

# Reflections on the state of specialized libraries: Five global trends all knowledge professionals should understand <sup>1</sup>

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That we are living in an age of information and knowledge explosion is an accepted cliché. Formal and informal data, information and knowledge are available to individuals and organizations in both structured and unstructured formats leading to information overload, concerns about data accessibility, discussions of the role of metadata, content farms, return on investment in both the creation and consumption of information and the future of the information professions and those who provide services to them.

Social media has worked to make every information consumer believe they are search experts, to create new models of communication bypassing traditional sources, directly impact the business structure of information companies and lead to the rapid decrease in the number of libraries, information and business centers and the role of information professionals in corporate, news and related settings.

In this position paper I'd like to suggest there are five global trends causing, affecting and driving these dramatic changes.

## 1. Globalization

We live in a shrinking world. Thomas Friedman, the *New York Times* columnist and author of *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the 21st Century*, believes we are now working on an unprecedented level playing field, that political, technical and economic factors have lowered geographic borders and we live in a world where events in places such as Egypt, Greece, Portugal, Singapore, India, China, Brazil affect our domestic economies. Open sourcing, blogging, offshoring, outsourcing, supply chain and informing are all driven or are products of globalization.

Among the results of this trend are the interconnected personal networks and sites which permit nearly instant sharing of news and content everywhere in the world. Digital world of mouth changes the model of recommendation, referral and review which have traditionally relied on more formal and more refereed and authoritative processes.

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## 2. Distressed markets

Events occurring in the US employment sector affect stock markets globally. The collapse of economies in parts of the European Union affect business success thousands of miles away in Japan. The collapse of the global housing bubble in 2007, issues of bank solvency and the West and elsewhere, global stock market declines, and nagging unemployment and underemployment issues are but a few of the trends affecting the information sector. The increased stress on business conditions has resulted in the acceleration of library and information center closings, outsourcing of information work and the rise in low-cost competition in the news and business information sectors. The pressure to demonstrate return on investment in information commodities has never been higher and the free and low-cost competition to significant traditional information sources has never been more intense.

## 3. Disintermediation

The elimination of intermediaries in the supply chain also referred to as in “cutting out the middlemen” is the classic market definition of disintermediation. Also thought of as the “do it yourself” movement or the rise of the individual, this trend is driven by the uses and practices of the millennial generation. In the consumer world disintermediation, coupled with disruptive technologies, as driven use the use of the internet for self-service in nearly every field of endeavor. Banking, shopping, searching and research, reading and referral are but a few of the areas of communication affected by this trend. It has also affected to role of librarians and other information professionals in both positive and not so positive ways.

## 4. Disruptive technologies or disruptive innovation

Clayton Christiansen, the Kim B. Clark Professor of Business Administration at the Harvard Business School, writing his series of books and articles on innovation, including *The Innovator's Dilemma*, *The Innovator's Solution*, *The Innovator's Prescription* and most recently, *The Innovators DNA*, was among the first to study innovation and commercial enterprises. His use of the idea of disruptive innovation set the stage for intense discussions regarding the positive changes new and interruptive technology can bring to commerce as well as social institutions, healthcare, education and others.

## 5. Competition

All four of the factors already noted are contributors to the increase in completion in the commercial sector as well as nearly every other area of global endeavor. Competition in the business sector, particularly in the business of information, is moving in a disruptive way toward merger or acquisition of companies, including traditional competitors, to the increased pressure to provide stockholder revenue, to the rise of startup companies in niche or low-cost markets. Competition for funds in the library and information sectors has seen the merger as well as closing of information centers and libraries. Competition funding in the academic sector and rise of distance education models, free models and other innovations are changing the way students approach and consume education. Competition is both a disruption and innovation driver. While the results are not always clear, the process of competition will provide new and innovative answers and increased choices.

If information educators and information professionals have an increased understanding of these global trends we can begin to work towards better formulating professional programs to equip our graduates and faculty to prepare them for the information challenges of the future. It is impossible to imagine fully the world these professionals will inhabit in 2050, and nearly as impossible to look toward a much shorter future. But in understanding these factors we can provide some continuing skills and understanding in the ways humans and organizations identify, acquire, organize, describe and disseminate intellectual capital. These are constant and continuing requirements for the success of the enterprise.