

Librarians Still Relevant In Digital Age

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News Focus by Sarimah Othman

KUALA LUMPUR (Bernama) -- Most people think a librarian's duties revolve around selecting and ordering various titles for the library, classifying the books, creating indexes and maintaining records of publications that are borrowed and returned.

The dictionary defines a librarian as a person who is a specialist in library work and is in charge of it, while library is defined as a place or building containing collections of books and other reading materials.

In this era of globalisation and digital technology where information is available at one's fingertips, is there much scope for librarians? Are conventional libraries still relevant, what with the easy access to resources in cyberspace?

Librarians Association of Malaysia (PPM) President Dr Nor Edzan Che Nasir is quick to reply that the job is still very much relevant, adding that a librarian's responsibilities involve a wider spectrum that go beyond the boundaries of the building.

"I won't deny that technological advances have transformed the medium in which information is relayed. These days, a lot of things can be done electronically, and even libraries subscribe to online databases that are easily accessible from anywhere, as long as one has good Internet connection."

She said university students, for instance, no longer need to spend long hours in the library as they could use their smartphones, tabs and laptops to get the reference materials they want, and they could do this in their hostel, lecture hall, cafe, or even while on the way back to their kampung.

"Most universities have databases for journals, e-books and all kinds of academic reference materials, which are easily accessible," said Nor Edzan, who is also Universiti Malaya (UM) Chief Librarian.

The availability of online databases, however, did not mean that librarians have become redundant or obsolete, she said, adding that "our job is not just to order books or keep a record of books that are borrowed."

She insisted that the services of librarians, who were specialised in providing access to information, would be relevant as long as libraries remained an important feature in the field of education.

Nor Edzan admitted, however, that there was a need for librarians to make some changes to the role they play, in keeping with the technological advances.

"In the past, perhaps, the librarian was only required to wait for people to visit the library to borrow books, as well as take care of various records and manage the library. Those days, the librarian was the intermediary between the user and the books. Now that the user has direct access to information, there has to be a change in the librarian's role as well. Hence, they have to be more proactive," she said, adding that currently, university librarians were also required to teach.

"We also conduct information technology literacy classes for students and other library users to teach them the correct way to search for information from legitimate sources.

"We have to stress to them that not all the information that they retrieve from the Internet is authentic. So we teach them how to verify the information. Did they get the information from a blog? Is the source bona fide? Do the URLs end with .gov or .edu, and such things," she explained.

Nor Edzan also said that as part of UM's corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiative, its librarians were also required to participate in outreach programmes, under which they help set up libraries in rural areas, including Orang Asli villages.

The initiative also sees them conducting Internet literacy classes for the local community and students at smaller libraries, schools, colleges and community centres.

While much more needed to be done for rural communities, in terms of helping them to have access to libraries and teaching them to be Internet savvy, their urban counterparts are better off as most towns have libraries.

Lauding Kuala Lumpur City Hall's (DBKL) move to set up libraries in several marginalised areas in the city, Nor Edzan said in doing so, DBKL was not only serving the local communities better but also providing more job opportunities to librarians.

These libraries, she observed, also served as a "transit" area for school children who passed their time there after school while waiting for their parents to finish work.

"I'm impressed with the librarians who work there as they not only encourage the children to read books, but also supervise their homework and make sure they have eaten and performed their prayers.

"Even though they are helping to 'babysit', they are doing it voluntarily. So, whatever the situation is and whether they are in a rural or urban library, librarians must be good at communicating and interacting with people from all walks of life," she added.

On whether the online information explosion has had an impact on the setting up of brick-and-mortar libraries, Nor Edzan said more libraries were, in fact, being established, especially by private and public institutions of higher learning.

"Research centres, ministries, judicial institutions and large organisations which have

resource centres also require libraries.

"As long as the public is interested in looking for information and want to learn, they will need the assistance of librarians. Although the medium in which information is relayed has changed from books to electronic means, the role of the librarian is still relevant," she added.

Meanwhile, Nor Edzan said in conjunction with PPM's 60th anniversary, it would hold a 'Conference on Librarians for the Cyber World' in Kuala Lumpur on Monday and Tuesday.

The conference will consist of four sessions, during which various topics will come up for discussion, including 'Developing Lifelong Learning Skills via Libraries', 'Developing Competencies for the 21st Century', 'Coping with Technology and a session on Leadership'.

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