Invisible libraries lift veil on content

The inexorable rush of technological progress equips digital libraries with the tools to offer a great deal more than a set of electronic databases

As the backbone of the UK's information infrastructure, libraries have to work hard to keep pace with the rapid technology-driven changes in how users search for and use information. It is this tradition that has spawned the virtual libraries possessed by major institutions. But the virtual library can be more than just a wall-less, digital or even invisible entity.

Tracy Kent, digital assets librarian at the University of Birmingham, said: "It is a misnomer to call them invisible libraries, because libraries and their collections of data are more visible to info pros now than they have ever been. With the help of technology, hitherto hidden and dormant content has resurfaced. It raises the profile and rediscovers older material."

According to Kent, the virtual library is associated with the obsolescence of standard or age-old library services and the rise of newer types of information needs.

ALWAYS OPEN

The emergence of IT and the internet on a mass scale has affected almost all information-related activity. Amanda Richardson, a research analyst with Hewlett-Packard Labs in Bristol, pointed out that a virtual corporate information service, unlike a physical library, can stay connected with digital users around the clock.

Certainly, as lending and maintaining a repository of physical books has become costlier and increasingly marginal to user consumption preferences, libraries have had to ramp up their services with the latest technology and digitisation. They have even engaged with publishers to produce born-digital material and content that can be easily digitised.

"Remember, libraries are well-established institutions for rare collections and so contain huge amounts of physical content that needs to be scanned, tagged and saved in virtual form to help increase their visibility and accessibility," Kent added. "We are trying to change working practices and produce content in forms that can be repurposed and converted into preferable formats." She believes information providers must adopt open access publishing methods and make their works Google-indexable to give users the easy and complete access to data they now demand.

But this goal is not without challenges. Kent said two of the biggest challenges for virtual libraries are copyright and ensuring they have resources in place that are compatible with user technologies and tools. Cost is also a huge deterrent to all libraries moving towards a virtual service. Kent said that digitising all the physical works the library had acquired over the past five years would cost around £13m. The question naturally arises whether digitisation and IT projects should be a library's sole responsibility or whether the state should fund them.

As a professional responsible for digital repository and opening access to digital assets, Kent engages with researchers to make their "outputs" accessible. She said the resulting digital access to full texts and data could make abstracting for libraries obsolete. "Why look at abstracts in the old-fashioned way, when with open access virtual libraries, professionals can access all the information they need?"

Which raises another challenge: that of information obesity. What libraries need is a robust system that allows information professionals to conduct efficient search and filter out the irrelevant information.

"In the next few years, semantic web, tagging and metadata will all take information search to an advanced level," Kent said. That level will be one where searching collaborative web platforms will generate statistics, book profiles, the number of people who have cited a study, and similar information useful for researchers.

KEEP UP TO DATE

If virtual libraries are to be optimised, training for information professionals is important. Kent, who is also a member of UKeiG, CILIP's special interest group, said that 10 years down the line, UKeiG is still running courses on optimising Google search. It also runs courses on the legal implications of the interactive web and comparing and contrasting research-specific search engines to help professionals make the most of virtual libraries.

At the Internet Librarian conference, held in London last October, Tony Hirst of the Open University outlined a different dimension to virtual libraries. Reminding attendees of the fairytale of the (invisible) elves and the shoemaker, he said that libraries were simply shops filled with the works of others. He spoke approvingly of how shops engaged in "invisible theatre", setting up puppet-filled scenes as window displays to engage an audience.

Hirst went on to suggest that individuals could use a combination of web services to deliver their own library and information services invisibly. He cited as a potential example people combining the web service

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Freecycle with online giant Amazon and a digital bookshelf from the Open University. Such a service would be a place "where books are bought, accessed or exchanged virtually, without an established library playing any role in it". Users exchanging books through such a mechanism would have effectively created their own library service.

MORE THAN JUST MORPHING

Hirst's take is very different from just thinking of virtual libraries as academic or corporate libraries that have morphed into digital resources. Peer loans, social media and search engine optimisation (SEO) have all resulted in the virtual exchange of information and books, which was not possible a few years ago.

Hirst urged internet librarians to "engage with the information and technology flow". He pointed out that social networking sites such as Twitter supported searches of specific user tweets for keywords such as "how" and "libraries", allowing users to tap into a rich source of useful tips. But he also warned that implementing the wrong sort of invisibility (setting up a digital repository that is wrongly tagged, for example, or not indexed by Google) would be more disastrous than not being virtual at all.

From bookless libraries and peer loans to proactive social media support, from the SEO of research repository content to mining library web analytics and invisible authentication on third-party servers, properly developed and properly resourced virtual services can give academic libraries an invisible but powerful presence. ■
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