This chapter provides a brief overview of issues libraries are confronting as they attempt both to embrace the opportunities of global networked information and to balance these with traditional resources and demands. The context in which Canadian libraries operate and uniquely Canadian approaches to digital library activities are reviewed. The federal government’s Connecting Canadians agenda has focussed on connectivity, but attention is shifting also to support of the creation of content. The federal department Industry Canada has been funding, within a job creation and skills development strategy, the creation of digital content by Canadian youth. The National Library is building an electronic collection of Canadia and various other digital products and services. Substantial digital collections such as the collaborative project Early Canadiana Online are emerging. Canada’s activities, which are not currently on scale with the United States or some other countries, remain largely a result of local initiative. It is hoped that increased provincial or national coordination, collaboration and funding will strengthen our libraries’ role in the delivery of networked information services.

The advent of the Internet, and in particular the World Wide Web, has changed the nature of research and information seeking. In more and more disciplines, networked electronic resources outstrip print
resources in currency, availability, low cost and plenitude. Increasingly, people seek—and find—the information they need instantly from their office or home desktop.

While libraries in some sectors are being used more than ever, there is clearly potential for libraries to be circumvented or ignored. While surfing has not supplanted the leisure reading of books, the Web is clearly becoming a first stop for many when information is sought. A recent Canadian public library study found that many Canadians with home Internet access are relying on it as a primary source for finding information on various topics, and that they had found such information in the past week (Ekos, 1998). A 1997 national survey of household computer use found that “search for information” was the highest cited purpose of use, at 84.4% (Statistics Canada, 1997). The main business of libraries—organizing and storing information and helping clients to use it—is being challenged.

Information professionals can list many reasons for concern about the new electronic information age. Much of the information on the Internet is not timely, nor reliable, nor, in many cases, easily found. It can be difficult to separate the “wheat from the chaff.” All the search engines, while powerful, have idiosyncrasies and inherent limitations, determine relevance with limited success and produce result sets that are often too large to be useful. So, on the one hand, much good information is not easily discovered—a problem that is being compounded by the continuing explosive rate of growth in the amount of information available. On the other hand, many library professionals and researchers see a need for more high quality information to be made freely accessible and optimized for use in the Web environment. The need for better organization of Web resources, for more rigorous description of resources and for more substantial content is well recognized. Libraries are also concerned about the increasing gulf between those who have access to technology and the skills to use it and those who do not, a gap becoming known as the “digital divide.”

INFORMATION ISSUES IN THE DIGITAL AGE

The issues that libraries as information organizations—not just in Canada, but everywhere—face in confronting the digital age have been widely documented and discussed over the past few years. Some of the more enduring and confounding include:
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