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Virtual Communities and Libraries, a Binomial

Most definitions agree that virtual communities (vcs) are born in cyberspace and are groups of people with the same aim who voluntarily join together to achieve it; that is, they pursue common goals. This may be regarding any topic, and it is common for there to be no restrictions. The communities know that they are networks, which is why they evolve as such, increasing their membership and diversifying.

In terms of topics of interest, we can say that the virtual communities-libraries binomial is very solid, above all when we are talking about the many opportunities and tools the former offer the latter for being in contact with their users and for supporting them in educational processes. What circulates the most in these groups are ideas, information, and knowledge that make it possible for both individuals and the network itself to develop. This is why libraries would contribute to enrich this body of knowledge and, in turn, the communities can be a space for positioning libraries.

This article will look at how this binomial is created and operates, above all with an eye toward improving their members' and related networks' education and cul-

ture. To do that, it is important to keep in mind the benefits that vcs contribute to libraries, since the documents they produce are very important in strengthening informational services.

I will explore how vcs can help broaden out libraries' scope and improve their services. I will also talk about strategies can help manage and make vcs more dynamic in connection with libraries, as well as how these communities can be tools for inclusion and diversity to improve users' experience and libraries' effectiveness in the digital world.

We should remember that, as technology advances, the way people consume information changes. For this reason, libraries increasingly look to these communities to improve their scope and increase their impact.

As stated above, in the vcs, people connect through online platforms to discuss, collaborate, and share information about specific topics. In the context of libraries, these communities may be made up of users, librarians, researchers, and other professionals from the information sector.

One of the vcs' main advantages is that they allow libraries to connect to a broader and more diverse public, reaching people who otherwise would not be interested in their services. In addition, they can help libraries stay

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up to date about trends in the world of information and adapt to users' changing needs. An advantage for the vcs is that librarians can offer guidance and useful resources.

Sources on the Relationship between Virtual Communities and Libraries

Many authors have dealt with this topic, although some works stand out particularly, such as:

- “Las comunidades virtuales y los portales como escenarios de gestión documental y difusión de información” (Virtual Communities and Portals as Stages for Documentary Management and Information Dissemination)
- “¿Comunidades virtuales o sociedad red?” (Virtual Communities or Society Network?)
- “Servicios de información a medida para una comunidad virtual” (Information Services Tailored for a Virtual Community)
- “Redes sociales: posibilidades de Facebook para las bibliotecas públicas” (Social Media: Facebook's Possibilities for Public Libraries)
- “Gestión de comunidades virtuales en bibliotecas. Una propuesta teórico-práctica” (Managing Virtual Communities in Libraries. A Theoretical-Practical Proposal)
- “Comunidades virtuales en la red: bibliotecas y bibliotecarios 2.0 trabajando por la inclusión social” (Virtual Communities on the Net: Libraries and Librarians 2.0 Working for Social Inclusion).

These studies have in common that they see virtual communities as tools to support libraries and connect with users online. The authors explore how digital technology and social media can improve library services and resources and how libraries can create participatory, relevant online spaces.

They underline the importance of effective communication and of a marketing strategy for reaching users and promoting the services. They also emphasize the necessity of understanding peoples' needs and expectations to be able to offer them useful, attractive resources.

Another commonality is their recognition of the importance of vcs in disseminating culture and encourag-

ing reading. They emphasize how social media can foster participation in online cultural activities, including literary pursuits.

In addition, they underline libraries' participation in the creation of attractive, relevant content and in interaction with online users. The authors talk about the need to create forums for discussion and interactive interest groups to look for information and bibliographical resources, including data bases, magazines, and e-books. This is why virtual libraries can serve as tools for research. Other topics they underline in the articles are the quest for inclusion, the adaptation of information for diverse communities, and the increase of knowledge and skills through virtual communities and libraries being seen as a binomial.

The Library in the Face of Change

As mentioned above, technological evolution has impacted the world of libraries and their function in society. In that sense, access to information has become easier thanks to the proliferation of digital devices and Internet connectivity. As a result, libraries have had to adapt and evolve to continue being relevant in the digital era. For example, online catalogues allow users to look for and reserve books, magazines, and other resources without physically visiting the library. Also, access to online data bases and other electronic resources has broadened the spectrum of available information. Technology has also forced the creation of digital reading platforms for those who prefer remote access, even from home.

Other libraries have diversified their offerings to include digital skills training. Many have forged alliances with other institutions and organizations to offer more complete services adapted to users' needs.

In this context, libraries have thought it appropriate to approach virtual communities to find out about their needs and improve interaction among them, taking into consideration that, as Julio Cabero says, learning in a vc is doing so in a group, collaboratively, and not competitively.

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This means that all the members contribute their knowledge and vision of the problems to achieve common goals, such as overcoming a difficulty or developing a project or activity.¹ In any case, we must not forget that in vcs, the communications model may be directive (hierarchical) or collaborative (horizontal).

Virtual Communities Support Libraries' Positioning Themselves

In the digital age, libraries compete ferociously to continue to be relevant. vcs can be a huge ally in this effort.

In the first place, by connecting with vcs, libraries can reach an audience that might not know about their services and resources. For example, a local library that wants to promote its cookbooks might connect with a vc of people interested in gastronomy and offer them resources they may be interested in.

In the second place, libraries can work with vcs to develop personalized programs and services. For example, they might join forces with a vc of programmers who could create a program for beginning coding.

In the third place, vcs might offer valuable feedback (comments and critiques) about the library's catalogue and operations and help it identify areas it needs to improve or promote its services and resources through the vc's own social media or other online platforms.

In the fourth place, vcs can help libraries become leaders in their field: the vcs can show their experience in specific areas, establishing themselves as reliable sources of information and resources, which would attract new users and improve their reputation.

In short, by working together, libraries and virtual communities can improve access to information for a great many people.

Conclusions

By being an online space for collaboration and user participation, libraries can connect to their community more effectively, foster literacy and education online, and generate knowledge collaboratively.²

In addition to this, vcs can help libraries stay relevant in the digital age, since they need to adapt to techno-

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logical and users' behavioral changes, improving their capacity to satisfy the community's information needs and offer up-to-date, personalized services.

Looking to virtual communities to this end is an important step for fostering inclusion and equity in information access. Libraries continue to be a vital link in disseminating knowledge and education, and vcs can help them fulfill that mission more effectively in an ever-changing world. ■■

Further Reading

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Notes

¹ Julio Cabero Almenara, "Comunidades virtuales para el aprendizaje. Su utilización en la enseñanza," *EduTec, Revista Electrónica de Tecnología Educativa*, no. 20, 2006, <https://doi.org/10.21556/edutec.2006.20.510>.

² María Guadalupe Vega Díaz and Álvaro Quijano Solís, "Comunidades de práctica y alfabetización informacional," *Ibersid. Revista de Sistemas de Información y Comunicación*, no. 4, 2010, pp. 93-103, <https://doi.org/10.54886/ibersid.v4i.3878>.