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Position Statement for Interacting with Information Technologies

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Introduction

Libraries are places that people visit online or in person with the specific intention of interacting with information. While library users (including schoolchildren, the reading public, university students and researchers) visit the library to gather information, they are often frustrated by library information systems. This frustration leads to users preferring more user-friendly resources (such as Google) over library resources [1]. Libraries’ user experience problems make them a rich and exciting field for Human Computer Interaction (HCI), as evidenced by (for example) Fried-Foster and Gibbons [2] and Crabtree et al. [3].

Understanding libraries have user experience problems, Swinburne University of Technology employs the author as a User Experience Architect where her role is to provide research-based evidence to support the library in making user-centric decisions. In her work she draws on theoretical HCI, library and HCI research, and local empirical data (either from existing sources, or by applying human-computer interaction techniques to study the local population). Two examples of her current work are outlined below.

The new library catalogue

Swinburne Library is implementing a new library catalogue with specific attention to making that catalogue user-friendly. At every step of the process, from calling for tender to making decisions about customisations there has been a focus on library users’ needs. It has been the author’s responsibility to support this user focus, and synthesize HCI theory and research with existing local data to influence decision-making. The author is also engaged in user testing some of the more complex aspects of the catalogue to drive implementation decisions. The selected catalogue software offers interactive information retrieval in the form of faceted search refinement and social information technologies with tagging and reviews. Post-implementation, it will be the author’s responsibility to study users’ interaction with these features both to fine-tune the features themselves, and to develop a greater understanding of local users’ needs and information behaviours.

The shelving project

While not strictly an information technology, library shelving systems are a part of the library information environment that is a considerable barrier to information retrieval: users often cannot translate call numbers to shelf locations [4]. Despite this being a recognised problem, little research has been done into how library users approach shelves. In response to this lack of research and in light of local users’ clear problems with shelving the author is conducting a multi-pronged ethnographic investigation into how they approach and scan shelves, in the hope that shelving and signage can better accommodate their information behaviour.

Conclusion

Libraries are a major site for interaction with information in both physical and technological spaces, yet their services are often not based on an understanding of library users’ desires, competencies, and information seeking behaviour. The author is a researcher-practitioner applying HCI techniques and research to support natural information behaviour in a library environment, and as such has a unique perspective to bring to this workshop.

References