COMMUNICATION, INFORMATION AND THE LIBRARIAN

Damian C. Iwueke
Librarian
Foundation for International Studies
at the University of Malta
and
Consultant Librarian
International Ocean Institute, Valletta, Malta

ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the general techniques of information work and the potential contribution of librarians to the development of information dissemination. Various operations, instruments, concepts, and training of information workers are also discussed.

The paper discusses communication and information, different occupations in the information industry, profiles of information workers, the librarian as an information specialist, and modern technology and librarianship. Aspects of information explosion and micropublishing are also discussed. Problems of information dissemination, especially among marine science libraries, are highlighted and brief solutions put forward.

COMMUNICATION AND INFORMATION

Communication and information are two basic words of our time. Most human relationship or activity implies some sort of communication. All knowledge begins with information on either what is happening or what is being said, done or thought.

Communication and information take different forms but the general system remains more or less the same. The basic principle underlying all communication is the circulation of a message between a source (documents, books or emitter) and a target (user or receiver) by means of a carrier (newspaper, radio, television, library, etc. or channel). Tangible communication can only be durable if it leaves a trace, that is, if it is recorded on some form of a carrier: book, photograph, sound record, video, slide, compact disk, film, etc. In short, a document. The purpose of documentary activities is to select, within the mass of information carried by the print and mass media, the pieces of knowledge required, process
them and make them available to anyone who might need them later and keep the document intact, yet always up to date.

To be informed is to be in a position to analyse a situation, find solutions to academic, administrative or political problems and perhaps be in a position again to make sound judgement. The process of teaching, learning and acquiring competence calls for different types of print and non-print materials available to students, researchers and the general public.

In acquiring documents and organising them, we should not forget that there is almost a ceaseless output of publications and invention of software for information transmission. The congestion is made worse, according to Guinchat and Menou, by an extraordinary reduction in the useful life of documents. In some fields, knowledge is renewed so quickly that a book might be considered out of date by the time it is published.

Technological explosion has been accompanied by information explosion in our modern world and this is also followed by documentary explosion. The spectacular increase in the production of documents has doubled ten fold in the last ten years or so. Some figures from Guinchat and Menou’s study which I have modified will help to illustrate the extent of the phenomenon and the present trends.

Titles of periodicals rose from some 10,000 at the beginning of the century to 170,000 in 1971. Book production more than doubled between 1965 (269,000 titles) and 1974 (571,000 titles) according to Unesco figures. In 1970, more than 6,000 documents were published on each working day, or some 2 million in the course of that year, and it is expected that there will be eight or ten times as many by the year 2000 when between 50 and 100 million printed documents are expected to appear.

Talking about printed documents, scientific and technical documents are dished out more voraciously than any other area of human knowledge.

The above figures are, of course, a very rapid rate of increase. The rate at which documents, periodicals and books are published continues to accelerate. It was 9.5 percent during the 1960s, it is presently running to over 400 percent. There are predictions of saturation and slower growth of documents production partly due to the introduction of information software, but in my view it has not had much effect as yet.

The main reason for this spectacular rise in publishing is the wonderful development of modern science and technological innovation. In the area of science, this is illustrated by the fundamental point that science feeds on science. If the information that has accumulated in sciences were no longer made available to the scientific community, scientific discoveries may very well loose ground and disappear altogether.
The scale and development of communication and information processes is today more sophisticated than it was before. Interpersonal communication is being supplemented by print and non-print communication. Between these forms of communication, all areas of human activity are provided with a whole series of institutions with the capability and duty of communicating knowledge within the family, the education system, the information profession itself, the systems of administration and so forth. The fact is that human communication is durable if it is recorded on some form of carrier as I enumerated above and these carriers include the book, document, photograph, sound record, video, slides, films, compact disks, etc. The information carried by radio, television and other electronic media sometimes escape the direct control of the user who is unable to check it, dilute it or give it some analytical response. Recorded information is therefore necessary and important in information work. This recorded information, however, has to be organized and processed for easy retrieval. And this is exactly what libraries do. It is, therefore, not an over statement to say that libraries are quite indispensable in the transmission of knowledge. The pedagogical relationship linking teachers and students, users and libraries call for stocks of documents and tools for exploiting knowledge. The aim of the different types of libraries is to provide information - in books, documents, periodicals and audiovisuals in the field of science and/or arts and to enable a person to improve his understanding and control of his surroundings and provide the parliamentarian, industrialist, shopkeeper, academician, scientist, lawyer or farmer with factual information on which to base his decisions.

A document is an object that provides information. It is the material carrier of knowledge and the memory of mankind. It is no doubt possible and even necessary to obtain information from other sources, for example by asking an individual or organization, by attending a meeting or conference, by visiting an exhibition or by listening to a radio or television broadcast as I had already pointed out, but these sources for the most part have also gathered their information from documents. The system is like a vicious circle.

The characteristic features of documents are three broad types: published documents (books, periodicals), unpublished documents (reprints, preprints, letters, manuscripts, etc.) and non-print documents (films, slides, video, tapes, discs and even traditional materials such as wood, stone, carvings, textiles and artifacts). I wonder if some of the objects stated above would qualify to be described as documents in the real sense, however, artefacts or traditional materials are instructional aids which supplement learning, especially for children and even higher students. In any case, each of the materials mentioned above has some useful importance in providing information which is one of the basic moral codes of information specialists.
OCCUPATIONS IN INFORMATION

The specializations in the information industry have grown in number and scope with time and technological development. The situation has become more complex by the different terms used to describe the different specialists in the information industry. Today information dissemination and networking have attained some sophistication. Librarians, documentalists, archivists, journalists, broadcasters, public relations and advertising executives, computer scientists and programmers, indexers, bibliographers and telecommunications experts may all be described as information specialists, depending however, on one's training, qualifications and experience. Generally speaking, these information workers have their different pattern of training and career prospects and each career, according to Guinchat and Menou, has marked itself out, extolled its own virtues and are now vying with each other in the information industry. Shall we then accept the fact that all the information occupations do belong to a single profession though highly diverse, for which the term "information specialists" describes them all. Perhaps yes, perhaps no.

THE PROFILE OF AN INFORMATION SPECIALIST

Though there are certain features peculiar to each occupation or specialty, the general type of work all information specialists do is essentially similar. Guinchat and Menou have highlighted three main types of work of the people in this profession.

(a) processing documents and information for easy retrieval. In doing this, information specialists must master the technical skills involved.

(b) serve users by providing them with references.

(c) perform public relations work effectively to gain the confidence of clients.

THE LIBRARIAN AS AN INFORMATION SPECIALIST

A librarian is an information specialist in its own respect. The librarian's work involves memory, selection of materials, grouping together concepts and retrieving same concepts and syntheses of data easily. Putting it in another way the librarian sorts, evaluates, analyses, translates and retrieves materials capable of meeting specific requests and objectives. He is expected to provide reliable and up-to-date information. This system of organising materials implies a great deal of work which when broken down becomes a "documentary chain". This documentary chain is so linked together that each depends on the one which precedes it. This is the logic of the profession.
Generally, the library profession is concerned specifically with service, communication and human contact, judgement and initiative, curiosity, adaptability, perseverance and modesty.

Library work is quite demanding, sometimes even physically exhausting especially for the one-man-librarian, yet its immediate results are often far more impressive. Beside all the trouble, it is frequently the user of the organised information who reaps the benefit and the praise.

MODERN TECHNOLOGY AND LIBRARIANSHIP

According to Guinchat and Menou, the appearance of non-print materials and computers has had a major impact on our society. All these have led to a documentary and technological explosion. It is also possible to predict a spectacular development of micropublishing and micro-copying at the expense of traditional paper based publications. In certain computer devices the use of paper has already been cut off altogether by the immediate transcription of the information sought on microfilm with instant processing. The fact that an original document is normally reduced when on microfilm avoids the piling up of paper and facilitates the distribution and dissemination of data. These technical advances require and stimulate great efforts to improve quality.

The fact is that the effective use of these electronic devices in improving information work calls for the co-operation of specialists from all disciplines. Information work is a team work. Beyond their technical differences, all the information professions share certain characteristics that account for their attraction.

Librarians especially, are persons concerned with communication and contact, whose profession calls for service to the community. The status of the library profession is the reflection of ethical rules which define levels of responsibility, duties, training and amount of experience required. As a career, the library profession may seem unpromising or lacking in prestige. This is partly because the public who use the libraries do not know much of the technicalities that are involved in organizing the published and unpublished pieces of knowledge they use. The future is hopeful however, according to the foresight of Guinchat and Menou: information work is expanding rapidly and its usefulness to society is growing in importance and recognition.

And whether the individual regards librarianship as a step on the way to other activities or as a genuine career with recognition coming from increased responsibilities, the expansion of library work with its goals, methods and new techniques is one of great promise and absorbing interest. Librarianship offers a sense of discipline, a way of working and behaving, a renewal of personal
knowledge that will always be an invaluable asset. Librarians are engaged, moreover in a new profession in the forefront of today’s concerns with the vital role of linking knowledge and moral awareness.

Speaking specifically about marine science libraries, there should be cooperation among these special types of libraries around the world. The nature of oceanographic research has taken a world-wide dimension. We are united by the oceans. The oceans are among the common heritage of mankind. We should share information about this precious resource. We should join hands in guiding it against all sorts of misuse. Joint effort is needed towards having a standard for bibliographic formats for the exchange of data within marine science libraries.

Information dissemination either through the library or the mass media has its problems though. There is the problem of funding especially for acquisition of basic working tools. There is the problem of reliability and durability of information. There is a problem of manpower. There is a problem of infrastructure such as electricity and spare parts for the repair of broken down machines, especially in developing countries. The problems are numerous. But we must not be discouraged. We should always endeavor to do our best with whatever resources are available to us. But to achieve results, we have to work together. We have to work as a team.

REFERENCE