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Disruptive Technology: Librarians Must Think Heretical Thoughts to Adapt

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The sun is setting and it is getting a little difficult to see as darkness falls. Without even thinking I walk over and flip a light switch and I am able to see everything to continue working. Light has become so commonplace I don’t even realize how much we rely upon it until it is gone. Power outage, camping, or a quick late-night trip to the bathroom, make me realize how this common item has become integral to our society. Yet this wasn’t always the case.

Before the common light bulb, people were only able to see in the dark using candles, lanterns, and gas lamps. None of those items produced much light nor were they easy to turn on with the flick of a switch. The light bulb made it possible for people to work after sunset, travel a little safer in the dark, and it eventually led to the invention of the electric power plant. Disruptive technologies change the way people do things, their perceptions, and expectations. The light bulb was a disruptive technology. It has changed society’s perceptions so drastically that light at night is considered a common expectation.

Just like the printing press allowed books to be mass produced and allowed for scientists to easily share their knowledge through scholarly journals, the Internet and personal computers further democratized knowledge and information far beyond books, journals, and other printed material. Tutorials, speeches, images, animation, etc. are all available online. Professionals were no longer necessary for publishing and mass distributing information; the average person could publish and distribute anything online for the masses. The personal computer provided the ability to access information on a much wider scale than the printing press but it was not mobile. While the laptop provided a bit of mobility, people didn’t have it constantly on and next to them as they moved about the day. The smartphone and the tablet changed that.

Our library patrons not only have the ability to access information on the Internet but now truly they can, and do, do it any time and any place. The smartphone has changed the way people communicate, eat, work, play, and find information. Text and data usage continue to grow while talk minutes continue to shrink. People now compare shop for items on their phones while they stand in the aisles of stores. Maps and printed directions are replaced by smartphone directions. Since most people carry their smartphone with them at all times, the ability to get information is easy and always possible.

What it Means for Libraries and Librarians

We as librarians need to re-think the way we have been providing resources and services. Our patrons are more mobile and connected. Simply having a Web presence is not enough. We need to look at how our patrons access and use information and we need to provide it in those ways. Five years ago, electronic books and electronic journals were easily accessible to people via their desktop or laptop computers. Now, the preferred methods of access have changed. People want to download electronic books to their mobile devices and they want to highlight and take notes in those electronic books. Apple Insider reports a survey by Black Book, that fifty-one percent of "office-based physicians said they use a mobile device to perform independent medical reference and Internet research." In a ComputerWorld article on the iPad Mini, one doctor describes his iPad as “full of medical apps for ultrasound regional anesthesia, anesthesiology textbooks, and medical calculators.”

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