"If it computes, patrons have brought it in": Personal information management and personal technology assistance in public libraries

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ABSTRACT

All public libraries in a single US state were surveyed in order to explore the types of personal technology assistance requests the staff received and how they responded to such requests. Staff at each library that reported having received patron requests for assistance with personal digital technology or content were invited for a 30-minute follow-up phone interview in which they were asked to provide more detail about their interactions with patrons and their opinions about this aspect of library work. In total, 130 of the 234 libraries (55.5%) in the state responded to the survey and representatives from 10 of those libraries participated in follow-up phone interviews. While public librarians are willing to tackle these patron requests, they have little preparation or specific continuing education in this area to provide them with support. Although many public librarians categorize technology assistance as reference work, official Reference and User Services Association guidelines do not consider it within the scope of reference work. The growing body of patron requests suggests that, as work in public libraries continues to evolve in order to meet patron needs, so too should the guidelines for reference work.

1. Introduction

According to a 2013 report, 56% of Americans own a smartphone (Smith, 2013), and that number continues to grow. Smartphones provides easy access to personal digital information: email, social media profiles, digital photos, bills, and personal statistics such as exercise statistics and calorie counts. With this easy access to personal information comes questions such as how to best utilize the information, manage the information, and maintain the information; issues associated with personal information management (PIM). While many people turn to commercial technology services for support, librarians often provide this kind of assistance to patrons.

2. Problem statement

Until recently, few studies have applied PIM research to library public services; human computer interaction (HCI) scholars have traditionally used PIM research for technological design. As popular interest in personal digital information grows, the study of personal information management can be explored for its potential as a service that information professionals can weave into traditional suites of public library references services. Copeland and Barreau (2011), Cox (2008), McGuire (2011), and Thomas (2007) have all suggested that library or

archival reference services could offer assistance to individuals wishing to manage and maintain their personal digital collections. However, little research has surveyed the landscape to learn whether and how these information institutions are currently addressing PIM issues and what common themes emerge. The results could be of value to scholars exploring the changing role of reference services in modern small public libraries, as well as library practitioners seeking to implement PIM programs for patrons. The research questions motivating this research are: what requests for personal information management assistance are small public libraries receiving, and how are these libraries currently responding to such requests?

3. Literature review

Much of PIM research is associated with human computer interaction, but PIM has grown to include attention from researchers in a variety of disciplines with interests beyond interface and software design (Jones, 2008). Jones (2008) conceptualized PIM practices as consisting of three main activities: finding activities, meta-level activities, and keeping activities, all of which can be associated with aspects of research in information and library science. Previous research has focused on PIM meta-level activities, which have the most potential for overlap with traditional library services (Cushing, 2013). Some recent research in public service in information institutions advocates for PIM activities, without naming them as such.

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3.1. PIM activities, libraries, and archives

PIM can be defined as "both the practice and the study of the activities a person performs in order to acquire or create, store, organize, maintain, retrieve, use and distribute the information needed to complete tasks (work related or not) and fulfill various roles and responsibilities" (Jones, 2008, p. 453). Two of the main PIM activities focus on finding personal information and then keeping the personal information for future re-use. The last main PIM activity is the area which has the most potential for application of library and information service knowledge and skill, and which researchers have begun to explore: meta-level activities. Meta-level activities include organizing, maintaining, managing privacy and the flow of information, measuring and evaluating, and making sense (Jones, 2008). Maintaining is further broken down to include maintaining for now, maintaining for later, and maintaining for a lifetime and beyond.

Previous research has focused on the meta-level activity of maintaining, including research associated with personal digital archiving (e.g., Marshall, 2008a, 2008b). Marshall (2007) defines personal digital archiving as a set of concerns individuals face as they attempt to maintain their personal information for the long term: predicting value; distributed storage; digital context; conflicting interests of protection and long term storage; format opacity; incompatibility; and obsolescence, curatorial effort, and long term access challenges. Marshall's work is significant in its identification of issues and its ability to draw attention to the issue of managing personal digital information for the long term. However, it does not offer concrete solutions. Copeland and Barreau (2011) are among the few to suggest that public libraries have a role to play in helping individuals manage their personal information. The researchers suggest that acting in their role as cultural institutions, community libraries could offer user education about how to preserve personal digital material. In addition, the researchers also suggest that community libraries could serve as community repositories. While user education on issues of personal preservation is novel, using this approach to encourage donation of material to community repositories is not. Archival institutions have long focused on documenting everyday life through outreach and collecting activities, resulting in hundreds of archival collections documenting community history. Further, Cunningham (1994) and Thomas (2007) suggest that archivists could expand their outreach activities to potential donors to include consultations of best practices for preservation of digital content.

Writing from the archives perspective, Cunningham (1994) suggests archivists take an interest in how individuals manage their digital content to ensure access to the digital material that could someday be donated to archival repositories. This suggestion emanated from the post-custodial perspective of archival practice, in which archivists were not required to hold physical custody to influence the maintenance of records. Thomas (2007) tested this concept, referred to as the "post-custodial approach" with the PARADIGM study, in which she deployed archivists to work with politicians to identify their personal digital content for long term preservation. Thomas found that "there is a place for generic awareness of archives and preservation issues that are in the hands of creators" (p. 22) including information about management, organization, and maintenance of material-all of which are meta-level PIM activities.

Building on the foundation set by the PARADIGM study, John, Rowlands, Williams, and Dean (2010) launched the Digital Lives project, in which they examined the curation of personal digital objects, over the entire archival life cycle. After conducting interviews, online questionnaires, and focus groups, the research team found that individuals were interested in maintaining some of their digital objects, and that archivists and curators would have liked instruction manuals that they could use to advise the public about how to manage and maintain their digital objects.

Cushing (2013) used the concept of digital possessions to explore the individual-digital item relationship, with the understanding that knowledge about this individual-item relationship could be used to create the instruction manuals suggested by John et al. (2010). Cushing characterized digital possessions as a) providing evidence of the individual, b) representing the individual's identity, c) recognized as having value, and d) exhibiting a sense of bounded control; and suggested that archival concepts of primary, secondary, and intrinsic value provide the frame for the defining characteristics. A better understanding of how individuals value their digital items can provide information professionals with guidance about how best to work with creators of digital content who ask for preservation advice.

Cox (2008) and McGuire (2011) also suggest that libraries and archives play a role in the organization, management, and maintenance of personal information. Representing different institutions, both suggest that public services in archives (Cox) or public libraries (McGuire) should evolve to meet the changing information needs brought about by an increasingly digital environment. This evolution includes public services that assist individuals with their personal digital material. Echoing a theme mentioned above, Cox suggests that it behooves archivists to take an interest in assisting creators as they attempt to manage their content because the content could eventually be accessioned by an institutional archive. However, Cox also suggests that popular interest in maintaining personal information could be used to explain the importance of recordkeeping in society. In this way, assisting individuals with managing their personal digital material serves as an excellent advocacy tool for archivists.

McGuire (2011) takes a slightly different perspective; he suggests that an increasingly digital environment will continue to change the public library's role in society because the library's existence is no longer based on the concept that information is scarce or expensive. The Internet has created an environment in which information is free and ubiquitous and individuals are more concerned with information overload than information scarcity. Therefore, public libraries can no longer operate on the assumption that patrons will be drawn to them to simply obtain information. Rather, libraries could offer individuals strategies on how to manage information rather than (or as well as) how to obtain information. This, of course, includes the management of personal information.

3.2. Information services in public libraries

The development of reference and information services in North American libraries has been traced to the second half of the nineteenth century, and was a response to the spread of education (Bopp & Smith, 2011). As larger percentages of the population became literate, interest in reading grew, which lead to an increased interest in libraries. Reference librarians helped the public navigate the library and its resources. Library users may still not know how best to navigate information resources, but with ubiquitous access to information via the Internet as well as the ease of using search engines, individuals rely on reference librarians less and less for help locating sources. Currently, many public libraries have forgone traditional reference services in favor of more inclusive suite of public services. The 2013 Digital Inclusion Survey suggests the term of digital inclusion is a more descriptive term to describe the ways in which libraries assist patrons with technology (Bertot et al., 2013). The survey explored how libraries can provide patrons with access to technology and can help them become more skilled in the use of and access to digital content. The survey found that most participating public libraries offered technology assistance to patrons via formal classes, and individual help by appointment, information point of use, or online training materials. Smaller and rural libraries were less likely to offer these services than were large metropolitan libraries (Bertot et al., 2013). Specifics statistics associated with personal information management assistance were not discernable from survey reports.

According to the Reference and User Services Association (RUSA), a division of the American Library Association, reference work includes "reference transactions and other activities that involve the creation,