West meets East – Using Technology to Provide Services

While a common trend for libraries in the United States is to offer access to electronic materials, the use of technology in providing services still varies greatly. Social networking, texting, and other new technologies provide libraries with the capability to bring their library services to their users, but they also require a great deal of support from the library staff in order to make them successful. I was curious to see how the libraries in Japan, thought of as a technology-oriented society, would be using technology to provide services.

I mentioned in my previous article that the limitations in offering electronic materials might be due to the Japanese written culture, which places a high importance on print materials. I found that this traditional aspect of their written culture in their libraries transcends into their social culture, as well. I discovered that the libraries place a great deal of emphasis on face-to-face communication. This is not to say that their libraries aren't offering any remote assistance, but these offerings are very limited.

Interestingly, one of the most common technologies used in the Japanese libraries is the implementation of the mobile OPAC, which they have found to be very popular with their users. Although not all of the libraries offer a mobile OPAC, many of them have worked hard to ensure that their users are successful at finding the materials they need. Chuo University High School Library meticulously adds keywords to their records, and a Metro Tokyo OPAC was created allowing users to search all of the library OPACs in the metro Tokyo area.

For those libraries offering remote assistance, most of them offer it by way of email, though Tokyo University and Waseda University had recently implemented an online form for students to use in submitting their questions to the librarians. Essentially, the information the students submits is emailed to a librarian who then sends their response back to the student. Though these systems are fairly new, they sounded to be well-received by the students. However, the librarians at Waseda University mentioned that many of the students tended to bypass the form and email the librarians directly.

Though the majority of libraries have not adopted technology to provide services, there were some exceptions. For example, the National Diet Library's Digital Library Division, have created online tools for both their library users as well as Japanese librarians. The first of these is known as ResearchNAVI, which provides online research guides for users. The other tool is an online knowledge database, which is a collaborative tool librarians can use to share reference inquiries and solutions with one another.

Finally, the most innovative use of technology I found was at Meiji University Library, where they have created their own intranet for students. Once logged into the system, students can make notes about items they find in the OPAC for later use, and even have the option of making their notes public for other students to see. This system also provides a way for students to receive assistance from librarians, also with the option of making their questions and answers public. By including a social networking element into this system, the students feel like they are part of the library and are more inclined to use its services.

As I had seen with the electronic materials, I sense that there is a cultural shift taking place in Japan in regards to technology in their libraries. It appears that while many of the librarians are trying to preserve their print and social culture, many of their younger users are adopting the technology that attempts to break down these former hierarchical walls. I watched many of these young students texting on the trains and subways, just as I watch them here in the US, and it makes me contemplate how they might strike a balance between preservation and progress and whether we can do the same.

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