

Library as Place

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I often turn to the Internet to satisfy my information needs. My computer's home page is setup to allow easy access to BBC News, NPR, the top headlines in the nation, local weather and various other "gadgets" that I typically reference. The convenience of using the Internet for seeking cursory information transcends the need for physical documents. For me, "going to the library" means that either I am researching a topic in depth; need a quiet, distraction-free place to concentrate; or am picking up a resource that I reserved online. I think that the library of the 21st century will perform these functions and much more to the communities they serve.

Libraries of the 21st century will be interconnected to form a large network of information resources. The local public library will be able to provide resources for users that reside across the nation or in a different hemisphere. It truly will serve a global community and a myriad of users. It will provide "access for all built around a unified and integrated resource hub" (Benton Foundation 1996). The resources of the future will not only include print and digital information sources, but also resources that may typically reside in community centers. The library of the 21st century will offer activities such as story time, knitting groups, yoga classes and everything in between. It will also continue to serve the community by offering courses or workshops such as: educating users to evaluate online sources, navigating the latest technological trend or relic from the library's past (e.g. microfiche reader). It will provide resources beyond the human record.

Libraries today already have large amounts of information in a digital format. The libraries of the future will continue this trend. Circulating books may be "checked out" by the user downloading the book to their Kindle or iPad. The library may even provide the hardware for those that do not own it. The physical representation of the book will still be housed in the

library for those that prefer reading a hard copy. The physical book of the future will be durable to prevent wear. It will also have a built in tracking device so that librarians will be able to find a misplaced book and users will be able to browse the stacks in a virtual environment realtime. The library of the 21st century will also have a relationship with book superstores. Users will be able to easily take librarian Stephanie Bange's advice: "come to the library and try out a book. If you like the fit, then go to the bookstore and buy it" (as cited in Zaslow, 2007) when super bookstores work in concert with libraries. This also may be an opportunity to provide additional funding for libraries if they are allowed a portion of profit when users purchase resources they "tried out" through the library.

The physical aspect of the library will not become obsolete in the digitized world of the future. It is obvious that technology has made it easier to communicate and congregate with people over long and short distances. Libraries are beginning to offer reference services via multiple mediums: face-to-face, telephone, instant and text message. The libraries of the future will continue to provide reference service in these ways and may possibly add video conferencing with the growing popularity of free internet calling services like Skype. Although these services make it easier for users to access librarians from their homes, they will not replace face-to-face reference. In *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations*, Clay Shirky discusses the innate human preference to be around other people. The success of Meetup, a site that allows users to find other users online and then meet up in the real world, exemplifies this characteristic (Shirky 2008). Library users of the future will have multiple ways to communicate with the library without leaving their homes, but the physical space will still beckon to those yearning for human contact. The library will also continue to be a

refuge from the hustle and bustle of everyday life. It will provide a physical space for personal reflection or study with colleagues. Public libraries will invest in learning spaces found in academic libraries such as twenty-four hour study floors (Miller 2002).

Libraries will continue to be a filter for and organizer of information in the future. Information resources are and will be increasing exponentially. Libraries must take part in organizing online information sources so they can be efficiently recalled and used to their potential. The future library catalog may have a dual role: owner of records representing individual items in the library network and search engine.

The library of the 21st century will offer a multitude of resources to an infinitely diverse global community. It will truly be the nucleus of the community as it expands its duties in a constantly changing digital society. It will also persevere in its fundamental role as a collector and preserver of the human record. The library will continue to evolve and prosper with technology instead of competing against it.

References

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