Libraries in the 21st Century[1]

"I don't need the library, it's too big, too complicated, and anyway, everything worth having is on the Internet."[2]

Libraries Strengthen Communities

Beyond their role as repositories of information, libraries have long been community centers. While some librarians worry that the digital age has eroded this part of the library's identity, others see a continuing role for libraries in helping people tap the unlimited community-building promise of the new technologies.

Evolving Role of Libraries

Libraries have long been pivotal community institutions, public spaces where people can come together to learn, reflect, and interact. But today, information is rapidly spreading beyond books and journals to digital government archives, business databases, electronic sound, image, and film collections, and the flow of electronic impulses over computer networks. Will libraries lose their role as lending institutions? And what will happen to libraries as physical places where diverse people can gather to pursue knowledge individually and collectively?

Research findings provide a theoretical underpinning and a practical guide for librarians, public officials, advocacy groups, community organizations, and others who seek to ensure a central role for libraries in the 21st Century digital age. This body of work reflects a conviction that libraries are uniquely suited to make the benefits of new information technologies available to everyone, regardless of economic status or place of residence; to bring focus and organization to the often bewildering and ever-expanding universe of information; and to counter the centrifugal forces of modern life by nurturing community, civic engagement, and democratic traditions.

Many of us live by a hierarchical information model, especially those of us whose introduction to libraries preceded the computerized card catalog. We think of information as organized and structured taxonomies of sources; we understand the difference between government documents and rare books, between the US history and Latin American history sources, and we expect to find these materials in their appropriate, separately structured locations in our libraries. We think that science and art, business and literature inhabit different information spaces. Educated in a world dominated by the physicality of libraries, from the neighborhood public libraries to college libraries and the great international research libraries, we think of information as residing in a particular place.

For all of the digital progress we have seen, this generation and the next will continue to find that libraries remain imposing buildings that house relics of a past age (i.e., books). These library monuments already serve as places to study or places to get online at a computer laboratory. Some pursuing difficult projects will ask a librarian for help.

Yet the activity of the traditional library takes place within uneasy hearing distance of the current trendy mantra anticipating the total digitization of human knowledge, whatever its original form (print, manuscript, picture, sound, or digital representation). The library, we hear, is pretty much over unless it can remake itself into an academic *Yahoo*, an intellectual *Google*, or some other competitive hyper-textualized, multi-threaded, linked, digital resource.

What are librarians to do and what should their public think?

Building and Enhancing Collections

Libraries must go digital just to keep pace with the hundreds of journals and newsletters that are becoming available online. Technology can also make collections more accessible. New computer tools can help in analyzing data. Geographic Information Systems can now be used with standard web tools to present data about environmental, land use, and other matters on a map, making it easy to visualize the impact of community and business resources and decisions.

Librarians can use computer tools to evaluate the expanding universe of knowledge and select what is reliable and relevant to the needs of individuals and communities. This helps make information manageable, so that individuals can better judge and use it.

While the web can vastly increase our access to information by automatically linking us to innumerable search "hits," how do we assess the quality and reliability of these other sources?

New technologies enable libraries to serve a wider variety of users by making it possible to carry all kinds of mediums -- text, sound, and pictures-in one digital form. That doesn't mean, however, that print will disappear, or that libraries will cease to have value as a place for people to browse through books and conventional periodicals. Some describe their modern library as "stepping over a stream," with one foot placed firmly on each bank. On one bank are valued traditional services; on the other is a leading role in the new age of technology.

What then, does this mean for the library, the librarian? Is it the end of the world, as we know it? Is the digital revolution likely to eliminate the art, craft, and science of librarianship? Not likely, but it certainly has and will continue to change it.

So where, in this wonderful new world, is the library? We do not know for sure. How then does a library, in real time and with real money and serving real people, deal with infinite possibilities of the digital age?

Thinking differently -- the growing importance of the reference librarian

The digital world has forced us to think somewhat differently about the value of the library. Once we valued the library for the duplication it could sustain, as represented in the annual ranking of library volumes and acquisition expenditures. In a digital world, no one cares who has the copy we find on line. The existence of duplicate copies gives no one an advantage when the digital copy is infinitely reproducible.

Who among us has not used *Google* or *Yahoo*? The Internet search engine is a miracle, but it also finds more junk than stuff.

Librarians should be in this game in a big way, and many are. As the Internet becomes so large an information space that it requires systematic and authoritative management, the librarian's skills, properly translated, will become crucial for ensuring me that I do indeed have all that I should on Adam Smith. The ownership of the physical space or the artifacts matters much less than the ability to find the right digitally stored knowledge. I do not care where Smith's *An Inquiry Into the Causes and Wealth of Nations* is stored; I care that I can read the authoritative annotated text on line.

Will all this become free? No. Money will change hands, and probably more money than we now spend on libraries, but we will spend the money differently. We will spend it on hardware, software, and the gurus who manage them. We will spend it on translating content into digital form; we will spend it on search engines and the research that builds them. The construction of these tools, currently in the earliest stages, will require us to waste much money. We will build the tools, anticipating one kind of bandwidth and capacity and as soon as our tools appear, the bandwidth will expand to such an extent that we will need to begin again.

Libraries and librarians will do two things most. They will maintain and manage unique collections of objects (sheet music from Hoagy Carmichael or the Letters of Thomas Jefferson), many of which they will digitize and deliver into the world. They will provide their constituents with help and assistance, as they always have but with the likelihood of receiving appropriately designed fees, in finding, evaluating, and understanding the universe of information that the digital world has provided us. They will spend less time and energy developing collections and much more developing on-line guides to subjects, topics, and resources. They will buy fewer materials. No one will care what volume of material each library owns, only what volume of materials each library's clients can access.

Supporting Our Modern Library -- It's up to each us

The National Telecommunications and Information Administration states:

> *Public libraries can play a vital role in assuring that advanced information services are universally available to all segments of the American population on an equitable basis. Just as libraries have traditionally made available the marvels and imagination of the human mind to all, libraries of the future are planning to allow everyone to participate in the electronic renaissance.[3]*

But how? Despite the federal commitment, Washington cannot achieve this ambitious goal on its own. The solutions will need to come from a variety of sources. Nonprofit service organizations, including community medical centers and homeless shelters, churches, community and cultural centers, public computer access centers, cable access providers, student groups, arts organizations, alternative media outlets, public schools, community activist organizations, environmental groups, and teachers-as well as individual library users-all have a role to play.

Successful partnering agreements have included library funding, grants, gifts, corporate partnership and contributions, government funding, university or college support, nonprofit organizational funding, and some instances-revenue through subscriptions and fees.

It may also be an appropriate time to evaluate fees for certain services. Some examples might include provision of document research for healthcare organizations, corporations and other businesses.

It will be up to us as members of the communities to ensure that our libraries continue, grow and expand their services. They are critical lynchpins in the foundational infrastructure that underlies a successful economy -- i.e., collection and dissemination of knowledge. Without a strong library presence we weaken that foundation. Libraries must change to meet the needs of the 21st century. This also means taking a hard look at how we finance this critical, value-added service to our county, including seeking new sources of revenue from emerging service opportunities.

Endnotes

Please note that we seek to give full credit to the works of others. We do err and apologize in advance for any omissions. Our intent is to assemble and convey thought-provoking ideas from whatever the source and we seek no particular personal gain from such conveyance.

---

[1] Substantial segments of this section are extracted verbatim, others with editing, from "Academic Libraries in a Digital Age," John V. Lombardi, *TheCenter* at the University of Florida, D-Lib Magazine, October 2000, http://www.dlib.org/dlib/october00/lombardi/10lombardi.html, retrieved April 6, 2006

[2] "The Library As the Latest Web Venture." *The New York Times* (June 15, 2000), and "Information Literacy within the General Education Program: Implications for Distance Education ," Carol A. Wright *The Journal of General Education* (49.1, 2000) 23-33, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/journal_of_general_education/v049/49.1wright.html, retrieved December, 2005

[3] "Connecting the Nation", Emilio Gonzalez, Telecommunications Policy specialist, National Telecommunications and Information Administration, Educom Review, Sequence: Volume 30, Number 6, http://www.educause.edu/apps/er/review/reviewArticles/30608.html, November/December 1995