

THE ELECTRONIC BRAIN

HARNESSING THE POWER OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

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Introduction

At the time of writing this article, it is difficult to conceive of an information professional in any field who has not encountered artificial intelligence in either practice, product, or media. Although Artificial Intelligence presents an uncertain future for many industries and professions, librarians, or, more appropriately termed, information professionals are, and historically have been, the natural leaders in the practice of utilizing new research technologies. As a result, information professionals have a professional incentive to embrace technology in its capacity to enhance their work while simultaneously acknowledging the limitations of the tools that are developed. This reality is particularly prescient now as librarians face the newest rapidly developed and disruptively capable tool that has been presented to us- Artificial Intelligence (AI).

Although librarianship in the modern age has been closely associated with books, and thus is often imagined as being tied to the rise and fall of books as a medium for information, a more accurate understanding of the profession requires a more historic perspective. This is not the first time our profession has been allegedly “threatened” by technological advancements. With the creation of the world wide web and digital content, a time when people could find everything needed online commenced, and many speculated that it would be the end of libraries. However, quite the opposite occurred. As a result of this new digital content and explosion of information, libraries became grounds for access and knowledge of how to navigate this abundance of information. We are, at the heart of our profession, information specialists regardless of the form the information takes. As such, we will continue to help our patrons navigate the fast-changing landscape of research and help them utilize AI to its potential. This article seeks to provide advice on how to best approach the advent of new trends and tools relating to research technologies, specifically AI as it affects our patrons’ information seeking behavior.

Learn It

As with any new technology whose primary purpose is providing information, AI is within the scope of our profession. To continue to provide excellent service to our patrons, whether in academia or the general public, we need to establish best practices for using AI as we have with previous technology. And, the first step to establishing those best practices is learning and understanding. One of the major benefits of a new technology is the overwhelming response from educators and practitioners dispersing information. There is seemingly no limit to the number of resources available and opportunities to educate oneself.

No matter your learning style or schedule, there are opportunities likely to be tailored to your preferences. Though AI can seem intimidatingly complex, there are plenty of ways to get up to speed with the definitions, practices, and functions of this new technology. One way to begin your education is the natural librarian reaction-read about it. A simple Google search for ‘Artificial Intelligence’ will yield more results than any of us could read in our lifetime. For a more curated approach, a quick visit to any information professional organization’s website will most likely offer publications on the topic from a librarian’s point of view. Prime examples of these national organizations include the [American Library Association](#), the [Association of College and Research Libraries](#), the [American Association of Law Libraries](#). For more localized options, the [Florida Library Association](#) and the [Florida Association of College and Research Libraries](#) provide many learning opportunities for information professionals based in Florida. These examples present some of the largest organizations, but don’t forget your [regional options](#) as well, who can offer a more personalized approach to your research. Webinars and conferences provide another learning opportunity, particularly for those who want to see tools in action or otherwise hope to socialize with those who share a common interest. A visit to your local library organization website can let you know about upcoming events on the topic.

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Once you have read and learned all you can about the topic, it is time to experience it. Learn about some of the most relevant tools for your setting and your budget, and play with them! AI tools are readily available, with free trials or open access options to try them, allowing you to start your own experiments. We have participated in training hosted by our Westlaw and LexisNexis representatives to better use their new AI offerings, and your vendors may provide similar training as well. The continual development of new AI platforms means your trusted vendors may be your best bet for focusing your efforts on the most relevant tools available to you. “Learning it” comes in handy because your research should have revealed some of the most useful AI applications for you, your patrons, and your institution. Consider how your patrons will use these tools and create a similar experience. Even sophisticated modern technology has limits, and you and your patrons will be well-served by your independent research. Honestly evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of each tool so you can better educate others, which leads us to our next topic.

Teach It

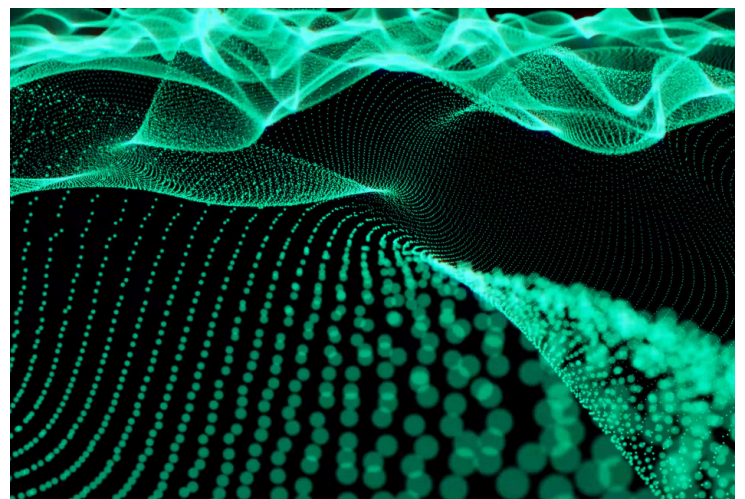
As information professionals we should naturally be considered experts on any tool that provides information, and this should include new technology that is generating information, not just traditional information resources like books and databases. A great way to establish oneself as an expert and resource on a topic is to teach it. The reality of our profession is that we are often an early stop in the research journey for those hoping to learn something new—meaning questions about AI are on their way to our reference desks. That this technology has influenced just about every industry means that we now must be proactive rather than reactive in preparing ourselves for the inevitable.

If you are at an academic institute, try proposing a course to teach students how to use AI for research or coursework. Also think about offering regular workshops to students, faculty, and staff to keep them abreast of the latest news and applications of AI. If you are at a public library, consider offering AI education in your programming for adults and children. If you can't teach a full course or offer regular programming, record online tutorials for patrons to view on their own time and create online research guides to demonstrate that you are taking the lead on this new technology. If your library has a makerspace, AI tools may be an excellent new addition to update your offerings.

While AI offers a great deal of potential in research, it also provides opportunities in creative ventures as well, so be sure not to overlook just how varied the generative possibilities are. Collection development, acquisitions, and technology services provide opportunities in every library to make information about AI available with respect to each institution's parameters. The possibilities are extensive for librarians to assert themselves in the midst of these technological changes, further demonstrating their adaptability and value in service to their patrons.

Integrate It

In homage to the old adage “practice what you preach,” AI is not merely a topic for librarians to teach; it is a tool for librarians to integrate into their day-to-day operations and services. There is no greater demonstration of the adaptability of libraries than our ability to embrace our times and evolve as needed. Embracing AI does not require replacing tried-and-true services or valuable technological infrastructure for the sake of novelty or appearances. Rather, it should be an opportunity to enhance select services and internal workflows. Gradually experiment and implement the AI tools that are the most conducive to your preexisting mission. Further, integration need not be a solitary act. It can be the natural result of collaboration with partner institutions or shared inspiration with other organizations grappling with these rapid changes in much the same way you are. Look to your peers for ideas and honest evaluations of new tools and services. It can be incredibly beneficial to tap your local counterparts for advice or guidance. Fortunately, here in Florida, there is no shortage of organizations—regional, topical, or statewide—that facilitate the sharing of ideas and interorganizational education as discussed in Section 1 of this article. Collaborative partners are readily available to mitigate risk and waste in the process of implementing AI in existing services.



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Follow It

Finally, when exploring any new technology, it is important to follow the trends and stay abreast of the new advancements and changes that occur. This is particularly true regarding AI, which not only entered the public conscience rapidly, but has continued to evolve at a similar pace. AI has proven itself ubiquitous in society as various industries adopt it as a product, tool, and/or feature. Likewise, developers continue to produce new tools in response to the ever-growing demand. It is important to evaluate these tools as they are released to determine their value in your setting and for your patrons. Blogs, news alerts, and library publications, both scholarly and practical, are great ways to stay current. In addition, organizational listservs curated with a library focus can support your awareness of new trends and tools relevant to your work.

Conclusion

It is a reality of the profession that we must continually demonstrate our value to our patrons, our institutions, and our communities. By staying at the forefront of new technology, such as AI, we confirm our value, adaptability, and relevance in an ever-changing world. This is not the first time libraries have confronted disruptive information technology, and it will likely not be the last. But, as with all the times before, our missions have been satisfied by our willingness to embrace change and evolve in the quest to improve access to accurate information. As depicted in the popular 1950s movie *Desk Set*, technology is not meant to replace us, but rather to serve as a tool to help us better perform our jobs. In fact, librarians and disruptive technology sometimes get along exceedingly well. With a mild alteration to Bunny Watson's climactic proclamation in *Desk Set* (1957) quoting the poem *Curfew Must Not Ring Tonight*, "Curfew will not ring tonight!" [1]

References

[1] Lang, Walter, dir. *Desk Set*. 1957; Los Angeles, CA: 20th Century-Fox, 2004. DVD.

