Transitioning Traditional Libraries to Digital

By Janet Spencer

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on some of the challenges of transitioning from traditional to a digital Library. With the world becoming more technology inclined traditional libraries have to meet the needs of present users. Today’s library users are looking for easy accessibility, efficiency in finding material and wide range of choices. With these characteristics being met with digital libraries users are preferring electronic material where traditional libraries have to accommodate. This accommodation requires a full transition to a digital library or a hybrid library. Despite which best fits the users’ needs there are some major challenges in converting into a digital culture. This paper will point out these challenges and explain the new elements involved in converting into a digital age.

Keywords
Traditional Library, Hybrid Library, Digital Library, Data Migration, Collection, Subscription, Technical Architecture, Digital Preservation

INTRODUCTION

When one thinks of a library, one thinks of the traditional library containing collections of tangible or print material for user access. Traditional libraries preserve and store its own physical items of books, periodicals and other informational material. Library collections can easily be found on shelving by following the Dewey Decimal System where materials of similar subject matter or genres is within one area. Traditional libraries are not just physical locations where users travel to for information. They are also public service providers. For instance public libraries have activities or programs in place for children and adult learning. They are cooling and warming shelters for those in need and more. Traditional libraries play many different roles within the community. They fill needs that go beyond information and reference services. Although traditional libraries perform important tasks, their mere existence is being challenged by newly emerging Digital libraries. Since technology has changed to a more computer literate world, users are more involved in digital accessible material. This has initiated a high demand for electronic articles, eBooks, journals and more, igniting an evolution of digital libraries. Digital libraries are becoming more ubiquitous in academia, causing a competitive nature among all libraries. Traditional libraries are feeling the hard hit from users preferring digital information over print materials. In the article, “Transitioning to eBooks” when faculty were asked whether their needs would be met if the library transitioned to e-books 95% felt that e-books would satisfy their research needs(Camacho, 42). As a result, traditional libraries are forced into the transition to hybrid libraries, which consists of print and digital works or entirely digital. This drastic transition to either a hybrid or entirely digital library comes with major challenges. This paper will attempt to identify some of the challenges within the transition process and explain how libraries are coping with the change.

Digital Benefits
But first, the benefits of digitized material must be explained, so that it is clear why digital is preferred. Convenience is one, where digitized material can be opened at any location as long as there is online
connectivity. This eliminates having to travel to the library every time information needs to be retrieved. Efficiency is another benefit, where information can be searched and downloaded within seconds. In terms of time, within a traditional library users would have to first seek information by reference librarian or reference computer then search for textbook on its shelf. Digital researching cuts down several minutes by traditional methods to seconds at your fingertips in retrieving information. The traditional process takes much longer than having information accessible online. Lastly, the opportunity to have access to a wide range of research material through the digital library database makes it preferred over traditional. Researching online gives one many different choices of articles to utilize in its own collection as well as other digital library collections; rather than being limited to a select amount of material in a physical library’s collection. Although there are benefits to utilizing digital material, the transformation from a traditional to a digital library can impose hardship. Hardships in transition developments and costs to maintain.

**Collection**

One challenge of transitioning is creating digital content. This involves building a digital collection with electronic resources and subscribing digital items through vendors. This is overall a culture change which can be tough at first to conform to. Most traditional libraries purchase physical copies of books where they are considered sole owners of print material. Digital transition would require the use of eBooks, where the library would be required to license books through a vendor to subscribe to publisher packages. This would make the publisher the owner of all eBooks or electronic materials provided within that package, dissolving the library of ownership authority and archival rights to paid material. “We also do not have archival rights to the books we have paid for, even if a vendor goes out of business” (Sendze, 34). This change in purchasing power allows the vendor the authority to add or delete material from the collection where libraries have to deal with losing material on the account of vendors shopping for current publisher deals. An example of a library that began subscribing to eBooks providers is Douglas County Library located in Highlands Ranch, Colorado. An agreement was met with Gale, part of Cengage learning to integrate eBooks into their collection in 2011 in order to service the needs of library users (Kelley, 2011).

Subscriptions are great for libraries who are looking to convert to electronic material without the hassle of searching for individual material to purchase, like once done with prints. Subscription packages comes with many eBooks, audios, journals and other electronic material for a set price. At the same time, subscriptions come with much heftier costs and guidelines that traditional libraries have never
encountered before. “With eBooks, we pay hundreds of thousands of dollars to license books from a vendor—but we do not own anything” (Sendze, 34). For some libraries this is huge financial challenge. With subscription costs increasing and librarians practicing cost-effectiveness when purchasing content, the limited library budget is just not enough to maintain. Some libraries have folded since the digital materials have surfaced. Others have struggled through the hard times, but are still one step away from being bankrupt. For example, some public universities are in a crisis because of low state funding and cut budgets. This could ultimately lead to a domino effect of institution or library closures if funding doesn’t get better. According to the article “Emergence & definitions of digital libraries” there is funding available to convert into digital libraries sponsored by national and international funders. But once this digital library is converted how will it sustain itself with maintenance costs being much higher than managing a physical location? “Daniel Greenstein and Suzanne Thorin’s report (2002) of a survey conducted by the Digital Library Foundation indicated that in 2000 responding libraries spent an average of over US $1 million each on digital conversion and digital personnel”(Karen, 14).

Technical Architecture
Another issue is technical architecture. Since the library is going through a total conversion to digital an upgrade to the current system is necessary to accommodate electronic material. This would involve high speed internet, a database to support digital formats, electronic document management functions and search engines for indexing items and accessing collections. This too would require more funds to develop and or upgrade current systems. Software and equipment for digitizing collection items or converting paper to digital form is necessary for a smooth transition to a digital library. Digitization is the process of converting a physical item into a digital format, sometimes known as digital formatting. The Digital Library Federation developed a set of standards for creating digital technical architectures. DFL also has endorsed best practices for electronic metadata standards which allows for materials to be easily searchable through digital databases.

Digital Preservation
The active management and appraisal of digital information over its entire life cycle, from creation and active use to selection, transfer and preservation, and re-use is digital preservation. Constant managing of digital material is mandatory to uphold the value of the collection. This requires providing accessibility to files. Access to documents is maintained by moving files to storage mediums, but if the format is outdated, data migration is needed where translation of data is transferred to another file format. Data migration of files can turn into a very costly procedure, which could be another contributing factor to library financial hardships.

Hybrid Library
Combinations of traditional collections, licensed e-resources and openly available digital collections produced in-house or elsewhere is a hybrid library. An example of a hybrid library is Arizona State University. It has a physical location with digital and print resources.
This type of library may be the most economical for traditional libraries that don’t want to entirely convert to digital and still occupy a physical location. This was the library type chosen by most public and academic libraries. Furthermore, hybrid libraries retain its print collections while developing digital collections. This keeps the cost down although hybrid is still pricey to maintain, it is not as costly as it would be if to go all digital. Some libraries can sustain as a hybrid with its budget constraints. Also hybrid libraries satisfy the needs of both, users who still prefer print and those who would rather download and view documents online. A study conducted by the Digital Library Federation determined that “most academic library clients seem to prefer a hybrid information environment in which electronic information sources adds to the range of information available, but does not supplant print sources” (Van Vuren, 3). Hybrid is a good library choice because one preference doesn’t promise the other. They work together as valued library resources.

In conclusion, the transition to digital collections is necessary to keep up with technology today, but to what extent of the collection is digitized will be dependent on the library and library users. Change will always come with challenges within library management, therefore some strong policies, funding and reasonable budgets have to be in place to sustain its productivity. The way the information is retrieved is evolving, but there will always be a need for some of the traditional methods. Print materials will always be available, even if more users prefer electronic files there will be the option for paper copies. The world is advancing for the better and so is the future of libraries.

Citations


Karen(2014) Emergence and definitions of digital libraries


