Librarians in the Digital Age: Impact of Internet Adoption on Search Habits

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Many librarians talk that there is a generational difference in how librarians do their job. Older librarians, who did not grow up connected to the Internet, often conduct research first using print resources, and then use online resources to fill in gaps or to supplement print references. Younger librarians, accustomed to Internet usage for their entire lives, often do not understand print resources and seemingly use online searches to complete patron queries. Both categories of librarians observe that they conduct research in fundamentally different ways than one another and they do about their job duties in a different manner. However, most of the discussion about the differences between groups of librarians has been anecdotal, based solely on causal observations among librarians. No formal research has been conducted in order to pinpoint if these differences in search habit exist, and if it does, what exactly these differences are.

Using formal ethnographic techniques, including interviews and observations of librarians conducting sample patron research questions, the researcher examines variances between the search techniques of librarians who grew up with Internet access (are digital natives) to librarians who first obtained Internet access as professionals (digital immigrants). The results show if there is some division in how both groups of librarians search for information and shows what factors can impact the divide.

The impact of this research implicates several areas of library professional practice. Not only will it support or deny the anecdotal data that there are differences between digital native and digital immigrant librarian populations, but it will also have implications for recruitment and retention of younger librarians. If research can document how younger librarians search, librarians in general may be more accepting of librarians who conduct their jobs in a different manner than do digital immigrant librarians, who have established the status quo of librarianship throughout their professional careers.