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The Identity Crisis of Libraries in the Attention Economy

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Introduction

In the present day world, the ecology that the human beings inhabit is laden with various kinds of spaces and places. Our ecology encompasses different kinds of cyberspaces and market places that continuously sway our mind. This character of continuously influencing and controlling the human psyche according to Herbert Simon makes our economy an 'attention economy'. The concept of 'attention economy' revolves around the innumerable existing spaces and places and the human attention. Attention Economy is considered to be one where there is scarcity of human attention. Davenport & Beck defines attention as, "focused mental engagement on a particular message or piece of information" and the attention economy as one where the scarcest resource is no longer just "capital, labour, information and knowledge," but human attention (Davenport & Beck 2001, 20). In the attention economy there is a constant competition among different spaces and places to attract the maximum segment of the scarcest modern resource. In the modern world of consumerism only those survive the tide who seeks the attention of many. Identity assertion can be stated as the order of the day. This continuous strive of representation and recognition by the individuals and institutions determine the entities success and failure. Looking at the way the nature of the modern society restructures itself Lanham writes, "We are moving from material to method. Stuff in them is getting evaporated before our stuff-clouded eyes ... [and] the world has become a stage, staging itself for a visitor's eye" (Lanham, 2006). Lanham means to say that the present day world has adapted 'change' as its permanent character. Today, the world is moving so fast that it takes no time for a mode of technology to become outdated. In the attention economy life and death of every thing depends upon the attention it attracts and the changes it adapts. In this sense attention plays a significant role in the development of libraries also.

Herbert Simon was the pioneer to articulate the concept of attention economics when he wrote:

> "...in an information-rich world, the wealth of information means a dearth of something else: a scarcity of whatever it is that information consumes. What information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention and a need to allocate that attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might consume it" (Simon, 1971).

According to him, in the attention economy the information has the power to consume the attention of the people. The scarcity of attention is the result of overload of information. Therefore, the competition is among the varieties of information in the environment. Generally, a person looks at the thing that draws his/her attention. In doing so the capacity to look at other things diminishes. This is why it is important in the attention economy for information organizations to define ways they can command and hold the attention of prospective patrons. In the attention economy representation of guarantees the sustenance of the organization. Identity crisis may be due to inadequate representation in the attention economy. The identity crisis in the attention economy may be recurring, as in the changing world we are required to constantly redefine and represent ourselves. We are in the time when stability is an exception and change the rule. To make their presence felt in such overloaded information economies and the fast moving world libraries and librarians will have to represent themselves. In the attention economy presence of libraries in the society would not help them get the users. They need to make their presence felt as a significant channel in knowledge generation and dissemination process. To gain recognition they will have to move away from the traditional way the libraries functioned. There is a need for libraries to pierce into the information environment of the people in order to seek the attention of the potential readers. Resources of the libraries will remain unexplored unless the information about their resources is disseminated to the information seekers. Today, information about information is more important than the information itself. Generally, there are two significant ways in which people gather information namely, self-initiated acquisition of information and environment imparted acquisition of information. Self-initiated acquisition of information occur when user know what information he/she wants. In libraries this kind of search for information will be useful if the reader know what information he/she wants. On the other hand, environment imparted acquisition of information is initiated outside ones mind. Actually this kind of information is feeded into persons mind from his/her environment. We come across this kind of information acquisition everyday. Advertising agencies have learned to take astonishing advantage of this kind of information acquisition. Most of the need for information arises due to the environment imparted acquisition of information. In the attention economies libraries need to exploit the available opportunities in the environment of the reader and create the new ones to assure the maximum utilization of their resources and for their sustained development.

In today's world longer invisibility leads to permanent disappearance. Libraries being the part of modern society cannot be an exception of this phenomenon. There are number of competitors in the market trying to grab the attention of the people. Libraries will have to be a part of this competition. Along with building mega structures housed with books and journals and all kinds of information in variety of formats, contemporary conditions also demands from libraries to build mega strategies for attracting human attention.

Libraries in the Attention Economy

Grounding his argument on the basis of the common discourses on information and its relationship to economics, John Buschman writes, "If information and its related sets of critical skills are as important to economic and political participation as we keep insisting, then what information we produce, how we keep it, what we keep, and how it is absorbed or not are crucial questions in our culture - and libraries are important (if undervalued) institutions in this" (Buschman, 2005). And reflecting on the condition of libraries in contemporary times he further questions, "If ... [information] is as important to our economy and politics as we have been saying, then why are . . . libraries so threatened on the fiscal front?" (Buschman, 2005) The paradoxical situation in front of us is that, on one hand, we compare information with money and relate our development positively with information we consume and on the other hand, we come across the disinclination of the people towards libraries. The phenomenon has twined out to be common to all kinds of

libraries. The use of academic libraries is dependent on the policies of the host institution, financial availability, and the educational system. Most of the corporate sector units' do not have a library and even if they have it is somewhere isolated from the central working areas. School libraries are getting merged together to become a central library for number of schools. In urban areas the situation is better as we can find some importance being given to the libraries and the young generation is encouraged to read and keep themselves attached to the books. Public libraries are being closed down and even if they are open one can only see a librarian sitting in and trying to clean the dust from the books. This shows that library as a social institution is under crisis. The condition of a librarian as an individual is similar to the situation of libraries. Mostly, we find positions of librarians getting reduced within the institutions, appointment of computer operators in place of a librarian, librarians paid less than what they deserve, librarians not being given permanent positions in the organisation, librarians facing difficulties in getting funds form the management to maintain and extend its services. Hence, even librarians are experiencing problems in getting recognition within the institutions.

Number of studies in the field of library and information science has been done indicating several kinds crisis. Nilsen and McKechnie brought forth one of the aspect of crisis where they studied the users' ignorance about library works. Nilsen and McKechnie investigated the phenomenon in a study in which they asked library users about who takes decision regarding the selection of books in the library. Sixty percent of their respondents did not identify library staff as responsible for this important aspect of collection development and assigned this work instead to library boards, government agencies, the library's customers, or some automatic process. Nilsen and McKechnie accounted this invisibility to the professionals reluctance to "claim expert knowledge" counterpart those they serve (Nilsen and McKechnie, 2002). In 2003, OCLC submitted a report titled *The 2003 OCLC Environmental Scan: Pattern Recognition-A Report to the OCLC Membership* identifying and describing issues and trends that are impacting and will impact libraries. The introduction to the *Scan* states "It has become increasingly difficult to characterize and describe the purpose of using libraries […] The relationships among the information professional, the user and the content have changed and continue to change" (Wilson 2004, ix). Another way of stating this is that trends indicate a conflict between the environment and resources that libraries offer and the environment and resources that information consumers want and use. A yet another study conducted by OCLC (Online Computer Library Centre) in 2005 titled *Perception of Libraries and Information Resources: A Report to the OCLC Membership* concluded that libraries are no more the first place people approach when looking for information. These studies clearly indicate the problem the libraries are experiencing today. Criticising the modifications or modernization of the names the library science schools have been adopting, Michael Gorman contends that "[librarians] do good work and should not be afraid to proclaim it", he identifies library education in the United States as a "train wreck" and claims that dismissing *library* from the schools' names is "symbolic of the deep ill, the existential crisis, that has gripped our profession" (Gorman 2000, 67). Therefore, it seems, the crisis resulting due to the changes taking place in the society is structuring itself into the psychological crisis among the librarians and is reflected in the changes taking place in the discipline and profession. These indicators are the reactions − for the reason − libraries and librarians kept themselves away from the cycle of representation, recognition and survival. Still, if libraries/librarians do not represent themselves to gain recognition in the society and to attract the attention of people towards them then the path of information seekers and libraries with diverge from each other.

Over and above the absence of visibility of libraries in society, also to some extent the penetration of computer technology in the information world has detrimentally impacted library profession. The intention, here, is not to criticize the technological developments that have taken place in the production and dissemination of information. In fact, computer technology has revolutionized the whole process of

information generation and dissemination and the working of libraries. But, due to the integration of computer and communication technologies, in the past few years internet has invented as many hurdles as it has opened the doors of opportunities for the libraries. For instance, Google with all its information services has drawn huge attention from the libraries as the users' no longer considers libraries as the only source of obtaining information. People now think that any information need can be satisfied on the Internet. With varieties of information services, Google has taken away a large part of libraries territory. It is the major contributor in convincing the information seekers that their information need can easily be satisfied through the internet. Libraries cannot challenge Google in terms of the quantity of information it holds and the search options it gives. Genealogy of libraries indicates that people have always consulted libraries for their information needs, but now, Google has replaced libraries in fulfilling many of those needs. It is not that libraries are not in a position to provide information. In fact, Gorman proposes that "regardless of the ready access to information offered by the Internet, libraries will continue to have not only a feasible but an important future because while electronic resources are valuable, they are, in most instances, enhancements, not replacements, of other [library] collections and services" (Gorman 2000, 31). He argues that the traditional library "is one that selects, collects, and gives access to all the forms of recorded knowledge and information that are relevant to its mission and to the needs of the community it services, and assists and instructs in the use of those resources," including electronic resources. Libraries, we must never forget, are selections, defined by what they exclude. Google, on the other hand, is truly universal in a way even our most universal libraries have never been. Libraries aim to be deep selections - and the use of that depth is our challenge. Librarians should learn how to make use of their rich collection in the electronic environment.

Libraries are, unlike in earlier times, no more in the vicinity of huge number of patrons. With the development in the technology the attitude of society towards different things also changes. In earlier time people were satisfied with the information they used to get from the libraries available to them. In the globalised information age there are numerous sources of obtaining information. Information seekers now have the choice regarding the source of obtaining the information. Now they want to have the information demanded by them in their desired content, format and time. Librarians will have to prepare themselves to meet the demands of a new generation of information seekers.

Strategies for libraries in the Attention Economy

Changes in the way of production and dissemination of information brought in changes in the perception of the readers. In the modern world with constantly changing environment the perception of the people also keeps on changing. The reason behind Brenda Dervin's emphasis on shifting the research attention from system to user, after reviewing ARIST literature, was to understand the way users perceive the services libraries provide. Libraries strategy should be based on the perception of the users. Librarians should study the perception of the users, understand their needs and preferences and design their products and services accordingly. Once this is done then the promotion and marketing of these products and services would gains better response.

Promotional activity can take many forms and the media of promotion should depend on the nature of target audience. As more and more people are becoming conversant with information technology the best way of promoting library service is by using web interface. It is the easy way of reaching them quickly and cheaply. Librarians can personalize the service by providing Current Awareness Service and Selective Dissemination of Information service via emails. Librarians should also learn how to exploit the internet for providing services and for helping users in searching online information and maximising the utility of their searching time. Library website serves as a promotional tool for advertising in-house library

services and electronic information resources on the web. Today, virtual visibility is more recognized than physical visibility. According to Puacz, "if the online presence of a library is not informative, innovative, and service-oriented, there is little to stop e-patrons from surfing on to different sites that better meet their needs" (Puacz, 2002, 113). Library website has a great potential to attract attention of people. It acts as a mirror of library services and resources. Also, a kind of a participatory library service that Michael E. Casey and Laura C. Savastinuk accentuate in their book *Library 2.0: A Guide to Participatory Library Service* can be attempted. According to their study users of the library can be involved in building the collection of library, improving the services library provides, inviting user comments on resources for library's OPAC. By doing this user's can be attracted and encouraged to make use of the library.

Taking into consideration the marketing strategies that the libraries enforce White opines that "Libraries do not market: occasionally they advertise what they already provide. However, increasingly we now anti-advertise, when budget cuts have made it difficult to maintain standards of service. [we allow] the budget to define the program rather than have the program define the budget" (White 1997, 116). Libraries have done much to gain recognition in the society and also taken advantages of emerging trends of accessing information for all purposes. But with the introduction of technology into information world, with all its development it has been trying to eliminate libraries from the information generation and dissemination process. One of the reasons is that the community of users that the libraries are intended to serve are not really aware of the services that they offer. Moreover, people are already under the illusion that every thing they want is available on the internet; whereas most of the librarians are aware about the limitation of online information. All of the information is not free and authentic on the internet. Majority of the people are not willing or can not afford to spend money on online information. Taking this situation in to consideration, librarians need to move out and put this fact in front of people and show them how their libraries can be really fruitful than relying on the internet for every information. For doing this librarians should have the knowledge about their collections, their strengths and their weaknesses. Hernon and Altman maintain that "Unless ... [readers] and the collection come together both interestingly and meaningfully ... the library is nothing more than an expensive warehouse" (Hernon and Altman 1998, 6). Therefore, to give meaning to their existence and to flourish in the attention economies libraries should market and promote their services.

The genealogy of libraries indicates that libraries have always been providing services and the nature of the services has always changed with the changes in the technologies. In the attention economy just providing the services to the users will not ensure the maximum utilization of library resources. There is a need to market the library services and resources. Leerburger contends that "The overarching goal of marketing is to assure that the library remains as an information center within the community" (Leerburger 1989, 8). Therefore, marketing helps the libraries to retain their importance in the society and serve as a space where life long learning is facilitated. But, according to Siess "If no one knows about your library and how it can help the community [and if no one knows what services it provides] the library will not-and should not-continue to exist" (Siess 2003, 15). And obviously librarians do not want the libraries to die. Commenting on the need of marketing for the libraries in contemporary society, Bell writes, "Overlooked eventually can mean unemployed. Marketing means creating an awareness of your value" (Bell, 1994). In times when people are more inclined towards online information, giving them required information in time, form, content and channel that they prefer will give them the reason and encouragement to use libraries. To make people aware about the library, librarians need to communicate to the potential customer the value of using the library. Marketing improves the visibility of libraries in the society and of the librarian within the institution. Marketing includes finding what costumers need and to evaluate how they perceive the products and services. Librarians should take advantage of all forms of communication available for marketing. It ensures libraries continued

survival and growth, and positions it as an indispensable resource which satisfies a need that cannot be met else where.

Another problem with libraries is their physical invisibility. Knowledge about the existence of the library is very important. Citizens should be aware about the libraries located in their vicinity. If they are not aware about libraries around them, obviously they will turn towards internet to acquire what ever information-authentic or unauthentic-they get. By acquiring the books and other information resources in libraries and not making people aware about it librarians are actually interrupting a knowledge generation and dissemination process. To become a bridge and to persist as a significant channel in the knowledge generation and knowledge dissemination process libraries should remain active in the society. Libraries should engage themselves in activities that attract the attention of people towards it. Some of the traditional methods that libraries can follow to attract the attention of people also include organizing monthly exhibitions and occasional lectures that can give them a reason to come to the library and are encouraged to know new things. Book clubs and book talks can be organized to keep people engaged with reading. Regular discussions can be conducted to develop interest for reading among users. Reading, said the great English essayist Matthew Arnold, "is culture." By encouraging the reading habit and preserving it, libraries are actually preserving our culture. Acting in a modern way libraries should strengthen their online visibility. Acquiring as many electronic resources as possible, either individually or by involving in consortia, librarians should aim to make their libraries search box as compatible as of Google. Libraries need to offer traditional services more efficiently and new services which appeal to those comfortable with new ways of accessing information. Maintaining good public relations and satisfying the information needs of people that aroused after engaging them in various activities organised by libraries, librarians can try to convert the visitor in to a regular user.

Since centuries libraries have been finding new way to extend and actively seek users' participation. Andrew Carnegie in his time designed libraries that served both educational as well as recreational purposes. In 1890s his libraries had *showers, gyms, billiards and barbers. He projected libraries as community catalysts. He knew that to get people interested in libraries there is a need to think beyond the traditional boundaries and render opportunities for interaction as much as specific services. In the attention economy there is a need to take* library services to users, rather than expecting users to come to the library. In the networked environment most of the potential users are going online to satisfy their information needs. In such a scenario most of the users can be found interacting and sharing on social networking sites like facebook, second life, orkut and many others. Libraries need to reach out in such spaces to get the attention of the users. Some of the libraries have been trying to reach their patrons through such social networking sites. Such a platform can be used by libraries to provide the latest news about the libraries, to provide digital reference services, to act as a kind of online discussion forum. Social networking tools allow libraries to interact with people in their natural environment, and to provide timely, meaningful and intuitive assistance.

Conclusion

Social change is about restructuring of the social institutions. Social change brought by technology has been quite rapid during the last few decades. Being in the organic society social institutions have to evolve themselves according to the emerging patterns. Libraries as social institutions also have to restructure themselves in order to sustain in the changing world. Genealogy of the libraries establishes that libraries have always evolved themselves with the changing society. In the attention economy libraries need to satisfy informational, technological as well as psychological needs of the users. Libraries need to generate interest among the readers through their products and services. Traditional media advertisers followed a model that indicated consumers went

through a linear process called AIDA - Attention, Interest, Desire and Action. Attention is therefore a major and the first stage in the process of converting non-consumers. Libraries can get the attention of the people by perforating their psychological environment which is only possible by promoting and marketing the services. Therefore, in such a scenario there is a necessity on the part of libraries to reach out with their products and services using varieties of strategies that can attract the attention of people towards them.

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