Chapter 1
Technology, Profession, Identity

ABSTRACT

This chapter provides a brief introduction to the primary concepts of the book: technology, profession, and identity. Understanding these concepts will provide insight into how the central question of the book will be addressed: What impact does a constant contact with technology have on the professional identities of librarians? Information technology has changed the way librarians perform their work and the expectations of library users. The role technology plays in the work lives of librarians is complex, but the impact it has had on their professional identity is even more so. First, the historical impact of technology on society is examined to highlight that many technologies we encounter on a daily basis are often not even considered technology in today’s technology-rich world. This is followed by examinations of the concepts of profession and identity. Together, these definitions provide the working definition of professional identity that will guide the remainder of the book. Professional identity is a description of the self within the professional practices and discourses of librarianship. By drawing attention to the role that technology plays in the professional lives of librarians, this book provides insights into how librarians interact with their patrons, policy makers, and society in general.

INTRODUCTION

Technology supplies many of the tools that allow librarians to meet the information needs of their patrons and users. The Internet, for example, now serves as the home for many reference books, indexes, databases, helpful web pages, and, of course, the Online Public Access Catalogue (OPAC). Technology helps library staff process and circulate books, videos, DVDs, CDs, and other library materials. It keeps track of fines and patron holds, and stores patron records. Off the public services desks, technology helps cataloguers and metadata librarians organize records in formats, such as MARC (Machine-Readable Cataloguing) and Dublin Core. Web librarians create websites
and manage other web-based software. Regardless of the kind of work a librarian does, she or he is always in contact with some kind of technology – from the pen used to sign her or his name, to the computer that hosts the software needed to perform daily tasks, to the machine that makes that all important cup of mid-morning coffee.

What impact does this constant contact with technology have on the professional identities of librarians? With the ubiquitous nature of technology in their professional lives, this question may seem trite. But, at its core, the answer has serious implications for how librarians understand themselves to be professionals. Technology has had a major and lasting impact on library work. Information from around the world is accessible at the click of a mouse. Library collections are managed using computer programs; books, along with their catalogue records, are purchased from online vendors; and in some cases these volumes are themselves virtual. Librarians often portray themselves as technology wizards, contrary to the popular images of librarians common in the media. The role that technology plays in the professional identity of hidebound librarians is a complex one. This book will look at this role from a variety of angles. What has been the historical role of technology in librarianship? How have technological developments outside the profession, such as television and the Internet, affected the way librarians perform their work? How have these changes affected their identities as professionals? How is technology currently taught in schools of Library and Information Studies (LIS)? How do librarians use technologies like the Internet to communicate and share ideas about their work and themselves?

The importance of these questions cannot be underestimated. Technology does not just affect how librarians perform their work, it is also changing where and when that work is performed, and even what kind of work is done. It is a commonly accepted, although somewhat incorrect, fact that inperson library use is down. Indeed, the American Library Association’s State of America’s Libraries Report 2010 indicates that physical library usage for both public and academic libraries was up compared to past years. Yet, it is undeniable that there is increased focus on the technology offered by libraries from both within the profession and from outside it. This focus is perhaps best understood by taking a look at two of the largest philanthropic supporters of libraries in North America over the past 150 years: Andrew Carnegie and Bill and Melinda Gates. Carnegie’s legacy for libraries is primarily a physical one. Through his many donations and the so-called “Carnegie Formula,” meaning that a town or city that accepted a gift from Carnegie to build a library had to subsidize the library to an amount that equalled at least 10% of the cost of the library building, over 2,500 libraries were built worldwide (Walsh, 1998). Carnegie’s legacy is, in some ways, forever linked to the library as a place. In comparison, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (2010) focuses its library-related philanthropy on narrowing the digital divide and providing computer and Internet access to patrons throughout the world. Thus, the focus of library-related philanthropy has gone from the library as a physical space to the library as provider of technology and internet access. In part, this shift in library philanthropy reflects an overall shift in society. According to the World Bank, the number of people with access to the world wide web has gone from 124 million in 2000 to over 230 million in 2008. Amazon announced it had sold more ebooks than hard covers for the first time in July 2010 (Teather, 2010). And cellular phone usage in the United States went from 36.3% in 1998 to 62.8% in 2003 (Rogers & Ryan, 2007). By 2009, 56% of American adults had wireless access to the Internet (Horrigan, 2009). Librarianship itself is changing to meet these societal trends. Over 92% of public libraries reported having a website (American Libraries Association, 2010) and 94.6% of students reported using their university’s library website at least once a week (Smith, Salaway, &
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