business and cannot be ignored. CIBER have undertaken studies of mobile phone users, which have compared the behaviour of thousands of mobile and 'tethered' users of the Europeana portal^{1 2 3} that help shed light on the issues that libraries are going to have to deal with in order to survive and prosper in the digital environment. The most important ones are:

Information 'lite'

The Google Generation, the born digital (and the rest of us) have been empowered by a mobile device that will take a form of information/reading behaviour already viewed as 'lite' and abbreviated to a completely different level, which, perhaps, will spell the end of culture as we know it. 'Lite' because visits from mobiles are much less interactive: fewer records/pages are viewed, fewer searches are conducted, less time is spent on a visit and less content retrieved. This is a consequence of: a) using smaller screens and different ways of interacting with devices (e.g., via touch screens rather than keyboards and mice); b) multi-tasking and the multi-purpose nature of mobiles because this means nobody does one thing for long, the preference is to do many things quickly; c) smartphones being used on the go and also in social, busy and noisy spaces. McLuhan's universe of linear exposition, quiet contemplation and disciplined reading and study is a thing of the past, but something librarians are still signed-up to.

Untethered

The first transition, from the physical to the digital space, transformed the way we sought, read, trusted and consumed information, but the environment in which we conducted these activities had not really changed. We still undertook much of our searching and reading (more aptly viewing) in work time, in the library/office space and on a platform primarily designed for use at a desk. The second transition to the mobile environment has seen the shackles taken off. Now searching and reading can be undertaken anywhere and at any time and little of it is now undertaken in the workspace. In fact, most of it appears to be done in the social space on a social device during social times (Saturday night is very popular). This means that today's users are untethered and operate in a borderless information world.

1 CIBER. Europeana: culture on the go. http://ciber-research.eu/download/20111007-Europeana_Culture_on_the_Go-mobile_report.pdf. 2012

2 Nicholas D, Clark D, Rowlands I, and Jamali, H. R. Information on the go: a case study of Europeana mobile users. *J. Am. Soc. Inf. Sci.*, 64, July 2013, pp1311-1322.

3 Nicholas D, Clark D. The second digital transition: to the mobile space — an analysis of Europeana. *Learned Publishing* 26(4), October 2013, pp240-252

Information on the go

Thanks to smartphones, people can meet their information needs at the time of need, rather than cold store them until they reach the office, library or home when, of course, by that time they probably have forgotten them. This is a huge advantage for the smartphone as immediacy and speed of delivery are everything for today's busy and hyperactive digital consumer. It means more needs will be met, but perhaps not always that well.

Borderless information world

'Big deals' provide fantastic access to scholarly information to a privileged few who inhabit our universities, but smartphones are levelling the playfield by providing access to masses of scholarly information for everyone and anywhere. And open access publishing, policies and mandates are rapidly increasing the haul, meaning that more than 80% of all content once locked behind paywalls will shortly be free to all⁴. Librarians, of course, have been active in this and, arguably, guilty of giving away the family silver.

Unstable information environment

The information environment, which in the form of the library was once the very epitome of stability, is now dynamic and unstable. Very strange things happen in this environment and we find ourselves in an upside down 'Alice in Wonderland' world⁵. For instance, a smartphone is used to read a book, and it was not so long ago when librarians actually banned phones from the library. It's obviously payback time because the phone is now the library! Another example, the phone a device originally intended for voice transmission is now largely used for text based communications.

Conclusions

We could not have come further from the initial concept of a library. With the smartphone there are no walls, no queuing, no rationing and no intermediation. It has also usurped the library's position as the most trusted source of information. Trust is imbued in the device as much as the content and this is mainly down to the fact that smartphones are personal. Information has become personal.

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4 http://science-metrix.com/files/science-metrix/publications/d_1.8_sm_ec_dg-rtd_proportion_0a_1996-2013_v11p.pdf

5 Carroll L. Alice's adventures in wonderland. London; Macmillan, 1865