LIBRARIANS IN TRANSITION: EMPOWERING KNOWLEDGE SEEKERS IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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Abstract

Libraries have historically served as essential hubs for information access and education. Traditionally viewed as repositories of books, libraries are now undergoing a metamorphosis. This qualitative research explores the evolving roles of librarians in the "new normal," particularly their function as scaffolds and knowledge acquisition guides. The study analyzes ten academic publications (1975-2021) on the changing roles of libraries. Employing a thematic analysis approach, the research reveals librarians transitioning into new roles: knowledge developers, collaborators, content curators, trainers, and information managers. These findings highlight how librarians are adapting to empower knowledge seekers in the digital age.

Keywords: *Changing roles, librarians, change, knowledge economy, thematic analysis*

Introduction

The library as a center for learning plays a very crucial role in the acquisition, the organization, the preservation, and sharing of knowledge. By the information resources it harbors, the library is expected to address the instructional, the curricular, the research, and recreational needs of the users visiting it. Quadri (2014) emphasized that from the library's point of view, its goal is to process, acquire, organize, preserve, and avail easy access to knowledge and information to its users in the most convenient way. Gunasekera (2010) equivocally said that the future of library will be a knowledge center that is dynamic where the librarian, the 'books' be it real or virtual and the users are engaging an interchange ideas.

The satisfaction derived from the use of library depends on the quality of its resources and the personnel and their ability and zeal in service provision. Lack of expectations, the continued closure of most public institutions or libraries, or any other point of limitation will probably not certainly and finally demonstrate. Indeed, libraries remain relevant as service institutions by consistently offering traditional services they are famous for. Abdulsalami et al. (2013) insisted that the primary mission of the library is to "bridge the gap between individuals and the information they seek".

To achieve this, it means that the work of the librarians involves several other tasks such as acquiring primary literature, organizing and controlling it and going ahead to provide access to the materials. The librarians are further required to maintain the catalogs and reading lists and even provide a comprehensive and up-to-date bibliography to enable the users to find the edition.

The library, together with the librarians and staff, is a dual design, acting both as a scaffold and as a support. It is the place where one acquires knowledge as well as the place where one causes the generation, reception, distribution, or even evaluation of content. *"Libraries are indispensable in the educational system of development"* as noted by Abdulsalami et al. (2013); *"both the library and the educational system are mutually and effectively interdependent… their effectiveness and completeness are inseparable one from the other."*

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted various student practices related to academic life (Aristovnik et al., 2020). This included a shift to online learning, closure of physical libraries, altered communication channels with faculty and administration, revised assessment methods, and changes in workload and student performance.

These disruptions forced libraries to re-evaluate their roles and adapt to the "new normal." Cognitive libraries, in particular, have been actively reimagining their strategic direction and service portfolios (Schonfeld, 2018). As Schonfeld (2018) notes, "academic libraries are undergoing essential transformations, venturing beyond traditional print collections."

Therefore, based on that and the specific mission of the parent institution, Schonfeld suggested nine Key Service Areas to invest in varied services among academic libraries. However, the parent institution mission should inspire these services: 1. Convene Campus Community; 2. Enable Academic Success; 3. Facilitate Information Access; 4. Foster Scholarship and Creation; 5. Include and Support Off-Campus Users; 6. Preserve and Promote Unique Collections; 7. Provide Study Space; 8. Showcase Scholarly Expertise; 9. Transform Scholarly Publishing.

In other words, the library is expected to facilitate and ensure the user uses the resources and services offered effectively, conserves items over time, and habituates potential users to become a routine or regular service user (Kamau, 2001). For instance, governments have implemented several health and safety protocols and guidelines which result in respective closures of many libraries across the world.

Therefore, as unclear as to when the libraries will open its doors as a scaffold and support equitable access to know and be informed. As a result, it does well for the researcher to have conducted this study.

Method

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the evolving roles of librarians in the face of contemporary challenges. A thematic analysis approach was utilized to identify recurring themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Data for this study was collected from academic journal articles retrieved from the Ebsco database. Keywords including "changing roles" and "emerging roles" of librarians were used for the search. Articles were selected based on a set of pre-established inclusion criteria detailed in Table 1. These criteria ensured the relevance and quality of the chosen sources, promoting a more rigorous research process.

This research covered a review of 9 articles, as shown on Table 2, which correspond to the period from 1975 to 2020. Only the findings, conclusions and recommendations of each article were reviewed.

Out of the 15 journal articles initially reviewed, only nine articles have been selected following a set of criteria for inclusion: a) must be written in English; b) published from 1965-2020; and c) must contain any of the following: findings and discussion, conclusion, and recommendation.

Articles	Language (English)	Findings and Discussion	Conclusion	Recommendation
DuVal (1968)	✓	✓	✓	
Hisle 2005)	✓	✓	✓	
Lapuz (2006)	✓	✓	✓	✓
Virgil (2013)	✓	✓	✓	✓
Obadare (2014)	✓	✓	✓	
Quadri (2014)	✓	✓	✓	✓
James, Shamchuk & Koch (2015)	✓	✓	✓	
Khan & Ali (2016)	✓	✓	✓	
Ducas, Michaud-Oystryk & Speare (2020)	✓	✓	✓	✓

Table 1. *Inclusion Criteria for the Reviewed Articles*

Journal Articles	Article No.	Period Covered
DuVal (1968)	1	1975-
Hisle 2005)	2	1998-2004
Lapuz (2006)	3	1988-2000
Virgil (2013)	4	1975-2012
Obadare (2014)	5	2001-2003
Quadri (2014)	6	1971-2013
James, Shamchuk & Koch (2015)	7	2006-2013
Khan & Ali (2016)	8	1976-2014
Ducas, Michaud-Oystryk & Speare (2020)	9	2000-2018

Table 2. *Summary of Journal Articles, and Period Covered*

In the deduction stage, as shown on Table 3, the researcher identified key points from the findings, conclusions and recommendations from the selected articles. Each of which has been assigned a particular code.

Journal Article(s)	Key Points derived from the conclusion and recommendations of the selected articles	Initial Codes
Article 1	Staying current with advancements in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) is crucial for information professionals.	*New interventions in ICT*
	The information field benefits from a diverse range of professionals, including those from engineering, communication, computer science, electronics, and more.	*People from diverse backgrounds* *Integration of fields*
	Collaboration with experts from various disciplines allows librarians to contribute to the creation of innovative technologies. Librarians play a vital role in the digital age, and their continuous adaptation ensures their ongoing relevance.	*Development of new technologies* *Librarians' relevance*

Table 3. *Deduction Stage from a Sample Article (Obadare, 2014)*

During the induction stage, as illustrated on Table 4, the codes were arranged accordingly and similar codes with related subjects are put together.

Codes	Journal Article(s)
Access to information	
Adult learning and lifelong learning	
Capacity building	Articles 2, 5, 6 and 8
Challenges	
Collaborative learning	
Communication	

Table 4. *Induction Stage*

In the verification stage, as reflected from Table 5, similar concepts were grouped to come up with themes.

Similar Concepts	Theme(s)
Access to information	
Information provider/disseminator	Librarian's Traditional Roles
Grounded	

Virtual access

Traditional roles
Inclusivity

People from diverse background

Service provider

User expectation

Library significance and librarians status and relevance

Maintenance

Table 5. *Verification Stage*

Table 6 presents the last stage, the emergence of themes, following the process.

Themes	Descriptions (as Scaffold and Support)
Librarians' Traditional Roles	Traditionally, librarians have served as a vital scaffold for information access, guiding users through extensive collections and ensuring organized retrieval. They have been unwavering support systems for research, learning, and the community, offering assistance in finding resources, enhancing research capabilities, preserving knowledge, fostering community connections, and teaching essential information literacy skills. In their time-honored roles, librarians act as both the scaffold that structures information and the support that empowers individuals in their pursuit of education, knowledge, and personal growth.
Librarians as Trainers (Past and Present)	Librarians have traditionally served as educators, guiding patrons in the effective use of resources. As a scaffold, they help individuals build their information literacy skills, offering support in navigating the ever-expanding information landscape.
Librarians as Collaborators (Present and Ongoing)	In a modern context, librarians increasingly collaborate with various stakeholders, acting as a vital support system. They partner with researchers, faculty, and community members, providing essential support to facilitate knowledge creation and sharing.
Librarians as Knowledge Creators (Contemporary)	Beyond curating existing knowledge, librarians are now actively contributing to knowledge creation. They serve as both scaffold and support, aiding in research endeavors and producing valuable content.
Librarians as Information Managers (Current and Evolving)	Librarians have evolved into expert information managers, organizing vast digital collections and ensuring easy access. They act as scaffolds by structuring information and support systems by offering efficient search and retrieval mechanisms.
Librarians as Lifelong Learners (Ongoing)	Librarians themselves are lifelong learners, staying updated with the dynamic information landscape. As a scaffold, they assist others in their learning journeys, offering guidance and resources for continuous self-improvement.

Table 6. *Emergence of Themes*

Results

Librarians' Traditional Roles. Libraries are service institutions. They exist primarily to serve their users. Hence, librarians are expected to keep their traditional role as providers and disseminators of information and knowledge. In doing so, user expectations are to be considered while maintaining the core services which libraries are known for or expected to deliver (Khan & Ali, 2016; Quardri, 2014; Virgil, 2013; Hisle, 2005; DuVal, 1968).

In today's knowledge-driven society, information is crucial for individuals, households, governments, and corporations (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2021). Among the core tasks of information professionals are: (1) providing information to users; (2) helping users find information; and (3) facilitating dialogue among users of their services (Obadare, 2014).

Librarians as Trainers (Past and Present). As a training center, the library is a place where user education and training may take place. User training may be individual or group. Librarians as trainers perform similar roles such as teachers, facilitators, instructional designers, and learning assessors. As trainers, librarians need to be familiar with different learning modalities and educational approaches in the teaching of library, research, and information literacy skills; thus, making learning more engaging and lasting.

Librarians as Collaborators (Present and Ongoing). Collaboration is no longer a trend, but a cornerstone of success in the 21st century. The need to address complex societal issues necessitates teamwork and collective thinking (Stokols et al., 2008). This shift emphasizes collaboration over individual efforts and fosters a sense of community, moving away from isolated work styles (Weick & Roberts, 1993).

The need to establish collaborative programs among libraries is crucial. Collaboration is one of the skills needed for librarians to become more effective in the new normal particularly in the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge and information. Collaboration also helps improve library image. As collaborators, librarians perform the roles such as entrepreneurs, negotiators, and partners.

Educators collaborating has long been recognized as a practice that improves learning outcomes, teacher satisfaction, and student engagement in the library (Lance et al., as cited in Kammer et al., 2021).

True collaboration, according to Little (2002), involves not only joint planning, decision-making, and action, but also a merging of independent ideas to create new frameworks. Additionally, it necessitates a shared commitment to resources, power, and expertise. No single voice dominates, decision-making authority rests with the group, and the final product reflects the contributions of all participants.

Data curation becomes particularly valuable when university libraries collaborate with other schools or historical organizations (Virgil, 2013). This collaboration allows for the creation of reports, databases, and easily accessible electronic archives of unique or historical information (Virgil, 2013).

Librarians as Knowledge Creators (Contemporary). Librarians have traditionally served as information and knowledge providers. However, knowledge creation should also be a core competency for them in the contemporary landscape. This involves conducting research to generate new knowledge and disseminating it through formal scholarly activities like conference presentations and articles. Librarians acting as knowledge creators take on roles akin to researchers, content creators, writers, authors, developers, and investigators (Witek, 2014; Beck & Davidson, 2018). By creating and sharing new knowledge, librarians empower users to make informed decisions and solve problems.

Librarians as Information Managers (Current and Evolving). Information professionals play a crucial role in guiding users towards the most appropriate media for their needs. As trained information managers, they handle information with meticulousness and professionalism, understanding its delicate and sensitive nature (Dutton & Rosenberg, 2010). Effective information management is paramount for any organization. Through careful collection, filtering, packaging, and dissemination of data to the right people, information professionals help prevent confusion and ensure informed decision-making. Consider the analogy of a well-oiled machine – information professionals act as the lubricant, ensuring the smooth functioning of organizational activities.

Librarians as Lifelong Learners (Ongoing). Libraries are a unique resource that fosters lifelong learning. Academic librarians, in particular, play a vital role by facilitating access to learning opportunities. They cultivate a learning culture through partnerships with students and researchers by providing them with the information they need (Malan, 2007). To effectively fulfill this role, librarians themselves must be committed to lifelong learning and understand the principles that underpin it.

Figure 1 presents librarians' emerging roles. While the primordial role of the library remains the same—to deliver and disseminate information—this may now be done in different manner or approaches in the next normal. In the exercise of other librarians' roles, the optimum level of service expected by clients should always be taken into consideration.
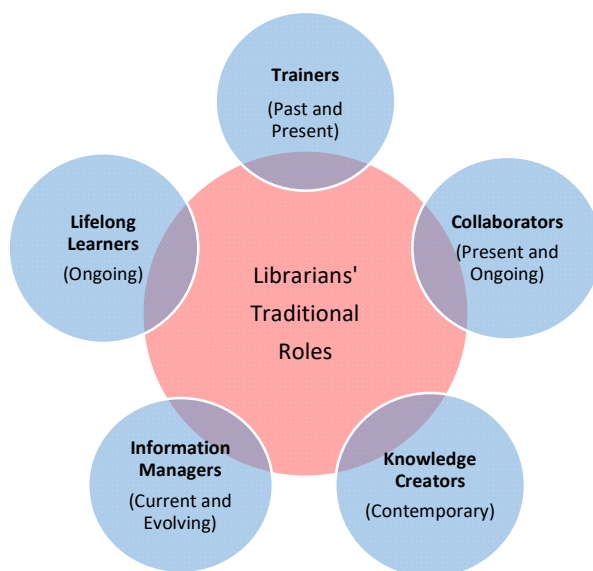
Figure 1. *The Shifting Roles of Librarians*

Consequently, as librarians perform their new and emerging roles, similar roles overlap, as it can be gleaned from Figure 2, whether they are aware or not.
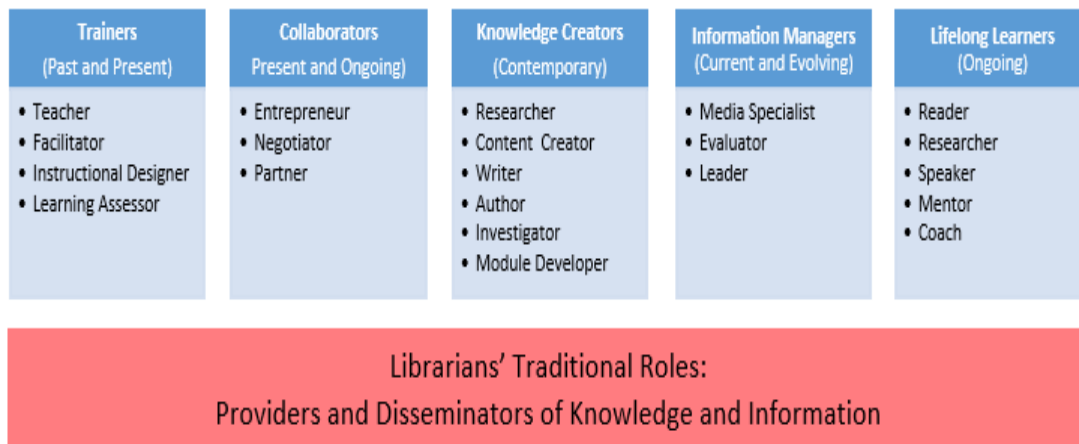
As trainers, librarians perform the roles similar to that of the teachers, facilitators, instructional designers, and learning assessors, among others. As such, librarians should possess the necessary skills and competencies required for such roles.

Consequently, librarians can also become entrepreneurs, negotiators, and partners in knowledge creation and other various sustainable information services.

In the same manner, librarians as information professionals, are good researchers, content creators, writers, authors, investigators, and module developers, because of their formal education, experience and training.

With the wide array of information resources which is now available from various sources, librarians are professionally trained to manage information. Librarians are trained how to access, evaluate and use information responsibly and ethically.

As lifelong learners, librarians' motivation to learn remains constant as anchored on their motto which is, "Continuous and Never-ending Improvement". In fact, lifelong learning is one among the many core competencies, both personal and professional, of librarians as reflected in the National Competency-Based Standards for Filipino Librarians.

Trainers (Past and Present)	Collaborators (Present and Ongoing)	Knowledge Creators (Contemporary)	Information Managers (Current and Evolving)	Lifelong Learners (Ongoing)
• Teacher • Facilitator • Instructional Designer • Learning Assessor	• Entrepreneur • Negotiator • Partner	• Researcher • Content Creator • Writer • Author • Investigator • Module Developer	• Media Specialist • Evaluator • Leader	• Reader • Researcher • Speaker • Mentor • Coach

Librarians' Traditional Roles:
Providers and Disseminators of Knowledge and Information

Figure 2. *Similar Roles that Librarians Perform in the New Normal*

Conclusion
In conclusion, the concept of the library remains a steadfast service institution, continuously evolving and innovating as it adapts to the demands of the new normal. The pivotal role librarians play in shaping the library's functions contributes significantly to its overall value. As the environment and technology transform, the methods and means of knowledge acquisition evolve in tandem, reflecting the timeless importance of libraries in facilitating learning and access to information. These themes underscore the enduring relevance of libraries in an ever-changing world.

Recommendation
It is imperative to enhance the recommendations as follows:
Comprehensive Skill and Competency Assessment. Recognizing the evolving nature of library roles, it is crucial to thoroughly identify, outline, and validate the skills and competencies essential for librarians in their various functions. This assessment will ensure that librarians are well-prepared for their changing roles.

Continuous Capacity Building. The study emphasizes the critical need for librarians to continuously invest in capacity building initiatives. This ensures they remain equipped with the most relevant skillsets for the ever-changing information landscape. Priority areas for development include data curation, digital literacy, research support, and effective collaboration. By mastering these skills, librarians empower themselves to keep libraries at the forefront of information access and utilization.

Research on Emerging Skills. In the context of the new normal, it is recommended to conduct an in-depth study to determine the emerging skills required for librarians in their evolving roles. This research will provide valuable insights into the specific competencies that librarians need to navigate the changing landscape effectively, ensuring their continued relevance and value to the community they serve.

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