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The digital consumer: an introduction and philosophy

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We have chosen the title of this book with care, adopting the more general ‘digital consumer’ rather than the more specific ‘digital information consumer’ descriptor in recognition of the fact that, although the book focuses on the behaviour of people visiting the virtual space for information, the internet has redefined and widened the information domain. Because the internet is an encyclopedic, multi-purpose platform that people use, rather like a superstore, to obtain a whole range of things (often at the same time), it is now almost impossible to say what information is and what it is not, what is information seeking and what is not. Being a digital consumer does not simply mean choosing or buying e-documents or information services. Information is also fundamental to the process and success of e-shopping. As Chris Russell in Chapter 3 explains, first a person is a digital information consumer and then an e-buyer. Thus people shopping at the John Lewis 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. It is not surprising therefore that looking for information is one of the two most common web activities – the other is e-mail; the digital consumer is essentially an information consumer. There is another reason for employing the more general form of the descriptor and it is because

information seeking is not conducted in a vacuum and many factors shape it. Therefore it is important that it is embedded in a wider world of e-publishing, e-shopping and communication theory.

Why this book now?

Because this book is a first, it fills a yawning gap in our professional knowledge and shows us how we can overcome an insularity that is plainly an obstacle to professional development. Amazingly, despite the fact that we are ten years into an information consumer revolution occasioned by the arrival of the internet, which is changing society, education and commerce on a massive and global scale, this is the first time, as far as we can discover, that information or digital consumers have figured in a book title issued by a publisher providing books for the information professions. Why is this the case when digital consumers worldwide can be numbered in their billions and are rapidly transforming the information landscape through their preference for search engines, dislike of paying for information, and short attention spans? Why is this so when the core information professions – librarianship, archives and records management, publishing and journalism – have been rocked, and, in some instances, derailed, by the digital transition? There are in fact a number of possible explanations, that we shall reflect on throughout this introduction, but the main reason is, probably, that information professions are insular and tribal (something particularly true of librarians) and what happens outside their strictly defined discipline boundaries are not their prime concern, even though the user and internet are busy blowing up and redrawing these boundaries. The once neat demarcation lines that existed between the information professions are becoming obscured as information consumers use their new-found freedom to relocate themselves and their activities in the virtual information space, and take on much of the work previously undertaken by information professionals. This is creating a degree of inter-communal strife, with particularly fierce disputes breaking out between publishers and librarians. These are fiercest in the scholarly communication field, where the introduction of open access and institutional repositories are close to

bringing the two communities to blows. E-books, rest assured, are also going to usher in further territorial disputes and skirmishes, with publishers and librarians once again fighting for the spoils, mortally wounding the loser in all possibility.

A second reason is that the digital consumer is now King, and the communication and delivery channels that have opened up are the King's Horses but you would hardly know this from the responses of many information professionals. Indeed, when we first used the term 'consumer' at a conference a few years ago now a number of participants took issue with the term. Their users, customers and clients, which is what they preferred to call them in a misguided attempt to show respect, were not consumers they said, as though this was a form of abuse. It is true that this no longer happens, although people still look rather uncomfortable when we mention the term. But of course in a world where access to information is a key democratic right and leveller, it is not so easy to criticize; political correctness cramps their style. However, the complainants have moved on and there is now a negative reaction when we make comparisons with the e-shopper. Indeed, when it was first mentioned that we would be including a chapter on the e-shopper in this book the reaction could be summarized as 'What the hell does this have to do with libraries, archives, etc.?' Our answer was 'A hell of a lot' as readers of this book will see for themselves, because consumers are now being offered ultimate choice in all aspects of their lives, the effect of which has been rapidly to dismantle the barriers between disciplines, be they professional, social or recreational. Connected consumers now have access, at any time of the day or night, through multiple devices and platforms, to all aspects of their information needs. If the traditional 'gatekeeper' is not there (at best) or gets in the way of this communication (at worst), consumers will abandon them and go their own way. This key aspect of the digital revolution applies to all members of the communication and information food chain, and we ignore it at our peril. There is a real risk of libraries becoming decoupled from the user.

Meeting the needs of a user community increasingly well connected by Facebook, LinkedIn, MySpace and Twitter will not be easy, and it is certainly best approached by thinking about its needs in an entirely different

way, which is the kernel of this book. The days of users as supplicants are pretty much over, and thinking about their needs as consumers is a key step-change in delivering the right services. However, few people have confronted the hard truth that their users are no longer in their grip, some have flown away and many new ones have arrived, and the majority of them now use information resources remotely and anonymously. Worryingly, while most people in the information professions are alert to the technical changes that have taken place in the virtual information space, when it comes to users many are going about their business as though nothing really fundamental has happened. Of course, information professionals have been bleating on about 'users' since time immemorial, but they have not really made that much progress in understanding them, certainly not their behaviour at the coal-face. It is almost as if by mentioning the term or having a conference, that this assuages the guilt. Thus, for instance, how many libraries (or publishers for that matter) have a department dedicated to following users' every move and relating that directly to academic outcomes and impacts? How many engage, even at the most basic level, with the kinds of sophisticated market research and demographic profiling that are behind the success of many of the UK's leading retailers or service providers? The answer is, none that we know of, and this is seriously worrying given that to succeed in the information business we need to follow the (anonymous) users' every move; they are after all driving all the major changes in the digital information environment. The big challenge here for us all is in understanding and accommodating the concept of the digital consumer. Failure to do this will result in eventual professional melt-down, the signs of which are already there for all to see.

This then is a book about information users, but not users as we once knew them. They are looking for information, yes, but also for goods, services, new experiences, titillation, excitement and entertainment. These consumers, numbered in their billions, are global 24/7 shoppers. They are the elephant in our room. This is a book for those people that want to believe that what they are doing is relevant to the information age in which we find ourselves, want to be in the fast lane and it is especially for those who lack recognition or long for a sense of purpose or mission.

The third reason why this book is badly needed is because the time has come for all the information professions to re-examine their core values and discipline boundaries, and it has to be said that they have been very slow in doing this. That is why, in an information-rich and information-driven world where there should be plaudits (and not threats) for the information professions, they find themselves challenged and, increasingly, isolated from the main action. The professional responses as determined by information policies, publications and professional education have to be regarded as wholly inadequate. Disintermediation (loosely defined and understood as ‘cutting out the middleman’), of course, has left many professionals in a state of shock and denial regarding the benefits that it has delivered – a society in which everyone is waking up to the critical importance of information and finding it. Disintermediation has triggered an information-seeking frenzy on a truly massive scale.

The world has totally changed but we are still relying on belief systems from another age – this is most evident in the information-seeking models we work with. The textbooks and professional tomes produced now are little different than those published five or ten years ago, yet our professions have been turned upside down, inside out. Let us not kid ourselves, the information landscape has been totally transformed. Google now channels millions and millions of people to the information they need, on a scale that dwarfs any library, publishing or newspaper effort. The tail (the retrieval system) is wagging the dog to within an inch of its life.

The prime purpose of this book is to reconnect information workers/providers, from all walks of life, with their user base by putting forward a belief system that will help people understand, engage, relate to each other and survive in a ubiquitous information environment, where information professionals and knowledge providers are no longer the dominant players nor, indeed, the supplier of first choice. Short of appropriate consumer theories, visions and a robust and appropriate evidence base there is a danger that the information professions are becoming increasingly rudderless and estranged from their users and paymasters. The warning signs are already there. Public libraries appear to be in real trouble and academic libraries risk being decoupled from their user

base as users continue to flee the physical space. And even the mighty scholarly publishing industry is coming under pressure from the emergence of open access publishing models and institutional repositories.

What is most concerning is that, despite the obvious writing on the wall, too many people are still attempting to defend traditional turf or territory and an obsolete information paradigm. Unfortunately, the majority belong to the library profession. The core realization has to be that the new model for the information/knowledge economy is not being reflected in the institutions that support it, including professional, educational and commercial ones. By widening the information embrace, this book introduces the wider information community to solutions they are seeking, or will be shortly. The book puts forward solutions now for problems that, while only just emerging, are being recognized as potentially cataclysmic for the whole information community.

This book is dedicated to all aspects of information-users-cum-consumers, and it is unique in this respect. Their rapid emergence in the virtual world requires us all to junk much of the intellectual baggage we have acquired over the years regarding use, users and information seeking. This baggage is an impediment to meeting the needs of today's information consumers by means of appropriate and attractive information services. We are lumbered by information-seeking theories and models produced in a hard-copy environment back in the 1980s and 1990s. Do we honestly believe that anything developed then on the back of several dozen people in a particular physical space more than ten years ago has any relevance to what happens today? In this book we blow the whistle on such notions, their time is up.

What makes it even more essential that we learn everything there is to know about the digital consumer is because all their activities take place anonymously in the virtual space and there are a large number of people using digital services information professionals have never encountered before and never will. Therefore, the need to peer into the virtual space, to find out what is going on is so pressing and obvious it is hardly worth saying, except that not enough people do it regularly enough. It is hoped that this book will start people looking by showing what can be seen and how it is best viewed.

The authors and their approach

There are too many authors and conference speakers who peddle visions of a digital future, typically on the basis of no evidence at all. They are the PowerPoint Puff evangelists. This book, despite its novelty, is not in the business of fantasizing; nor is it simply about tomorrow. It is mainly about today because the real problem is not what tomorrow will bring but what today has already brought with it. The beliefs and concepts propounded here in this book are built on a massive evidence base, whether they come from logs, surveys, interviews and focus groups, or the peer-reviewed literature. We do peer into the future at the end of the book but Barrie Gunter does this purely in the context of the research evidence.

The topic demands an interdisciplinary approach for all the reasons previously mentioned and this is provided by a group of authors whose subject strengths between them include psychology (Gunter), media studies (Gunter), journalism (Withey, Gunter and Nicholas), computer science (Dobrowolski and Huntington), information science (Rowlands and Jamali), librarianship (Nicholas, Dobrowolski, Jamali and Fieldhouse), history (Moss), archives (Moss), scholarly communication (Nicholas, Rowlands and Huntington), education (Williams), consumer health (Nicholas, Huntington and Williams), e-commerce (Russell), marketing (Russell) and publishing (Nicholas and Rowlands). The book also hopes to avoid the fragmentation that is so often found in edited, interdisciplinary books, because all the authors know each other, have worked and researched together and respect and understand each other's contribution in the field. All are connected in some way or another to the Centre for Information Behaviour and the Evaluation of Research (CIBER) (www.ucl.ac.uk/slais/research/ciber/) research group that has pioneered digital consumer research. Furthermore, Nicholas, Huntington, Gunter, Withey, Williams and Russell teach on a course called Digital Information Consumers, taught to Information Management undergraduates at University College London (UCL), where many of the ideas presented in this book were developed. Even so, there is diversity and overlap in the offerings of the contributors and this is the inevitable (and welcome) outcome of dealing with a global and fast-changing phenomenon – the like

of which has not been witnessed before. Each chapter can be read as a self-contained piece.

Chapters and contributors

Richard Withey sets the stage in Chapter 2, 'The digital information marketplace and its economics: the end of exclusivity'. He provides the essential environmental context for the book by showing how business models that have long supported the information industry are undergoing seismic change, and argues that those who ignore this do so at their peril. He explains that the exclusivity created by the ownership of the printing press is over and that this matters a lot for the information professions. He utilizes his long experience of being a senior executive in the digital information business to make his point with some authority. Chris Russell, one of the country's leading e-commerce analysts, in Chapter 3 'The e-shopper: the growth of the informed purchaser' also provides an essential context for the understanding of the digital consumer. He does this by providing a deep and authoritative insight into the behaviour of digital shoppers and the factors that have shaped their behaviour. E-commerce and e-shopping have led the way and are dominant and pattern-forming activities in the virtual environment and have helped shape the behaviour of the digital information consumer. Usually one and the same person, where the e-shopper goes, the information consumer follows and Chris helps point us to where things are going and what we can expect down the line. For many readers this will represent their first contact with e-shopping concepts and data.

Michael Moss examines the theories that are emerging from all the changes that we are witnessing. He argues that we need to wake up to the realities of the arrival of the second digital revolution that is being colonized by other disciplines with theory and rhetoric that address its far-reaching implications for the way we live and do business. He also argues we should not ignore previous information revolutions, such as the development of printing in 15th-century Europe, and, perhaps more importantly, the long preoccupation with information and its adjuncts in European thought, stretching back to classical times. Barrie Gunter, in Chapter 5 'The

psychology of the digital information consumer', provides us with an understanding of human behaviour online. The rules of online interpersonal and human-computer interaction can provide important insights into what lies behind information-seeking behaviour and how to utilize more effectively, and how to design more user-friendly, online communications systems. Psychology rarely figures in the professional literature and this chapter will provide an invaluable introduction to what it can offer to our understanding of the digital information seeker.

At the heart of the book are two research-led chapters on digital information seeking in a virtual environment. The first, 'The information-seeking behaviour of the digital consumer: case study – the virtual scholar' by David Nicholas, Paul Huntington, Hamid R. Jamali and Tom Dobrowolski is the most extensive evaluation of the digital consumer's information-seeking behaviour ever presented. It represents the first airing of CIBER's comprehensive digital information-seeking model, with its 13 individual traits. This is a model that takes cognizance, unlike other models, of the fact that most information seeking in a scholarly environment will soon be virtual. Chapter 6 also discloses the details of the digital footprint that provides the data that populates the model. Chapter 7 by Peter Williams, Ian Rowlands and Maggie Fieldhouse, looks at the information behaviour of young people, commonly referred to as the 'Google Generation', and reviews the available evidence as to whether young people, especially the young scholar, will augur a wholly new way of seeking for information. The thrust of this chapter is that consumer traits conveniently attributed to the young are in fact now mainstream for all ages: it is simply insufficient for information professionals to serve out their time until retirement hoping that it will be someone else's problem. The future is now. In fact the future was five years ago, just nobody noticed. This chapter constitutes the first general release of data from the widely acclaimed Google Generation report (www.ucl.ac.uk/slais/research/ciber/downloads/).

The penultimate chapter sees Barrie Gunter identifying changes in the pipeline that might impact on the digital consumer. He explains that digital information consumers will soon have even more choices to make than ever before in terms of sources of information about commodities and services.

They will also more readily become producers as well as consumers in the digital world with the spread of digital equipment and off-the-shelf tools that enable them to upload their own content online. The rapid evolution of new information and communications technologies will lead to even more shrinkage in the time-lag between innovation launch and reaching a critical mass or ‘tipping point’ beyond which they spread dramatically from early adopters to the general population.

The final, short chapter is one that we owe to the information community who we all believe have an important and valuable contribution to make in the new information world we are being fast-forwarded to. That is, providing they take on board all that we are saying! To assist in this, we have itemized and prioritized, executive summary style, the essentials.

Intended audience

As mentioned earlier, this book has been published to address widespread concerns being felt by all the information professions – librarians, publishers, journalists and archivists. Of course, many authors will say this in the hope that their sales will receive a boost as a consequence, but we have very good reasons for believing this to be true. The internet has thrown all the individual professions together and they now have much in common and in many cases the user is the same virtual person. However, it is undoubtedly librarians who are currently under the cosh and for them this book should be regarded as an essential survival kit. Because the book sets about the task of changing professional mindsets and because this is easier done with students, who, by definition, should be less set in their ways, we clearly hope that they will read the book in great number and help spread the consumer message.

Knowledge transfer is the current buzz phrase in academe and this book ticks all the right boxes in this respect. We are moving research findings into the practitioner environment, sharing relevant information amongst the information professions. This is the first time these findings have been placed in the professional mainstream and brought together in the form of a professional manual or manifesto.

One final point

You might ask, why have we published these contributions in the form of a book, when they could just as easily have been a ‘conversation’, a blog, a dialogue, or an online virtual conference? Well, we were asked to, which tells its own story about the readiness of this audience, you, the information professional, to accept change. If this book has one message, it is captured in the words of E. M. Forster: ‘Only connect, and the beast and the monk, robbed of the isolation that is life to either, will die. . . . Live in fragments no longer. Only connect.’ (Forster, *Howards End*, 1910).

The web connects. The beasts and the monks are, of course, the information professionals, isolated from what is actually going on. The internet is taking user/consumer connectivity to a new level, where the collective intelligence is shared. Who will need a gatekeeper then?