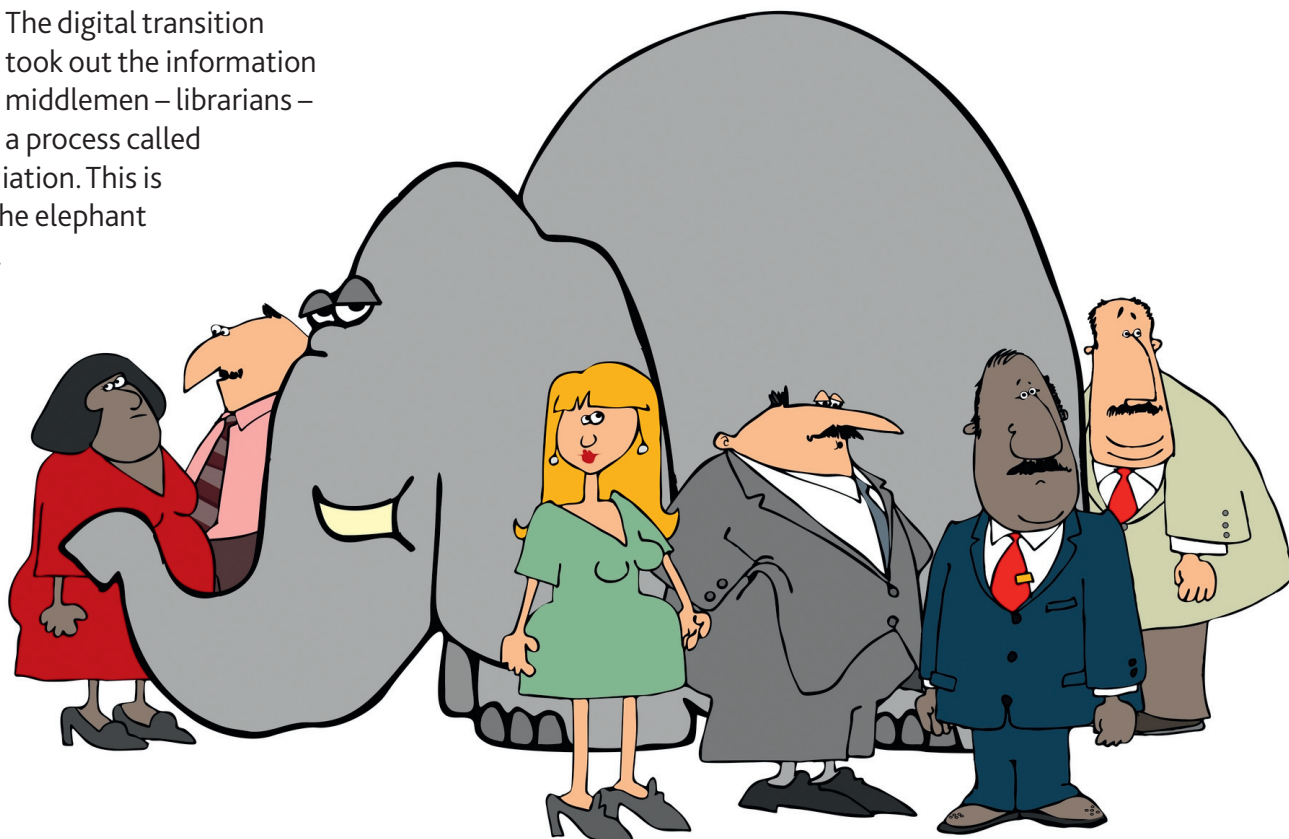
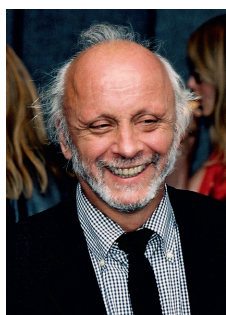


“ The digital transition took out the information middlemen – librarians – a process called disintermediation. This is very much the elephant in the room.



Disintermediated, decoupled and down



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The information profession must quickly learn lessons from consumers of information in the digital space, if they are not to sleepwalk to disaster, warns Professor David Nicholas.

Warning – contains inflammatory content!

This is David Nicholas's personal opinion. But what do you think? Get involved, have your say! **Twitter #UpdateNicholas** or email your letters to update@cilip.org.uk

THIS year is unlikely to be a happy one for the profession. In fact the profession has not had a good year for some time. It is in poor shape and large bits have fallen off. The once burgeoning special libraries sector (media, government, law and business libraries) has all but disappeared. When I was at City University's Department of Information Science we used to run an option called business information, which was regularly the most popular option, attracting 40-50 students. It has not run for years. It is now the turn of the public sector. Public libraries, especially branch and mobile libraries, are being savaged. CILIP estimates that more than 600 libraries in England could close, with a reduction of 4,000–6,000 full-time equivalent staff.¹ Unfortunately, the long-term prognosis provides no comfort either, because there is going to be no hiding

place in the public sector as Europe tries to weather the economic downturn, widely acknowledged to be the worst we have seen in peacetime. No profession would want to be corralled in the public sector, which is facing 710,000 job cuts by 2017 according to the Chancellor's Autumn Statement,² and this profession is. It will surely be the turn of academic libraries next, facing 10 per cent cuts,³ great uncertainty because of rising student fees, and a forecasted 13 per cent shortfall in students.⁴ If CILIP were not to branch out its recruitment strategy, membership would have fallen to half its current level by 2022. Of course even these bleak figures assume that nothing new will happen to rock the boat, but something is violently rocking the boat – read on!

It's disintermediation (and not the economy) stupid!

The economy is however only partly responsible for professional ills. What has really made it easy prey for the circling economists, accountants and policy makers is the digital revolution and librarians' inability to deal with it appropriately. The profession is like an ocean

liner whose brakes were applied some time ago (about the time business and media libraries started their decline, in the 1990s). It has yet to come to a stop, but it will stop, the only uncertainty being when. The brakes were, of course, applied by the digital transition, which took out the information middlemen – librarians, a process called disintermediation. This is very much the elephant in the room. Librarians would rather believe that economics is the cause because it hurts less – after all, nothing can be done about economics, can it?

To understand why the profession is in such a perilous position, we need to go over what has happened as a result of the digital transition. Fortunately, we can eschew the polemics and draw on a large and robust evidence base, an evidence base the Ciber⁵ research group has amassed over the last decade as a consequence of studying the digital footprints of millions of people who have migrated to the virtual space. You can't argue with the evidence! In fact, we have never had such a good grip on what is going on.

Disintermediation, simply the process of people doing it themselves without an intermediary, is something the profession has long worried about. Well, as a result of disintermediation, digital consumers⁶ have now arrived in their billions and with considerably more information fire power than librarians ever had. We can add a level playing field as regards access to information to the elephant we already have in the room.

Massive information choice and 24/7 access mean that users have been set free. We are all librarians now and connected directly to the big fat information pipe, once the preserve of the privileged few. Now the vast majority of people do most of their searching, using, sharing and reading of content in the digital space. And, despite the doomsayers (information literacy advocates), on the whole they have managed extremely well. (Nobody feels they are 'illiterate', they actually feel enfranchised and search like mad, thanks to Google.⁷)

What really hurts is not just that users have adapted to the new consumer paradigm and managed quite nicely without librarians, but that librarians have shipped large numbers of library users into someone else's (digital) space. Typically, this space is that of the publishers. Having provided the means of escape (via journal Big Deals and the like) librarians forgot to follow up their users to find out what they were up to in the liberated digital space. Big mistake!

It is about to get worse, much worse

Just when you thought the digital storm had abated a new one is brewing, which could deliver a knockout blow. The digital transition has much further to go. Ever bigger numbers of people, including groups strategic to the business of libraries and their activities, will migrate rapidly and seamlessly to the digital space. The relatively recent and phenomenal advance of e-books, smartphones, tablets and, of course, social media will guarantee this.

The rise and rise of e-books⁸ will be responsible for a huge movement of people to the digital world; people who have until now been in the slow lane of the digital transition (the elderly; humanities scholars; users of public libraries; and undergraduate students). E-books carry many more people with them than e-journals and many of these people are core business for libraries. Thus e-books put academic libraries in the firing line. Most academic libraries revolve around books and students. Much of the student business concerns the storage, management and loan of textbooks. This

work will wither away as the availability of e-textbooks improves. Students love them; they love the digital information seeking highways (links) that have been opened up within books and between books, which means they can fast feed on the snippets they need.⁹ Bloomsbury will be giving them away for free.¹⁰ The writing is on the wall.

Smartphones are going to take it to another level

With the impending switch from the use of personal computers to mobile platforms to access the internet – mobile platforms are forecasted to be the platform of choice by 2013¹¹ – big changes in information seeking and reading behaviour will occur and this will happen far away from the physical library, indeed, a good deal of access will be on the go and in the social space. You cannot get far enough away from the original library concept than that – and many libraries ban the use of mobiles! If you ask a young person today about libraries they will tell you that their mobile is their library. The voice-activated phone, iPhone 4S,¹² which enables you to use your voice to send messages, schedule meetings, make phone calls and request information is bound to take its toll on reading, perhaps even viewing, and most of all librarians. Google might have struck the first blow to the profession but Apple could well deliver the fatal blow.

Oops! Nearly forgot that small matter of the social media – Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and the like. Hardly small players! Not good news here either. It looks as if there will be another major round of disintermediation. Ciber's latest research indicates that, while social media has found serious application at all points of the research lifecycle, from identifying research opportunities at the beginning to disseminating findings at the end, for libraries it will lead to a further decoupling from scholarly users, information, communication and provision.¹³ Also, more generally, why read something when you can ask a friend. Isn't that how it all started out? We seem to have come full circle. 'What Marshall McLuhan called "the Gutenberg galaxy" – that universe of linear exposition, quiet contemplation, disciplined reading and study – is imploding, and we don't know if what will replace it will be better or worse. But at least you can find the Wikipedia entry for "Gutenberg galaxy" in 0.34 seconds.'¹⁴ As John Naughton alludes, what people really want above all else is fast information. Librarians are still to wake up to this. They are still serving information up in the old ways – as they have done for decades. Most people do not want whole or big things (probably never did). They want snippets, abstracts, summaries, one liners, and bullet points. And where they do need whole or big things, they want them fast.



Too many libraries and librarians exist in a parallel universe to that inhabited by their users. Librarians must understand how differently people seek and use information in cyberspace and realign information services along new lines.

Can anything be done, please?

So, where do we go from here? Based purely upon the evidence, not sentiment, in ranked order, this is what should be done.

The first thing is to decamp immediately¹⁵ to the digital world and wholly immerse oneself in it. That is where the vast majority of users are, and the rest will be there soon. Too many libraries and librarians exist in a parallel universe to that inhabited by their users. Librarians must understand how differently people seek and use information in cyberspace and realign information services along new lines. Throw away those old information-seeking textbooks. Nobody does it like that anymore, not even the middle-aged. If you don't, you will lose the Google Generation completely, and they will be the teachers, lecturers, social workers, parents and doctors of tomorrow.

The second thing is related, and that is to get into digitisation big time. It is a relatively new market and early players can win a big market share. It is also a market that has plenty of capacity. Libraries are vehicles of time, institutions of social memory and can profit from this. Thus public libraries might digitalise local ephemera – old photographs, postcards, letters from the war, and social documentation. They could also digitise material from local events, local cuisine etc. What is the business model for this? Do a deal with Amazon, Microsoft, The National Archives, EU/Europeana, museums, tourist boards or just market it yourselves.

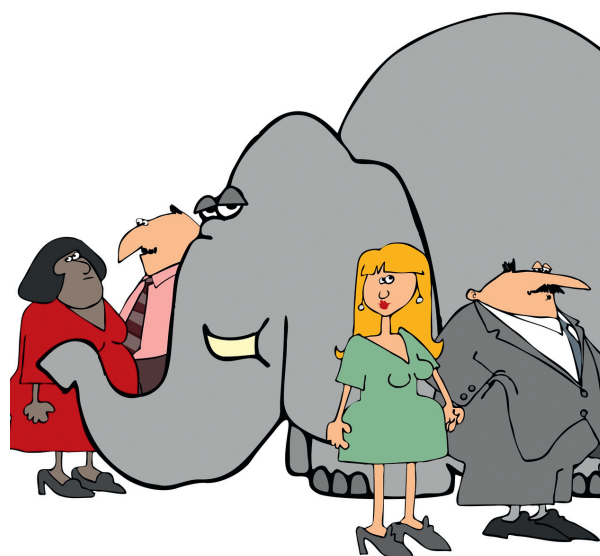
The third thing that an individual can do is to jump ship to publishing. Publishers are the owners of the best digital libraries. They have money and content, and everything is heading their way (for the next seven years anyway). They are well positioned to become the librarians of the future. That is why, when I was at UCL, we started a publishing programme in the Department of Information Studies. It proved to be hugely successful, reaching nearly 70 postgraduate students within three years of its introduction. I suspect that some of the best students who would once have come into librarianship now go into publishing. If you cannot do that, the fourth thing you should do is to start teaching people how to get the most out of their smartphones and iPads. Forget information literacy and federated search engines and focus on enhancing user performance. I would be surprised if anyone is being taught how to use mobiles to search the internet and yet that will be the main way people will search and use information in the very near future. If you don't believe me, read 'Culture on the go'.¹⁶

The fifth thing is definitely counter-intuitive. Libraries, as they are presently constituted, probably can only survive as memory institutions, as the knowledge acquisition function will inevitably move to the massive knowledge digital infrastructure. (As I write this the Government, while cutting grants to local authorities – the funders of public libraries – has announced massive investment in the UK's broadband infrastructure.) Physical libraries need to model themselves on museums, galleries and important cultural and historical institutions – a place to see real and beautiful books. Look how popular the British Library has become. There will always be a market for nostalgia. The history of libraries will be back on the curriculum, it will take the place of Second Life.

The sixth thing: this for public librarians (but there are lessons here for others), please read and reflect

on the polemic by Tim Coates, former head of Waterstone's¹⁷ and a public library advocate. The public library sector appears to have won the prize for being the most divorced from reality. According to Coates it has lost its way and got cut off from its roots. Nobody appears to know where they are going, nobody is in charge. The service is often badly managed and costs too much. Public libraries seem to have reached a stage beyond disintermediation.

It may seem like a mountain too high to climb, but I have already mentioned the digitisation opportunities that await public librarians, and there is actually another quick fix. Why not think of a model for lending e-books, possibly with the help of Amazon or Waterstone's? This would mean people getting books when they want, on the device they want, with a minimum loss of time. Providing this service would mean that libraries could still be part of a social space, as custodians of a collection, and benefit from all that brings with it. More mainstream than cafes. [1]



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letters: update@cilip.org.uk

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