

Professor David Nicholas

Director, Department of Information Studies and the
CIBER research group, University College London

My research group, CIBER, has been chronicling the rise and rise of the digital information consumer and the demise of bricks and mortar information institutions and hard-copy publications over the past seven years. We have done this by means of a pioneering methodology called deep log analysis which enables us to visualise what goes on in cyberspace in respect to the viewing and using behaviour of millions of people. The massive and robust evidence base accumulated opens out a world to us not seen before and what we see convinces us that the public library is rapidly decoupling from its user base, mainly, but not exclusively, as a result of the digital transition (people moving their reading, study, leisure and information seeking activities into the virtual space). With this transition comes disintermediation, the removal of the intermediary (typically the librarian) from the information chain, which means we are all librarians now, and have to behave like them – constantly reviewing and validating data. But of course we are not librarians and we tend to behave like e-shoppers which has all kinds of consequences for the future – and I will deal with this later.

What with the advent of e-books this process is about to rapidly accelerate, bringing into the virtual space a large body of new people – students, humanities and social science scholars and, of course, the general public. Indeed, generally people are being fast-forwarded by Government and other organisations into this virtual space (in an attempt to create e-citizens of all of us) and yet the public library seems incapable of adapting to the realities of this and the needs and behaviours of the newly enfranchised digital information consumer. For any institution or profession to decouple from their audience, constituency or market represents its death knell. And in terms of the key metrics of loans, membership and visits, as your letter points out, we can already hear the bell ringing. For a much-loved information institution, public libraries, to face possible melt-down in an information age, when information has never ever been so important, is unpardonable and something we should all be ashamed of. Yet it will happen because nobody seems to understand the need to look at the big picture and that the tail (the digital) now wags the dog.

There has been so much change, indeed a fundamental shift in behaviour, especially amongst the young, which appears to have been completely missed by public library policy makers and many practitioners. They seem to be re-arranging the chairs rather than moving house, which is what they must do. This is partly because much of today's information seeking and consuming goes on remotely and anonymously (and few people look to see what goes on behind the curtain, much to their shame) and partly because librarians fear the worse and are in denial. Without this knowledge of the digital information consumer librarians are working on the basis of an old and false paradigm. There is too much looking to the future and too much blaming the kids for a form of information behaviour and reading which is endemic to the whole population, which essentially reflects a failure on the part of the profession to deal with what is happening now.

Government, society and professions need to face up to the consequences and a good start would be to wake up to what has actually happened to our users, library members etc; they have opted for fast information as they have for fast food. Only then can we deal with the consequences that result from this – lack of attention, lack of a mental map, no sense of collection, and a poor idea of what is good and relevant. Understanding information seeking behaviour in the digital space is a prerequisite to determining academic, education, cultural and personal outcomes – positive and negative. Then we shall be in a position to determine whether we are really benefiting from the information society and always-on information, and not blowing it as seems to be the case. If we are right about this – and we have better data than anyone, then whose responsibility it is? If it is to be public libraries – the logical choice, then they show little signs of helping e-citizens to survive in a digital world where almost all of their strategic activities are conducted. These concerns should be driving the public library agenda not defending increasing tired and bankrupt provision and policies. I am afraid I remain very pessimistic.