The information enfranchisement of the digital consumer

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Abstract

Purpose – Aiming to ensure that everyone obtains the rich rewards available in today’s information-centred society, this paper sets out to explore how the curious problem of “information malnutrition” in an era of plenty might be overcome to bring about the true information enfranchisement of today’s enthusiastic digital consumer.

Design/methodology/approach – Based on the insights gained from research projects involving hundreds of thousands of people, the paper first analyses the whys, wherefores, implications, effects and challenges of the “information malnutrition” problem and then proceeds to investigate the ways and means for its holistic solution.

Findings – Although in today’s information-saturated world people have vast amounts of information at their beck and call, their myriad information needs often go unmet. Fortunately, changing this picture of ineffectual information consumption is quite feasible. The key to it all is achieving a nuanced understanding of people’s idiosyncratic needs through ongoing assessment, utilising the analytical framework offered up for the purpose by the authors. It falls to information professionals, then, to see to the true information enfranchisement of the digital consumer, for it is their proclaimed mission to ensure that people’s information needs are handled effectively. This can be done directly, via the proficient planning and delivery of information provision, but also indirectly, by spreading professional thinking and practices to those who insist on sorting out their information needs on their own.

Originality/value – The paper offers a new approach to the much-debated problem of ensuring that people really benefit from the information abundance that is available to them, which is firmly grounded in theory, but, nevertheless, highly practical.

Keywords Generation and dissemination of information, Information profession, Digital libraries, User studies

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction: the curious problem of “information malnutrition” in an era of plenty

Citizens of today’s postmodernist knowledge society seem to crave information to an extent that is surely unparalleled in the history of mankind. This is hardly surprising, of course, for competent decision-making in our era of plurality of values, diversity, change and meltdown of authorities is so very much knowledge- and information-contingent. Indeed, with the key to success in all walks of life popularly – and rightly – held to be knowledge constantly updated and refreshed by new information, we all forever find ourselves in information-need situations. Under these...
circumstances, living in an information-saturated digital world, with its plethora of
conveniently available modes of access to a truly amazing cornucopia of information
resources, has its instantly recognisable advantages.

And yet, unfortunately, with all that people undoubtedly have truly vast amounts of
information at their beck and call 24/7 in the office, home, coffee bar and train, their
myriad pressing information needs may, and, in fact, often do go unmet. Admittedly,
this is not for lack of enthusiastic attempts on their part to resolve any information
problem encountered. In fact, inhabitants of our information-hungry world happily set
out to exercise their new-found options in the internet-redefined and vastly widened
virtual information space at the slightest call for doing so. Not for lack of opportunities,
either: with the effortless accessibility of the internet for all and sundry via the
veritable armoury of computers and modems which seem to have sprung up virtually
everywhere, huge swathes of the population are connected directly to the information
they might need, on a scale that dwarfs any library, publishing or newspaper effort.
Why then? Why is “information malnutrition” so rife in an era of such plenty? And,
perhaps even more importantly, how can we rectify this regrettable situation? How can
we ensure that everyone actually obtains the rich rewards so sorely needed and,
happily, so easily available, too, in today’s information centred realities? How can we
see to the true information enfranchisement of today’s enthusiastic digital consumer?

The whys and wherefores of the “information malnutrition” problem

Ironically enough, the root of the “information malnutrition” problem seems to be the
very act of switching the information tap on to everyone, which all too often amounts
to the removal of the information professional from the information equation. Thus,
unlike the traditional library-driven information seekers of the not so distant past, who
relied on the professional intermediary for the authoritative and knowledgeable
amassing, organising and retrieval of information, today’s ever-connected digital
information consumers search for themselves, often from non-library or evaluated
information environments. Indeed, disintermediation (loosely defined and understood
as “cutting out the middleman”) is very much the name of the game these days;
everyone sorts out their own information needs (and those of their family and friends,
too), unhesitatingly taking on the tasks previously reserved for information
professionals. We have all become librarians, have we not (well, as long as we have
Google at our disposal . . .)? Most people, however, are not information professionals;
they only think they are. Actually, few possess the professional know-how of a
librarian – though they would inevitably protest otherwise, to the tune of “Who needs
information professionals performing their feats of conjecture to alight on the right
solution to an information problem when all it takes is typing in a keyword or two?
Getting hold of the qualitative and authoritative information, which is right on target
to your needs, is easy, is it not?”.

Well, as it happens, in actual fact not, as the substantial evidence base amassed in
the CIBER studies exploring the information work of various communities, most
notably those associated with news (Nicholas et al., 2000), health (Nicholas et al.,
2007a), voluntary and charitable work (Nicholas et al., 2004a) and scholarly publishing
(Nicholas et al., 2008a), unmistakeably indicates. Rather the contrary: present-day
information seekers consistently demonstrate characteristic patterns of behaviour,
which, taken together, often constitute such ineffectual activity that the much debated
possibility of “dumbing down” in information work increasingly appears to approximate reality. It is a widespread, pronounced, endemic form of digital information behaviour that is tantamount to no less than a novel style of information seeking: bouncing, frenetic, volatile, promiscuous and intent on the pursuit of quick wins (Nicholas et al., 2003, 2004b, 2006, 2007b, 2008a).

Thus, information seekers of today are “bouncers”: faced as they are with huge digital choice, search engines constantly refreshing that choice and a shortage of time that results from so much to look at, they typically view only one or two web pages from the vast numbers available to them. Their checking-comparing, dipping sort of behaviour, reminiscent of television channel hopping, is thus best described as “bouncing”, although the terms “flicking” or “hopping” or “skittering” would equally do. As a result, much of people’s activity in the digital environment involves navigating rather than consuming: reading appears to be undertaken only occasionally online, probably undertaken offline and possibly not done at all, for most people do not penetrate a site to any depth. On average information seekers spend only a few minutes on a visit to a web site, insufficient time to do much reading or gain much understanding into the topic under investigation. They scan online pages very rapidly and click extensively on hyperlinks, advancing horizontally rather than sequentially. As visitors to cyberspace thus tend to move quickly, not to say frenetically, from webpage to webpage, spending little time reading or digesting information, it is hardly surprising to find that they experience quite some difficulty in making relevant, quality or reliability judgements about the pages they retrieve. Instead, the merit of some information is judged by its popularity; the wisdom of the crowd is the key measure of worth.

Furthermore, not only do information consumers now “read” differently, “feeding for information” or “power browsing” at a feverish pace through a (large) number of sites, titles, contents pages and abstracts to find what they want, but they are also what can be termed as “promiscuous users”: they do not often return, if at all, to sites they once visited. So much so that the single, high-quality and authoritative source, which is always consulted and deeply mined, seems to be a thing of the past. Not that this promiscuity is very unpredictable: the short attention span characterising today’s people and their tendency to leave their memories in cyberspace, coupled with the uncertainty that is part and parcel of being constantly exposed to such massive access and choice, render promiscuity the almost unavoidable – certainly the most pragmatic – approach to information seeking. Digital consumers simply shop around for information and on the basis of comparisons take decisions for themselves on what they perceive to be appropriate to their needs.

Plainly then, present-day information seeking behaviour is very, very different from that of yore, with people bouncing, “power browsing” and viewing rather than searching, mining and reading; navigating rather than using; relying on the crowd’s collective wisdom rather than judging and evaluating. It is hardly surprising to find, then, that while people do indeed effortlessly acquire vast amounts of information, all too often none, or at most very little of it, aptly meets their needs. In fact, much of it amounts to the information equivalent of fast food: easily obtainable, flattering to the undiscerning palate, but of little actual value at its best, and harmful at its worst. Regrettably, though perhaps not unexpectedly, considering what we know of fast food consumption, people are satisfied enough with their information supply, never
realising, or at least comfortably ignoring that they should – indeed could – do much better where their information needs are concerned.

The origins of this state of affairs are manifold, beginning with the simple fact that people are frequently altogether unaware of having a need for some information, especially nowadays, when the information professional is increasingly absent from the picture. Indeed, this is one of the instances where the growing marginalisation of the information professional has particularly unfortunate consequences, for more and more frequently there is nobody competent enough around to unearth (not to mention adequately see to) people’s information needs. Thus, although people do understand today that if they are to perform efficiently, effectively, safely and happily, they have to be well informed; it is to no avail if they do not know that they lack a particular piece of information if they do not realise that there is information out there that could be of help to them. Of course not: unless information needs are brought to light – that is, recognised, identified and articulated – they cannot possibly be met. This obviously may have far-fetching implications, now, in our fast-changing times, more than ever, for new discoveries, new equipment, new technologies, new legislation, as well as political and economic factors quickly render valueless – even dangerous, what we know and do, giving rise, as a result, to new information needs.

True, our constant exposure to vast amounts of information may by lucky chance bridge over an unidentified and unacknowledged gap in an individual’s personal corpus of knowledge, for a chance encounter with the relevant information allows the need to be recognised. People cannot, however, possibly count on this serendipitous method for the adequate meeting of their needs; it is too much of a lottery, not to say Russian roulette, in these information-centred times. There is, of course, an expedient solution to the problem: turning to an information professional for aid in sorting out the information component of one’s various undertakings. After all, the consensual mission of the profession is ensuring that information services are based on an appreciation of people’s information needs, whether acknowledged and directly articulated or unknown and unexpressed, even if information professionals do tend to concern themselves more with the former than the latter. Unfortunately, a continuing dialogue between client and information professional is often a rarity, indeed has always been a rarity (see, for example, Line, 1973; Weintraub, 1980), so we cannot even wholly blame it on the recent massive advent of disintermediation. Thus, bringing the information consumer and information professional closer together has always been high on information professionals’ list of priorities, at least on a theoretical level. These days, however, the efforts towards this purpose, which, by now, are tantamount to re-intermediation, have become an absolute must, although, admittedly, the unearthing of people’s dormant information needs is just one of the reasons for doing so, a point we will come to presently.

Meanwhile, to continue with our attempt to understand the curious phenomenon of “information malnutrition” in an era of unprecedented information availability and accessibility, we need to probe deeper into the problem. For, apparently, even when people do realise that they need information and set out to obtain whatever it is that they think they need, they are often quite incapable of doing so, but – and this is the crux of the matter – they are convinced of the exact opposite. Holding themselves to be competent and skilful information consumers (Gupta and Houtz, 2000; Horrigan, 2007; Keengwe, 2007; Messineo and DeOllos, 2005; Stern, 2002), they believe they can afford
to shun professional assistance – indeed, the above-noted, age-old but growingly more widespread phenomenon of information seekers moving away from information professionals seems to stem, at least in part, from this self-delusion. Lamentably, as we have already seen, they could not be further away from living-up to their (self-held) image of expert information consumers. True, these days we are undoubtedly witnessing what Mahe (2003) so aptly calls “the banalisation of the use of ITCs”: almost as a rule, people have convenient internet access and diligently hone their expertise in skilled use of technology through constant use (see, for example, Dutton et al., 2009; Lenhart et al., 2010). It does not mean, however, that they are proficient in information work too, for computer skills and information literacy may go hand in hand, but the two are definitely not one and the same. Thus, digital consumers’ apparent facility with computers by no means guarantees the successful resolution of their information needs. Actually, as their technical expertise in effect disguises an unsatisfactory level of information literacy, it even seems to exacerbate the problem, for they do not even realise that their assured handling of an information need has, in point of fact, left it inadequately met.

Finally, complicating matters further, even when people identify a need for information and more or less succeed in pinpointing what it is that they lack, as well as, happily, turn out to be capable of dealing competently enough with the problem, they may still remain uninformed or less than adequately informed. This happens because they deliberately refrain from tackling an information need or at least take a conscious decision to resolve it only in part, say, to no more than a certain extent. Thus, at times people may be well aware of an information problem and the solutions to be had for it, and yet, for various reasons of their own, from convenience to time pressures, they nevertheless ignore their needs or decide to go about dealing with them in a manner which they know to be less than ideal. Here again the simile of fast food comes to mind, or, more specifically, the way people skip meals or knowingly pick the less nutritious but quick and convenient option of fast food, although their fridge is full of healthy fare.

A case in point is the all too familiar phenomenon of people refraining from pursuing their information needs for lack of time. Such non-use of relevant information, as Wilson (1993, 1995, 1996) points out, may not happen by accident or by mistake even in academe. Rather, it often reflects a routine and normal approach for coping with the prevalent situation, in which the concurrent pressures of the constant dearth of time on the one hand and the huge quantities of available information on the other combine to instigate a policy of deliberate disregard of one’s information need. In fact, even at the best of times today’s information seekers tend to be satisficers (a term resulting from the blend of the two words “sufficing” and “satisfying”). That is, they stop information seeking after finding material that is good enough (Savolainen, 2007), so that they can juggle the need for comprehensive information with the constraints placed upon them. Clearly, in today’s world, in which information is being generated in ever-increasing volumes and people are connected to information sources of unparalleled power and reach, taking a conscious decision not to attempt to meet one’s information needs, at least not fully, is commonplace, and will increasingly become more commonplace.
The vital need to reverse the move towards ineffectual information consumption

Apparently then, it is people’s happy if often self-deluding contentment concerning their information pursuits – we know if, what and how much we need and can easily, efficiently and effectively get it, too – that is at the root of the syndrome encapsulated in the phrase “information malnutrition in an information saturated world”. This clearer understanding of the phenomenon is certainly a step in the right direction towards avoiding the disaster it intimates – and a right disaster it is in our information-dependent times, even more so, in fact, than it would seem at first glance. For, as Nicholas et al. (2008b) suggest, in today’s internet-centred reality people’s information activities are inextricably intertwined with the meeting of the whole range of their needs.

Of course, the meeting of people’s basic human needs, be they physiological, psychological or cognitive, has always often been contingent on the availability of some appropriate information, to the point of success in meeting some primary need being wholly dependent on meeting an information need (Nicholas and Herman, 2009). However, with people increasingly turning to the multipurpose virtual space, which is the internet, as their first port of call for goods, services, new experiences, titillation, entertainment and excitement, obtaining information has become part of their day-to-day activities to such an extent that it is now almost impossible to say what information is and what it is not, what is information seeking and what is not. After all, in the digital world in which we live, our pursuits, so often internet-based, almost as a rule involve choosing or buying information. The example of e-shopping best illustrates the point: as Russell (2008) explains, first a person is a digital information consumer and then an e-buyer. Thus, people shopping at an e-store will be using the internal search engine to find what they want, navigating through the site, employing browsing menus and opening another window on a cross-comparison site, to make sure they are getting value for money. Only when the information-seeking component of the shopping process is successfully completed will they actually purchase the item they need.

No wonder, then, that these days people’s approach to their information needs reflects a mindset more characteristic of digital consumers than traditional library users. Thus, they expect enjoyment even when they set out to meet their formal, work or study associated information needs; they much prefer involving, dynamic and personalised content experiences that can compete with the likes of Facebook; they want instant information gratification at a click; and their choice of information is frequently fashioned by promotions and offers. This last point, for example, has been amply proven in a CIBER study of Emerald, a scholarly journal database, which found that for any journals that were offered for free as part of a promotion campaign, use jumped immediately by a factor of ten, only to drop down again to pre-offer levels once the promotion was over (Nicholas et al., 2008a). Thus, smart digital consumers that they are, information seekers “play the market”, trying for the best from the abundance of opportunities offered by the web, albeit all this, with as little investment of time, energy, effort and resources as possible. Indeed, refusing to resort to professional intermediation may very well be part and parcel of this quest for “cost-efficient” information consumption. Sadly, “cost efficient” their quest may often be, but, as we have just seen, its outcomes frequently leave much to be desired.
The key to connecting effectively to information: information needs assessment

Thus, when to make the most of the ever-expanding, mostly digital environment, indeed to stay afloat in it at all, it is vitally important that people get the information component of their pursuits right – the success of their various undertakings genuinely depends on it. Hence, difficult or not, changing the way things stand now is absolutely crucial. Fortunately, as the authors suggest in their recent book *Assessing Information Needs in the Age of the Digital Consumer* (Nicholas and Herman, 2009), meeting today’s vital requirement for productive information retrieval and management is quite feasible: the key to it all is the ongoing exploration and analysis of people’s needs, which, alone, can ensure that they connect effectively to information. This, obviously, would be first and foremost the concern of information professionals, for it is their proclaimed mission to make certain that the service they provide reflects the mainstream activities of the community it sets out to assist and offers truly personalised responses to information seekers’ needs. It is up to them, then, to do what it takes to attain this goal: to monitor and evaluate people’s information needs and their ways and means of coping with these needs on a habitual basis. Still, in today’s disintermediated information environment, the (masses of) people who insist on fending for themselves when it comes to sorting out their information needs could benefit greatly, too, from acquiring the capability to see to their own requirements.

The question is, of course, how exactly the routine collection and analysis of information needs data, which is the secret to the success of any information endeavour, should be performed. Before we can get down to answering the question, we have to make clear what we really mean by “information need”, for the concept is very slippery indeed. This is obviously part and parcel of the general vagueness characterising the term “need” itself, as a *New York Times* article on the recent trend of companies’ increasingly involving their customers in the innovation process (Tripsas, 2009) amply demonstrates. Explaining that the idea behind it all is achieving a richer understanding of customer needs, Tripsas cites Ranjay Gulati, a professor at the Harvard Business School, who says that “Being customer-driven doesn’t mean asking customers what they want and then giving it to them [...] It’s about building a deep awareness of how the customer uses your product”. That is why, she goes on, quoting John Horn, Vice President for Research and Development at 3M’s industrial and transportation business, the goal is to understand “what our customers are trying to accomplish, not what they say they need”. Plainly then, the term “need” is hardly self-explanatory or unequivocal, even if people do refer to it as if it were both, and, by the same token, plainly neither is its derivative, “information need”. Thus, the first step towards evaluating the need people have for information is understanding what the expression really means and differentiating it from some closely associated but distinct information concepts, like want, demand and use. True, these are all manifestations of need – and, as such, undoubtedly should be considered, but they are neither identical to need, nor fully or accurately describe it.

Information needs are the call for “information that would further this job or this research, and would be recognised as doing so by the recipient” (Line, 1974, p. 87), that is, the call for information that individuals *ought* to have to do their job effectively, solve a problem satisfactorily or pursue a hobby or interest happily. Hardly surprisingly then, information needs arise when people recognise a gap in their state of
knowledge, that is, when they experience “an anomalous state of knowledge” and wish to resolve that anomaly (Belkin and Vickery, 1989).

In comparison, information wants are what an individual would like to have – like being the operative word here. Of course, in a perfect world information needs and information wants would be one and the same. However, we live in a far from perfect world, in which, for a variety of reasons, stemming from idiosyncratic factors of personality, time, and resources, not all that is needed is wanted, and not all that is wanted is actually needed.

Information demands are requests for items of information believed to be wanted. This is where information-seeking starts, where the potential consumer first encounters the information system, source (human or documentary) or intermediary. Nevertheless, people may demand information they do not really need, perhaps because their initial perception of its value does not match with reality: someone tells them it is a good site, but on arrival it turns out to be a disappointment (lots of information-seeking must lead to blind alleys, especially courtesy of Google). By the same token, they certainly need or want information they do not demand, for instance, because they are not aware that it is there. Of course, demand is at least partly dependent on expectation, which, in its turn, depends upon existing information provision. That is why the internet stokes up demand and leads inevitably to (very) large amounts of material that is demanded but not needed.

Information use, the more visible end of the information-seeking process, is the information the individual actually uses or consumes. Use may be intended – the direct outcome of a satisfied demand, but, just as much, unintended – the result of browsing or serendipitous discovery, while not looking purposively for anything or when looking for something else. Use is readily assumed to be a clean, hard, direct manifestation of need, which it definitely is not.

To begin with, it is not all that easy to determine when the use being witnessed can be counted as “real” consumption of information, for “use” can and does refer to, at the very least, two clearly distinguishable levels of use. The first level of use simply involves determining whether something is worth using in the first place, but does this constitute “use”? The second level of use is the actual consumption of information, subsequent to its having been found relevant, which probably corresponds more directly to the popular concept of “real” use. Nevertheless, even use data of this kind can really tell us very little about many of the key needs characteristics: thus, for example, the need for information presented from a particular viewpoint, approach or angle certainly cannot be gleaned from usage data.

In addition, there is the dilemma of how use is to be measured. What can be taken to be an indicator or record of use? Citations, logs, issue statistics, library loan studies, book sales records or the ubiquitous tick boxes in questionnaires? Obviously then, use data are really very problematic, and need to be handled with great care (but are generally not). Also, perhaps even more importantly, use data are too crude indicators of need to serve as a comprehensive enough foundation for services aiming at the meeting of information needs: whilst use can be a manifestation of need, an information need is, in theory, greater than demand plus use. Moreover, as people can only use what is available, use is very heavily dependent upon provision and access, albeit this is less of a problem these digital days. And, perhaps most disturbingly, where use studies are concerned, non-users – whose number can often amount to quite a significant percentage of the population, are not taken into the equation.
Evidently, use data can only offer a partial view of need. Even when augmented by demand data, use data can only help an information system improve on what it is already doing, but since there is no guarantee that it was on the right lines to begin with, this is of limited value only; use data will not help build a system which will provide new services and solutions. Thus, use data may be very welcome for measuring the usage of what is provided, but it is no substitute for needs data in establishing whether what is provided is what is best.

How are information needs assessments to be performed?
Having thus reviewed the key terms associated with the study of information consumption, not to be pedantic, but to make it crystal clear what exactly should be studied if we are to base information solutions on the need people have for information, we can now return to the question of how we are actually to go about performing information need assessments. The secret to it all seems to place the tricky concept of information need in a comprehensive, clear-cut and understandable analytical framework, which is precisely the form of scrutiny the authors offer up in their aforementioned book (Nicholas and Herman, 2009). Indeed, the method for information needs data collection, analysis and evaluation, developed by Nicholas (1996) on the basis of a model proposed by Line (1969, 1974), has at its heart an evaluatory framework, which, based as it is on the insights gained from research projects involving hundreds of thousands of people, is firmly grounded in theory, but, nevertheless, highly practical.

Not that the parameters of such a framework too readily come to mind, for it is far more difficult to describe the characteristics of information needs than, say, those of housing needs. This is probably to do with the fact that information needs arise from other needs: as such, they are more likely to be accorded less individual thought and consideration, and, as a result, their characteristics are not so easily remembered or disentangled. Still, with all that information needs are perceived as less concrete and more diffuse, just as you can describe the key characteristics of housing need (building material, site location, type – apartment or semi-detached, number of rooms, architectural design/character, and age/period), so too can the characteristics of information need be described. Thus, it is possible to identify 11 major characteristics of information need, which combine together to form an 11-pronged evaluatory framework:

1. subject;
2. function;
3. nature;
4. intellectual level;
5. viewpoint;
6. quantity;
7. quality/authority;
8. date/currency;
9. speed of delivery;
10. place of publication/origin; and
11. processing and packaging.
This framework fulfils different roles at the various stages of an information need investigation. At the data mining stage it is used as a template, through which data can be fed and evaluated, for it serves to draw the enquirer's attention to the necessary data and helps in determining how relevant the data being volunteered are. Thus, it acts as a filter, a place to collect and classify data. Later on, once the necessary evidence has been gathered, the framework can be put to good use again, this time for information needs analysis. Used at this stage as a template for identifying and classifying the central themes recurring in the data at hand, it enables the systematic performance of cross-case analysis, aimed at disaggregating the accumulated evidence into its thematic components according to the 11 aspects of an information need. What is important to point out at this juncture is that the portrayal of the various facets of need may take a lot of words, but this does not mean that employing the framework on a daily basis is a long and laborious task, for it is just the initial understanding that takes the time. Indeed, when the form of analysis has been mastered, the various aspects shrink into a headings checklist that can be mentally brought out for the inquiry underway.

Plainly then, the method just described for the collection, analysis and evaluation of information needs is easily understandable and very practical indeed: off-the-shelf, usable and reusable. Nevertheless, it has much more to it than that, for it is its holistic approach which renders it uniquely suitable to the exploration of people’s needs and ensures that information problems are met with truly effective solutions. This is because only a line of attack that considers all of the different attributes of an information need can provide a truly fitting answer to a problem encountered: targeted, customised, individualised and relevant. Just how important it is to employ such a multi-faceted approach to an information need is easily demonstrated by the example of the unsuitability to most UK based high-school students of some information, which may be right on target subject-wise, but, say, highly scientific in its level, 20 years old and in Chinese. Thus, the greatest advantage of the method is its inherent capacity to bring about the meeting of people’s expectations – and, much more importantly, genuine needs – for custom-made, personalised information services.

Indeed, the method can be profitably used by information managers, information system designers, publishers, records managers and individual information consumers alike. And this at both a macro level – for effective strategic information management planning, and at a micro level – for the efficient carrying out of routine enquiry work and consumer online searching. More specifically, it can be put to use for the following purposes:

- laying the foundations for the design of personalised information services by benchmarking the needs of different information communities and making comparisons between them;
- monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness and appropriateness of existing information systems from a consumer perspective;
- detecting gaps in information service provision and remaining vigilant to changes in need necessitating modifications, adjustments and fine-tuning;
- aiding the assessment of the never-ending tide of new information products;
- ensuring that one-to-one information service encounters are set on a firm footing and conducted in a systematic and comprehensive manner;
• bringing the information consumer and the information professional closer together (something which is inherent to the information needs assessment process put forward here);

• providing an information literacy training tool for the enfranchised, but untrained, digital consumer; and

• offering a self-help guide for the e-citizen who wants to maximise the benefits of the information cornucopia.

Ensuring the true information enfranchisement of the digital consumer

Happily then, the nuanced understanding of people’s idiosyncratic needs, which alone can ensure the positive information outcomes we (and society) want, is quite achievable: the methodology is there, the technology is there, the opportunity is there. All it takes now is for everyone to take up the torch! Easier said than done, though, bringing this to pass: as long as people subscribe to their popularly held image of “self-sufficient computer/information whizzes”, they are hardly likely to be highly motivated to set out to acquire information literacy skills, are they? After all, from their point of view nothing is broken, so why attempt to fix it? Neither can they be reasonably expected to seek out the services of intermediaries to aid them in fulfilling their information needs, when they can now easily and (at least to their minds) expediently meet all aspects of their information needs on their own, and do so at any time of the day or night, too! It falls to the information professionals, then, to see to it that people’s information needs are handled effectively: directly, via the proficient planning and delivery of information provision, but also indirectly, by spreading professional thinking and practices, most notably through teaching information needs analysis in their digital and information literacy classes. Unfortunately, information professionals, manifesting what seems to be a rather complacent stance where their customers are concerned, are not exactly storming down the walls increasingly separating them from information seekers.

Not that any information professional worth his/her salt would admit to such complacency: being wholly aware that the gist of their proclaimed mission is to service the needs of their clients, they all agree, and have done so for decades, that it is very, very important to understand their users. Practice, however, seems to lag (far) behind theory where the actual set up, evaluation and auditing of information provision systems are concerned. As Pettigrew et al. (2001) point out, the realisation that information systems and services should be designed to support information behaviour, and that the design of such systems should be based on our understanding of this behaviour, has not often led to the forging of a direct link from the study of information needs and behaviour to information provision specifications or procedures. Why, then, this patent disregard of the user?

First of all, surprising as it may sound, there is still a school of thought that simply sees very little point in consulting the users: people do not know what their needs are, they do not know what they are talking about, why ask them? Thus, as proponents of this approach maintain, it is far better to trust professional judgement to get it right, and then it is just a question of convincing the users of it (see, for example, Shinebourne, 1980). True, people no longer dare say “we know better what is good for you” in so many words (it would be politically incorrect), just the same as today’s
physicians refrain, at least in the presence of their patients, from voicing such patronising attitudes. Still, questioning the value of turning to the prospective users at the design and development stages of services and systems is still endemic in our profession (Rosenbaum et al., 2003; Stefl-Mabry et al., 2003).

Also, and this is no less grave a problem, even when information professionals do agree that they should base the provision of their services on the investigation of the actual needs of their target communities, the onus to connect to their potential clients is frequently too tall an order for them. Indeed, typically inward-looking and plagued with a four-wall mentality, information professionals, but especially librarians, tend to concentrate on whatever goes on in the information unit, rather than in the outside world, where obviously, most information needs are hatched. As part and parcel of this frame of mind, but also because they are generally seen as fulfilling a low status, supporting role in the organisation (Adams et al., 2005; Biggs, 1981), they demonstrate a marked reluctance to initiate contact and maintain ongoing dialogues with their clients. The inevitable result of this state of affairs is that information professionals do not always know their customers as they patently should – though they would inevitably protest otherwise. Add to this that they are notoriously preoccupied with information systems, rather than the users of these systems – as the old cliche goes, for battle-weary information professionals people get in the way of the systems they are so busily building and defending – and a picture of a general neglect of the consumer emerges in all its dismal entirety.

Indeed, paying due allegiance to the idea of the user all too often seems to be the extent of it; hardly any libraries (or publishers for that matter) actually investigate users’ information needs, follow their information behaviour and then relate their findings directly to outcomes and impacts. Thus, while space-age information systems grace our desktops, information centres and libraries, we still do not use suitably modern and effective management methods to ensure that these systems are providing their customers with what they need and want. To say that information systems are largely free from consumer evaluation and are seldom challenged with user needs or usage data would be to exaggerate, but not to exaggerate by very much. This, despite the fact that the example of thriving businesses amply proves the crucial importance of moving closer to the consumer, for it is clearly sophisticated market research and demographic profiling which is behind the success of many leading retailers and service providers all over the world. Take just one recent example: in a New York Times article, citing a Newsweek interview with Amazon’s chief executive, Jeff Bezos, he defines Amazon’s business strategy as follows: “We start with the customer and we work backward” (Bilton, 2009).

Obviously then, information mediators, too, have little choice but to collect and analyse information needs data as comprehensively as possible, and on an ongoing basis, too, or they cannot possibly fulfil their mission of coming up with the state-of-the-art, swiftly delivered, custom-made, targeted, authoritative and qualitative solutions their clients need, want and expect. After all, what is the point of efficiently overseeing a collection, service or site that amounts to no more than a dim and distant reflection of the needs of its users? And it is bound to be so in a world that has probably seen more change in information needs and information behaviour in the last five years than in the previous 50! Luckily, as we have already noted, today there is no reason whatsoever to shy away from studying information need and information-seeking
behaviour. Indeed, we have at our disposal the know-how, as well as the ways and means to bring about a fundamental transformation in the defunct information provision policies of the past. Thus, for the growing ranks of information professionals – librarians, archivists, information managers, information system designers, records managers, journalists and publishers, keeping a watchful eye on individual information needs and practices should be an inescapable imperative, a key management activity and the basis for all decision-making processes.

Unfortunately, the reaction of too many people in the profession to the upheaval taking place all around them is rather like that of a frightened rabbit in a car’s headlights. They only look complacent; in fact, they are paralysed by fear, possibly in denial. If information professionals do not get close to the consumer, they will become an irrelevance: out of sight, out of mind. Indeed, if the traditional purveyor of information is not there (at best) or gets in the way of communication (at worst), consumers will simply abandon what to them is a sinking ship. Information professionals had better take this gloomy possibility to heart, challenging as it may be, or ignore it at their peril. If they opt for the latter, they take the risk of disintermediation continuing unabatedly, something which threatens to culminate in professional Armageddon. The writing is clearly there on the wall, for all to see.

Still, the grim prospect of the ultimate demise of the information profession should not be the sole concern of those who stand to lose their jobs in the process, for its implications touch directly upon the vast numbers of today’s enthusiastic information seekers, too. True, having become digital consumers, rather than passive users, they are no longer the captive audience of the past, wholly dependent on the information providers’ goodwill; there are plenty of convenient enough alternatives to the traditional information services. Nevertheless, although they have a huge digital choice in terms of sources of information about commodities and services, only the provision of the right solutions to their needs can ensure that they truly reap the benefits of living in an information rich world. Also, as they insist on going their own way in the internet-based, often unvetted information world surrounding them, they need to make the many, many evaluations once made by librarians and to do it well; thus, they must become much more information literate.

All this results in very good reasons indeed for reinstating information professionals to their rightful position at the forefront of the information society. Who else can see to it that the information society is genuinely geared to meet people’s needs and that seekers of information can capably manage on their own? Much depends here on the profession itself. The appropriate reaction is surely to recognise that there is now a void to be filled where information problems are concerned, and the opportunity should be grabbed with both hands, for information professionals are certainly the ones best placed to fill this void. They are the ones who can see to it that information services fulfil their intended roles by providing truly personalised responses to people’s needs; they are also the ones who can help consumers in acquiring information literacy skills, without which they cannot adequately fend for themselves in today’s information-saturated environment. The potential terrain for the information professional has thus increased enormously, although most of it lies outside the boundaries of the physical space. The key to mastering this terrain, of course, is moving closer to the consumers – real and potential – and studying their information needs. All it takes, then, to ascertain that people make the most of the
greatest gifts anyone could have, that of information, is for information mediators to reaffirm their professional vows with their customers: to connect and reach out in an era of disintermediation, disconnection and decoupling.

References


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