

Digital citizenship and the role of the library

UKSG eNews 383

28 Oct 2016

Leo Appleton, University of the Arts London

I have been thinking recently about 'digital citizenship' and what it means exactly to be a citizen in the 21st century. How do we survive and further develop as citizens in a world which is becoming more and more technologically dependent and where much of our daily life is carried out in a digital world, or relies on understanding digital concepts and transactions. Simple things like withdrawing money from the bank, booking hotel rooms, arranging travel, applying for and claiming benefits, tax returns, arranging insurance, renewing memberships, etc all now rely on a level of digital literacy or understanding, as well as access to computer technology in order to carry out these tasks.

There are of course always non-digital options available for those who cannot access the digital landscape (whether it be access to IT or having the necessary skills) but these are now the exception rather than the norm, in much the same way that for most academic library and information professionals, assisting users in accessing and searching print media is much less common than helping them to navigate the digital information environment. There are of course exceptions (my own art and design environment being one of them) but for the most part we deal in digital, rather than print, and we have continued to develop as a profession accordingly.

I am very fortunate in that I have several professional 'hats' within the library and information environment and each brings with it different experiences. One of my hats is my day job, that of managing academic libraries, which allows me to interact and engage with students as they make use of the services, facilities and resources that we make available to them. It is here that I have happily observed the development of librarians and students alike as they all adapt to the digital age (whether they like it or not) where information and digital literacies have become intertwined. Similarly increased academic engagement in virtual learning, digital humanities, and social media has enabled librarians to become involved in supporting the academic digital landscape, and in doing so develop information and digital literacy strategies for supporting the various elements of this new environment: VLEs; online profiles and reputations; digital security; digital research support, research data management; altmetrics, etc. In effect, academic libraries are now fully involved in supporting their users and developing them as digital citizens.

This transition, by academic libraries, into the digital age got me thinking about our other library sectors and how they support their users in being digital citizens within their broader contexts. Another professional hat that I wear is being involved in CILIP's special interest group, [Multimedia, Information and Technology](#) (MmIT), whose remit it is to provide information and advice and to encourage discussion and debate around all things digital and electronic in the library and information world. During 2016, the group's focus has been on digital citizenship and I have had the

good fortune to host three events this year which have focused on the library's role in supporting digital citizenship. What has been fascinating to discover is just how colleagues in other library sectors are supporting different aspects of digital literacy and ultimately digital citizenship for their respective user groups and constituents. For example, many public libraries are actively engaged in hosting and facilitating job clubs (where members search for jobs online and are supported in their applications, CVs, etc), coding clubs, grid clubs, Google garages, etc. All of these activities take information literacy provision within the library to another level. It is here where we might start to talk about digital literacy, rather than information literacy, but for me they are all variations on a theme of 'information seeking requirements and behaviours' and our public libraries are adapting to make sure that they are offering support that is required to survive in our digital world, and to develop digital citizenship.

It is also through these events that I have learnt about the work of the [Tinder Foundation](#) and its mission to tackle digital exclusion throughout the UK. The Tinder Foundation works strategically with public libraries and regards them as essential vehicles for digital inclusion. The Tinder Foundation's [LearnMyWay](#) initiative takes digital literacy and activity to the citizenry and public libraries are providing a natural and appropriate infrastructure in supporting the UK Online Centres, through which this initiative is delivered.

Similarly, in the health libraries sector, digital literacy for clinicians and practitioners requires skills and abilities to search and critically appraise digital information with regard to evidence based practice, whilst patients need awareness and support in accessing and using digital and online health services (ie online appointment booking and ordering repeat prescriptions). These, again, are examples of where health libraries are adapting to meet the digital needs of their citizens, and enabling them to work and live in the digital age.

A third professional hat that I am fortunate enough to wear is that of LIS researcher, in that I am just over halfway through a part time PhD study into the value and impact of UK public libraries on citizenship development. The empirical part of this research has allowed me to run focus groups in public libraries all over the UK and talk to library users about how their public library usage enables their citizenship. I suppose this is where my interest in digital citizenship stems from but it is quite exhilarating (from a librarian's perspective) to hear stories about how lives are changed through the support provided by librarians and library staff in enabling access to digital technologies and computers and providing skills training to make use of the digital resources and facilities. The findings of this research will be written up and shared in due course, but how wonderful it is to hear from real public library users how it is the public library that enables them to participate in society and community activities. Some examples of how libraries do this is through providing access: to wifi and the internet so that they can stay informed about local political activities; to after school computer clubs and homework clubs where school students can make extended use of PCs; to skilled employability support and job clubs; to high-tech digital music and film editing facilities and support; to simple access to a PC to write a letter to the local newspaper.

In many cases the library users are often quite unaware of how the library is supporting and developing them as digital citizens, as they are simply going to the place that they know will help them. The fascinating thing about unearthing these stories through my research is that it becomes clear that all libraries have adapted, whether strategically planned or not, in order to support their users in various aspects of digital citizenship and ensure that they are not excluded.

And finally, a fourth hat that I frequently sport is that of co-editor of this very publication that you're reading, *UKSG eNews*. This allows me to occasionally share my observations with a wider audience, so many thanks for indulging me. I always find it very reassuring to observe positive change in how libraries adapt to the current climate, and embracing and developing support for digital citizenship (in its many forms and across all sectors) is another great example of this.



This UKSG Editorial is taken from the industry newsletter *UKSG eNews*, published every two weeks exclusively for UKSG members. The newsletter provides up-to-the-minute news of current issues and developments within the global knowledge community.

To enjoy *UKSG eNews* and other member benefits [become a UKSG member](#). To submit an editorial suggestion for *UKSG eNews*, contact the editors: seditor@uksg.org.