

Of Translators and Librarians

This was the title of a short article I wrote a little more than 10 years ago, in 2008. The point of the article was to highlight the remarkable speed with which librarians had accepted technology (unlike translators at that point). I contrasted the well-known “The Bookworm” painting by Carl Spitzweg of 1850 with this then-current description of how librarians approach technology in *Wikipedia*:

The increasing role of technology in libraries has a significant impact on the changing roles of librarians. (. . .) Increasing technological advance has presented the possibility of automating some aspects of traditional libraries. In 2004, a group of researchers in Spain developed (. . .) a robot [that] is able to navigate the library, look for the specified book, and upon its discovery, carefully take it from the shelf and deliver it to the user. Because of the robot’s extremely limited function, its introduction into libraries poses little risk to the employment of librarians, whose duties are [no longer] defined by menial tasks such as the retrieval of books.”¹

In my article, I came to the following conclusion:

There’s a great contrast between Spitzweg’s wonderful “Bookworm” painting of 1850 and the 2008 Wikipedia description of the use of technology by librarians. While the “Bookworm” provokes a poetic image, librarians today have been able to master and accept technology and thus still play an important role today. In sharp contrast, the language industry—whose main character, the translator, has a historically similar poetic and romantic image—has chosen a different path. That’s why our industry is currently experiencing such heavy turbulences.²

A lot has changed since 2008. The majority of translators have embraced some translation-related technologies



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and have recognized that there are ways to distinguish themselves other than rehashing already-translated materials.

But what struck me on several recent occasions is that the job of the librarian has once again changed as well, and once again those changes have been embraced with readiness and grace.

My wife and I spent our annual vacation-mainstay at our family’s lake cabin in rural northeastern Washington. The cabin is hermetically cut off from any electronic connection, and we leave only a few times to go into “town,” which happens to be Colville, a struggling blue-collar community about a 30-minute drive from our cabin. During those treks, we typically drop by the library to check our electronic correspondence.

The library in that little town is amazing. It’s staffed by three or four librarians who run a large range of activities, some of which have to do with books and all of which have to do with people. The Colville library is a place for toddlers to be read to, for older kids to play video games, for the homeless to cool down from the heat or escape from

the wildfire smoke in the air, for travelers to check in, for the elderly to meet, and, yes, for just anyone to borrow books or games or log onto the internet. It’s as much of a cross-section of society as you can possibly get, and it’s all guided by the librarians who spend so much of their time with social interactions and do it brilliantly. (In the past few years, I’ve always made sure to personally thank them for their services and tell them how much I admire them for what they do.)

Now, I don’t think the Colville library is all that different from other libraries. It’s just what librarians do, and so often do well.

All this reminded me of a report on National Public Radio (the U.S. lifeline for, well, just about anyone who likes to listen to the radio and wants to stay informed) that discussed exactly that.³ Only this report specifically mentioned social workers employed in libraries, which clearly is not in the budget for most libraries. Even the 2019 Wikipedia entry on “Librarians” reflects the social work reality:

Traditionally, a librarian is associated with collections of books, as demonstrated by the etymology of the word “librarian” (from the Latin *liber*, “book”). The role of a librarian is continually evolving to meet social and technological needs. A modern librarian may deal with the provision and maintenance of information in many formats, including books, electronic resources, magazines, newspapers, audio and video recordings, maps, manuscripts, photographs and other graphic material, bibliographic databases, and web-based and digital resources. A librarian may also provide other information services, including information literacy instruction, computer provision and training, coordinating with community groups to host public programs, provide assistive technology for people with

This column has two goals: to inform the community about technological advances and encourage the use and appreciation of technology among translation professionals.

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disabilities, and providing assistance locating community resources.⁴

It seems unlikely that “social work” is part of the future service offerings for translators (interpreters might be a different story, but I’ll leave those speculations to more knowledgeable people). But as part of our services, we’ll have to continue to market our skills of meaningfully interfacing with people (clients, colleagues, and the general public) and to continue to be open to changes.

In spite of what we like to say (“translation is the second oldest profession in the world”), the translation profession as we know it today (excluding literary and religious translation) is very young and still in its formative stages. While I believe that we may have almost reached a plateau in its development, changes will still be necessary for many. And you know what the beauty of change is? Changing skills doesn’t mean giving up one skill in exchange for another, but adding skills to an already impressive array.

That’s what librarians continue to do, and that’s what we’ll have to do as well. After all, St. Jerome is the patron saint for *both* of those professions for a good reason. ●

NOTES

1. Zetzsche, Jost. “Of Translators and Librarians,” *tcWorld* (March 2008), www.internationalwriters.com/aboutus/Librarians.pdf.
2. 2008 Wikipedia entry for “Librarian,” <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Librarian>.
3. Dwyer, Colin. “Your Local Library May Have a New Offering in Stock: A Resident Social Worker,” National Public Radio (July 17, 2019), [n.pr/2KvAdhZ](https://www.npr.org/2019/07/17/746444441).
4. 2019 Wikipedia entry for “Librarian,” <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Librarian>.



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