Librarians as information champions in a world of infobesity and fake news

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Abstract:

In today's context of digitalization and infobesity, navigating the streams of information and deciphering the true from the false are real challenges, especially for the most vulnerable populations. Librarians epitomize the skills needed to disentangle reliable information from fake news: information, media and digital literacy skills. They guide users towards the relevant information, build their capacities to search and verify information by themselves and build bridges between underprivileged communities and public services (healthcare, legal counsel, etc.). However, to effectively perform this function, they need to be able to reach those who are the most fragile, and they need to learn about and understand the needs of these new users.

In the US, Libraries Without Borders (LWB) has launched the "Wash and Learn" program in which librarians create physical and digital libraries in laundromats. They offer their guidance to users of the laundromats while they wait for their clothes to wash and dry: from legal literacy, to health literacy, librarians help users navigate the information, reinforce their information literacy skills and accompany them towards the relevant structures when necessary. The librarians of the "Wash and Learn" program have successfully overcome the outreach challenge: they are information champions fighting social inequalities through literacy.

Based on our field experience in industrialised countries, as well as developing countries, LWB has developed an online training platform, BSF Campus (www.bsfcampus.org/) and a coaching program for young leaders of tomorrow's libraries, which will be continuously improved through feedbacks and best practices gathered from practitioners.

This workshop will focus on the skills that librarians need to become information champions themselves: communication and outreach abilities, service prototyping, adaptation to users' needs, partnerships establishing, etc.. Building upon LWB's and each participant's experience, we aim at collectively facilitating the emergence of ideas and action points to extend the reach and the impacts of libraries.

Video on our Wash-and-Learn project in Detroit (US):
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FgVHJk6YJqQ

INTRODUCTION

Information explosion is undeniable. And the digitalization of our everyday life exacerbates this dynamic. The amount of data created on digital information platforms every day is eight times greater than the information stored in all of the libraries in the U.S. Every minute, YouTube users upload 48 hours of new video contents and 571 new websites are created. In this context, navigating the streams of information and deciphering the true from the false are becoming real challenges, especially for the most vulnerable populations.

Although access to digital tools is becoming more and more common, usages are still strongly marked by social and economic inequalities. 39% of the French population is worried by the necessity to perform most of their administrative and fiscal procedure on the Internet. And according to a study by Emmaüs Connect, between 40 and 50% of young adults enrolled in job-seeking programs in local community centers in France do not have an email address when they enter the program and do not know about job search websites, while 80% of job offers are now posted on the Internet, with one in three solely posted on the Internet. Socioeconomic status is a huge determinant of people's ability to use technology: according to a study by the Pew Research Center, lower-income Americans are more than twice as likely as those in higher income groups to be classified as digitally unprepared.

Digital literacy, defined as "the ability to use information and communication technologies to find, evaluate, create and communicate information", is more than ever required not only for academic and professional purposes, but simply to fully take one's place in today's society and make informed political, societal and economical decisions. In order to effectively fight social inequalities in education and employment, digital literacy needs to be part of educational public policies. It has long been thought that inequalities in digital uses would soon spontaneously disappear, in part thanks to youth's abilities to take ownership of digital tools. But the horizon is grimmer than it seems: numerous studies are challenging this view demonstrating that the Y generation has indeed a superficial understanding of technologies. Their usage of the information and communication technologies is often limited to messenger apps, basic features of office softwares and online search. As technologies are gaining more traction and playing an increasingly important role in our everyday life and in the governance of our society, it becomes increasingly pressing for every citizen to acquire the digital literacy skills required to fully understand and exploit the potential of digital tools, as well as truly comprehend their biases and risks.

If we examine the components of digital literacy, we will actually highlight qualities and competencies that are key elements of the librarian's toolbox: the ability to comprehend information architecture, to navigate complex and numerous sets of data, the ability to search for information, find the relevant answer to a specific question and most importantly the ability to guide non-expert users. Librarians epitomize the skills needed to disentangle the true from the false in a world of infobesity and fake news.

Because libraries are open spaces full of information experts, they should be the cornerstone of a global strategy to fight social inequalities by empowering every individual to make informed decisions and fully take one's place in the political and social space. Libraries Without Borders believes in the power of information and education to reinforce individuals' sense of agency. Through our programs worldwide, we aim at building bridges between the most vulnerable populations and the society of information, from which they are too often excluded.

This paper will discuss the societal roles of librarians and the obstacles they face in their mission to reach the most underserved communities. Based on the "Wash and Learn" program that we implemented in the US, in which librarians create physical and digital libraries in laundromats, we will develop the idea that librarians are information champions who can extend the reach and the impacts of libraries towards the most vulnerable communities. Through their work, they equip the most fragile individuals with the skills, the resources and the community that they need to improve their condition and their wellbeing.

THE SOCIETAL MISSION OF LIBRARIANS

Librarians are information champions

With over 320.000 entities in the world, libraries represent a wonderful potential for development and democracy. Libraries provide their users with free access to curated contents, connectivity, a space where they can learn, interact with others, exchange ideas, build common projects. But more importantly libraries offer guidance and capacity building opportunities to users, through the mediation of librarians. And in a context where librarians' information and digital literacy skills are so scarce yet required, librarians have the power to transform societies and fight social inequalities worldwide.

In our knowledge society, librarians are often perceived as the experts on contents curation and contents management. However, as the world becomes increasingly digital and users are required to know how to sort through digital databases and search engines, librarians' social mission becomes as crucial as their academic expertise. They have 3 missions that are profoundly linked and can be leveraged to create a more equitable world:

1. **They guide the users towards the most relevant information.** In a local library, as in an academic library, they help the user specify their needs and find the content that will answer their question or propel them further in their thought process.
2. **They build users' capacities to search for and verify information.** By accompanying the users in their search and by showcasing the process at work while looking for information, they train the users in information and digital literacy.
3. **Finally, librarians build bridges between the underprivileged communities and public services.** By guiding the users towards relevant information and building their

capacity, in a space that is open to all regardless of one's socioeconomic status, gender, age or ethnicity, librarians are connecting the most vulnerable individuals with services that should be equally provided to all.

We call these three missions social, because they highlight the way the librarian's skills are exploited to reinforce the community's capacities. Libraries are not knowledge archives, they are social spaces in which one can access, discuss and create knowledge.

Through their set of skills, librarians are uniquely placed in today's society to fight social inequalities and provide the most fragile individuals with the skills and resources necessary to fully embrace their citizenship and contribute to society's development. They are today's information champions.

Barriers to the library: access and accessibility

In many contexts, libraries are the unique place where someone, regardless of their income or their education level, can have access to information and connectivity free of charge. However, prejudices and symbolic barriers are still preventing some of the most underprivileged communities to access library services. Access does not equate accessibility. One can have access to the library and not use it, because one does not feel like they belong in the library, either because they cannot read, or because they did not go to school or graduate from school. In a similar way, one can have access to a computer, a smartphone and have access to data, without knowing how to find the information they are looking for, or how to find the online form that they are required to fill in to access social assistance or other public services. Providing citizens with a wonderful network of libraries and having trained librarians ready to guide the users is therefore not enough to improve the most vulnerable individuals' well-being.

Underprivileged communities, even in industrialised countries, often struggle to navigate the multiple, complex and sometimes contradictory streams of information. And public services that could provide the necessary guidance - in particular, libraries - often struggle to reach those who need them the most. There is a strong overlap between the underprivileged communities and the underserved communities.

Five types of barriers prevent high-quality contents from reaching the most vulnerable adults and children:

- **Skills barriers**: fundamental literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy skills are required to access information. And the most fragile individuals sometimes do not feel confident enough in these skills to seek access to information in traditional informational and educational settings. Librarians should therefore aim at providing these individuals with the skill set that they need to effectively access contents.
- **Relevance barriers**: the underserved communities do not always see their reflection in the contents offered by traditional information access points. Communities should be invited to shape the content and curriculum with librarians, ensuring that information uses language, images, and examples that match the individuals they serve.
- **Reliability barriers**: As the quantity of information and misinformation continues to grow, citizens' trust in traditional media and channels of information waver. Interestingly, 78% of adults feel that librarians can help them find trustworthy and reliable information. Moreover, they can teach participants techniques to sort through false information.

- **Scheduling barriers**: Low-income individuals often cumulate jobs or need to adapt their day to day schedule to external constraints, making it impossible for them to use institutional services.
- **Social barriers**: Learning can be difficult alone, and individuals lacking a formal education may feel ill at ease in traditional learning environments, fearing judgment and exclusion. Building social support networks around learning new skills helps alleviates some of the challenges encountered by users.

How can librarians overcome these barriers?

At Libraries Without Borders, we aim at improving both access and accessibility of information for the most vulnerable individuals. Solving access issues requires a better coverage of libraries, even in the most remote and underserved regions (rural areas, low-income neighborhoods). Solving accessibility issues requires more profound and challenging changes to the current system. Based on our experience in industrialised countries (US, France, Belgium), as well as in developing countries (Cameroon, Ivory Coast, Senegal, DRC), and in emergency situations (Great Lakes region, Middle East, refugee settings in Europe), we have identified 4 key domains to improve accessibility:

- **Understanding non-users and their needs**: library services are usually designed to fit the needs of most users. Non-users of the library and their needs are often understudied and therefore suffer from information deprivation in an information-rich society. Rendering the library accessible and relevant to the needs of those who do not use it requires sensitivity to physical and psychological barriers to access, as well as interactions with and empathy towards those who do not come to the library. Projecting the library out of its walls thus becomes a prerequisite to serving a community in this entirety.
- **Promoting the social mission of the librarian**: in a society-rich information that requires high digital and information literacy to navigate effectively its contents, the librarian becomes more relevant as a facilitator than as a custodian. However, the librarian ecosystem lacks role models who exemplifies the social mission of the librarian. Formal trainings only marginally focus on the skills required to mediate access to information, to work with specific groups that do not use library services or to adapt the library services to attract those that do not see it as fitting their needs.
- **Involving the users and the non-users in the design of the library's services**: though the library is, in essence, a community service, it rarely involves the users in the design of its services. As Lorcan Dempsey stated: the 2020 library will be engagement-centered. When resources are scarce, users build their workflows around the point of access to information - the library - and users' attention is abundant. Now, because users' attention is scarce and the available resources are abundant, the library must build its services around the users' workflows. Thus, engaging with the local community to design library services and meet the community's expectations is essential to maintaining the link between the library and its community.
- **Anchoring the library in the local ecosystem**: too often the library works in silo, disconnected from other field actors. However more than an institution, a library is a community space that can become stronger, more impactful and more efficient through its connection with other local stakeholders.

THE EXAMPLE OF THE WASH AND LEARN PROGRAM

A methodology to bring the library and the librarians to the users

In the summer of 2015, LWB and the New York Public Library experimented the deployment of a pop-up multimedia center and digital library called the Ideas Box in the South Bronx (NYC). Implemented in a public park, a few feet away from the local library, the Ideas Box attracted children, adolescents and their parents throughout the summer, in learning and creative workshops led by the librarians and volunteers of the community, in storytelling sessions, in tutoring sessions designed to help students catch up during the summer or simply to browse the contents curated by the librarians. The users of the Ideas Box were not usual users of the local library: they enjoyed participating in the activities offered in this pop-up library, but did not usually attend the library, either because they felt that it was not for them, or simply because they did not think that the services of the library could fit their needs. Through this program, they discovered - or re-discovered - the services of the library and the guidance offered by the librarians.

Inspired by this success and the ability to connect with underserved populations, in 2016, LWB launched the "Wash and Learn" program in which librarians create physical and digital libraries in laundromats. Laundromats provide an ideal space to engage with low income families. Their clients return weekly and wait an average of 90 minutes for their laundry to wash and dry. The "Wash and Learn" program brings the library to the users, taking it out of its walls. In each laundromat hosting the program, local librarians create a library. They curate contents: books, games, tools but also digital contents that are then uploaded onto a local server installed in the back office of the laundromat. This server emits a local WiFi hotspot, onto which users can connect using the devices made available in this pop-up library or using their own smartphones.

Low-income families at the laundromat experience a myriad of legal, medical, financial, and educational that often do not fit neatly into themed buckets. Fortunately, librarians are experts at refining broad questions and curating information to find the answers. Thus, each laundromat provides tailored resources that specifically fit the evolving needs of the local community. Wherever we work, we partner with librarians to facilitate the program and to train volunteers and local organizations in the basic tenets of information science when librarians are unavailable. The result is a cadre of para-librarians who, like paralegals or paramedics, are poised to provide supplemental services to communities where librarians are sparse. Through digital literacy and online tools, the para-librarians help families find and sort through basic health information, answer their own basic legal questions, and much more.

The "Wash and Learn" program has been deployed in 8 states across the US (Minnesota, Michigan, Pennsylvania, New York, Maryland, Providence, Washington, North Carolina). In average, each "Wash and Learn" program engages 20 unique users per day who participate in learning workshops with a facilitator, with an additional 100 unique users per day who sign on and independently browse curated digital information.

In March of 2017, the first Laundromat Literacy forum was convened and a partnership was signed between LWB, the American Library Association, the Coin Laundry Association and the Clinton Initiative. Many other groups involved in learning and access to information have also joined this coalition: Scholastic Learning, the Barbara Bush Foundation, LakeShore Learning, Kiwanis International, for instance. This consortium will publish a guide for any librarian or laundromat owner wanting to build its own "Wash and Learn" program: it will

include a step-by-step methodology, along with use cases from different settings (rural, urban, suburban environments, serving different communities).

The key success factors: meeting the community where they are to answer questions relevant to their needs

The "Wash and Learn" program attracts users not only because it utilizes time that is otherwise wasted away, but also because it provides guidance and access to information in places that are familiar to the participants. The library and the librarians come to the users, meeting them where they are. We replicated the same approach with legal literacy and health literacy programs, bringing access points to high-quality and tailored contents in churches, community centers, parks, community housing hallways.

The adaptive curation of contents constitutes another key factor: contents are selected daily according to users' questions and expressed needs. More often than not, librarians also help users clarify their need for information: an everyday life question can hide a legal or a health concern. The facilitators are trained by librarians to curate contents and identify questions that require guidance from a professional.

The plasticity of the contents offer reinforces facilitators and librarians' relationship with the local community. Through constant interactions, they build a bond of trust with the users of the laundromat that enable them to effectively build bridges between underserved communities and information services.

The "Wash and Learn" program has already shown significant results in connecting the most vulnerable populations with public services. This has been verified for both libraries and thematic counselling: in Detroit, the program has increased the number of library cardholders ; in New York, the program successfully connected users with lawyers, doctors and social workers ; in Washington DC, we increased the number of Chinese-speakers who use the library by 20% in 2 months of intervention. A comprehensive study launched with the Clinton Initiative and the Coin Laundry Association will examine how the program impact children's academic success. By fostering partnerships with local organizations, the "Wash and Learn" program also increased collaboration between librarians and other actors of the social aid system, establishing an integrated response to the needs of the most vulnerable individuals.

Conclusion

Access to information is increasing, while accessibility is actually on the decline. To build a better future, public policies need to tackle both issues: improving access to information and promoting accessibility, especially for the most vulnerable populations. Libraries are ideally placed to fight these inequalities, they can be a core component of a global strategy for development. But efficiently fill this mission, they need to embrace their social mission. Librarians have a key role to play as information champions, democratizing access to information and actively accompanying the most fragile individuals in their search for the relevant information and in building users' capacity to source and verify information. Rather than being custodians of information, they should be facilitators, building bridges between the most underprivileged communities and public services.

Libraries can thus become a hub for knowledge sharing and creation, a space of social and cultural mixing, a space that fosters collective wisdom and participate to sustaining democracy.

Together with multidisciplinary actors (libraries, NGOs, public services, community-based organisations), LWB strives to facilitate the emergence of ideas and action points to extend the reach and the impacts of libraries worldwide. This paper highlights a few lessons learnt from our field experience and represents a call to action for organisations wishing to design the prerequisites for libraries to play their role as social impact catalysts.

Acknowledgments

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Bios

Jérémy Lachal
Executive Director, Bibliothèques Sans Frontières (Libraries Without Borders)

Jérémy Lachal co-founded the non-profit organization Bibliothèques Sans Frontières (BSF) / Libraries Without Borders in 2007 alongside French Historian Patrick Weil. He has since been leading the NGO in its mission to reduce the vulnerability of populations through enhancing access to information and education.

By creating innovative programs such as the Ideas Box, a portable multimedia toolkit designed for vulnerable populations, the Code Travelers - Les Voyageurs du Code (computer programming workshops for youth) or the adaptation of Khan Academy into French, Jérémy Lachal has developed BSF into one of the most innovative NGO in the field of access to education and information.

With 120 staffs and a budget of €8M, BSF is present in 30 countries around the world. The organization has received numerous awards including the French presidential initiative – la France S'engage, the Google Impact Challenge in 2015, WISE Award in 2016 and the Library of Congress Literacy Award.

Jérémy is member of the Clinton Global initiative and Ashoka fellow since 2015. He is also joined since 2012 the IFLA's international leadership program.

In October 2014, Jérémy gave a TED talk on the Ideas Box on the occasion of TEDx Paris' fifth anniversary (http://bit.ly/1xQDCsf).

Jeremy is graduated from Sciences Po Paris (Paris Institute of Political Studies) and earns a Master's degree in International Law.

Muy Cheng Peich
Education Director, Bibliothèques Sans Frontières (Libraries Without Borders)

Muy Cheng Peich graduated from the Ecole normale supérieure (Paris, France). She worked as a researcher in cognitive psychology, studying memory, attention and social cognition at the ENS, at UCL as well as at the EPFL. Passionate about mechanisms underlying learning and creativity, as well as education issues, she is thoroughly convinced that education and access to information can and should a play a role in the reduction of social inequalities.

She joined Libraries Without Borders in 2014, after working with the organization on the adaptation of Khan Academy for French-speaking countries. She then created the Department of Education, Contents and Training at Libraries Without Borders. Together with her team, they promote empowerment and agency through innovative education methodologies and tools, carefully curated contents and the experimentation of activities that encourage creativity, analytical and critical thinking, and learning by doing.

Muy Cheng is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts.