Libraries, Librarians and Mobile Services
by Lisa Carlucci Thomas, guest editor of special section

EDITOR’S SUMMARY
In recognition of the rise of mobile computing, a collection of articles is presented to explore its transformative influence on libraries, librarians and library services. Libraries are offering an expanding array of electronic resources, and patrons are eager to access them on their smartphones, tablet, and similar devices. Despite technological and budgetary challenges, librarians are finding success through creativity and collaboration. This special section explores several aspects of mobile computing in the library context. The articles describe innovative projects made possible by partnering with experts offering programming and other skills, technology implementations that expand users’ awareness of and access to resources and practical solutions to common challenges of mobile sites for libraries.

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Mobile computing is transforming how people search, receive and interact with information on a daily basis. In just a few short years smartphone ownership has skyrocketed and popular use of e-readers has been steadily on the rise. These advanced mobile tools provide portable, instantaneous access to the world of information, across boundaries of subject, discipline and industry.

Libraries are fully engaged in the process of adapting to increased demand for electronic collections and the ongoing acquisition and archiving of born-digital content. Supporting mobile access to these resources is the next step, and mobile efforts are under way. These are challenging economic times for libraries to take on new technological initiatives, yet librarians across the country and internationally are seeking creative solutions to providing mobile library services. Innovative projects, such as Dan DeSanto’s exploration of mobile, place-based, access to the University of Vermont’s Long Trail digital collection, described in “The Mobile Future of Place-Based Digital Collections,” and Michael Whitchurch’s QR Code implementation at Brigham Young University, as reported in “QR Codes and Library Engagement,” link the mobile user to the physical and virtual collections offered by the library – thus enhancing the user’s experience and expanding the reach of the library’s rich and diverse collections.

Technological skill and programming ability are often cited as barriers to implementing mobile technologies, particularly among information professionals who haven’t had formal training in these areas. DeSanto, at UVM, and authors Edward Iglesias and Wit Meesangnil, both from Central Connecticut State University, achieved their vision beyond skill barriers by establishing partnerships in support of mobile development at their libraries.

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Iglesias and Meesangnil detail their experiences and lessons learned in “Mobile Website Development: From Site to App.” Through their collaboration, they discovered that they could stage the development of the library’s mobile website, and once the primary goal was accomplished (a mobile library website for the university library), easily adapt the product into a more advanced result (an Android application).

Collaboration offers several advantages in the mobile environment. Mobile projects require the in-depth knowledge of librarians, that is, those who know their library collections well, who understand the services needed to support their research community and who are trained in the organization of information. Mobile projects also require computing and programming ability and the expertise to design user-friendly interfaces that are intuitive for the multitasking mobile user. The combined intellectual power of like-minded information experts with unique technological skills creates the opportunity to move mobile projects forward, as well as to foster reciprocal learning, gained from the pooling of knowledge to overcome technical and cultural gaps and advance shared goals.

When it comes to mobile information exchange, we’re all currently developing best practices for language, design, development and engagement as we ourselves interact via text messaging (SMS), mobile platforms, social media and location-based services. As information professionals experiment with these technologies, they’re putting their professional skills and knowledge to use evaluating existing options and making recommendations for peer implementations and improved next-generation products.

Librarians Tiffini Travis, California State University, Long Beach, and Aaron Tay, National University of Singapore, provide a look at how mobile-ready platforms can provide cost-effective mobile solutions for libraries in their article, “Designing Low Cost Mobile Websites for Libraries.” They describe the pros and cons of employing mobile-friendly tools to offer access to library information and services on a shoestring, while paying close attention to the mobile usability needs of users, as detailed in their valuable “Library Mobile Site Checklist.” Likewise, mobile web expert Jeff Wisniewski from University of Pittsburgh offers his take on “Mobile Usability” – outlining what it means to be where the users are and to recognize and design for mobile user needs. He concludes: “Build well, test and retest, and continuously improve to ensure a mobile web experience that both satisfies and delights users.”

Innovation, collaboration and experimentation are essential to successful mobile projects. As mobile technologies evolve, we rely on our own experiences as mobile information consumers, our knowledge and expertise as information professionals and our partnerships with interdisciplinary colleagues to gain insight about the norms and necessities of mobile culture, the mobile computing needs and expectations of our users, and the emerging vision of the mobile future, defined by each of us working together at the edge of information technology today.