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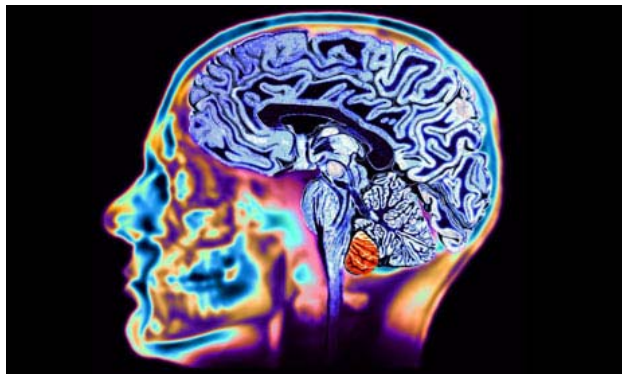
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Beyond books: what it takes to be a 21st century librarian

From connecting with people to keeping up with the latest technologies, there is a whole lot more to the job than stamping due dates

Emma Cragg and Katie Birkwood
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Librarians provide training to show people how to search for information and evaluate what they find.
Photograph: Science photo library

If we stopped the next person walking by on the street and asked them what our jobs as librarians involve, we'd be willing to bet that their first answer would be stamping books. This is because many people's experience of librarians is of the frontline, customer service staff. Have you ever considered how the books get on to the shelves and ready for you to borrow? Behind the scenes there are teams of librarians working to make this happen.

There are librarians who select the books for purchase, librarians who process the orders and librarians who create the bibliographic records that make it possible for you to find the book in the library catalogue and then on the shelves.

Books are only one aspect of what libraries and librarians are about. Librarianship is a people profession; a librarian's job is to connect people with the information they are seeking, whatever format that may take. At their heart, all library jobs have a central purpose: to help people access and use information, for education, for work, or for pleasure. In all library roles customer service and communication skills are important. If anyone ever thought they'd become a librarian because they liked books or reading, they would be sorely disappointed if they did not also like people too. Libraries of all kinds are keen to demonstrate their value to as wide an audience as possible, and to open up access to culturally significant resources that they hold.

In the digital age, when information is increasingly becoming available online, there is a propensity to say that libraries and librarians are redundant. This is not the case. Information available online is often of dubious origin and there is still a wealth of information behind paywalls that can only be accessed by those who have paid. We have helped many library users who have only been using search engines for their research and come to the library perplexed because they cannot find the information they want.

If anything, the internet has added to the range of services libraries provide and in turn this has also increased the variety of roles available to librarians.

As well as being good communicators with people and active adopters and exploiters of technological developments, librarians need to have detailed specialist subject knowledge to pass on to library users. Librarians provide training to show people how to search for information and evaluate what they find. These information skills sessions are now expanding to include digital literacies such as how to stay safe online, the use of social media sites and online collaboration tools.

There is no standard route into librarianship: librarians have first degrees across the whole spectrum of subjects. To become a professionally qualified librarian you also need a masters qualification in librarianship or information science. An introduction to librarianship can be gained through a graduate trainee scheme. These are run by libraries in a variety of sectors with an aim to provide experience and training in a work-based context prior to the masters course. A year as a graduate trainee can be useful but it is not a requirement for a place on a postgraduate programme.

More information about the wide range of jobs undertaken by librarians can be found through the Library Day in the Life project. This is a biannual event that encourages librarians to blog about their working week. Round 6 of Library Day in the Life ran from 24 -30 January 2011.

If you are interested in finding out about how to embark on a career in librarianship, Ned Potter has summarised the ten things you need to know if you want to work in libraries. Many librarians have also written about their route into the profession through the Library Routes Project.

Case studies

Kate Smyth, project officer for children and young people, Oldham library and information service

Kate works closely with teenage volunteers who run Warhammer, Lego and Yu-Gi-Oh (toy and game) clubs in Oldham's libraries, and also with younger children as the organiser of sessions for young carers and library sleepovers for Scout groups. In the past year she has organised two gigs in the children's library as part of the Get It Loud in Libraries project and is currently working on the library's first Battle of the Bands. Kate's focus on the personal relationships central to library work continues with her role as administrator for the library's Twitter, Flickr and Facebook accounts, and she is also responsible for the library content on the Go Oldham website.

Emma Cragg, academic support librarian, University of Warwick

Emma acts as the liaison between the university library and the business school at the University of Warwick. Many of the resources used by business students come in digital form, as online journals, databases, or ebooks. Although they are online, these resources are not free: access is paid for by the library for its users. Emma is responsible for selecting which resources to buy for the business and management subject areas. She also provides training to help staff and students make the most of the resources available. Her technological skills and interests extend to the use of social media for education and professional development.

Michael Cook, library manager, NHS Bolton library (based at Bolton central library)

The library serves 1,600 local primary care trust (PCT) staff as well as health students, social care staff and the general public. Michael's daily work involves looking after the physical library space and helping readers with the systematic searches of health and medical literature necessary for research and good treatment practice. This he does in the library but also on visits to outreach teams, teaching them how to find the information they need using specialised databases and websites. He also manages the public health section of the PCT website, trains and manages other library staff, and

works on collaborative projects with NHS teams and public libraries to improve access to health and mental health resources for the general public.

**Katie Birkwood, Hoyle Project associate, St John's College library,
University of Cambridge**

Kate is cataloguing the papers of 20th-century scientist Sir Fred Hoyle (1915-2001). Although much of her time is spent producing detailed descriptions of Hoyle's autograph manuscripts and letters that will be used by academic researchers, a major focus of her work is organising and running events for the general public. These events open up the library and display and interpret its treasures for people of all educational levels and backgrounds. She also works with schools and other special interest groups to supplement and broaden curricula and informal learning programmes. Librarian for her means teacher, curator, creative designer and tour guide.

Emma Cragg and Katie Birkwood are academic librarians and participants of the Library Day in the Life project

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