



DIGITAL CULTURE AND THE FUTURE OF LIBRARIES

TWC 554: INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AND CULTURE (2021 FALL - A)

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October 6, 2021

“You will often hear it said that the print medium is a doomed and outdated technology, a mere curiosity of bygone days destined soon to be consigned forever to those dusty unattended museums we now call libraries.” (Coover, 1992)

Introduction

As society moves toward a more digital culture many aspects of our daily lives are changing. We now store most of our personal documents and information digitally, on devices ranging from desktop computers to cell phones. Contact information, email, images, and documents are sometimes only saved and accessed via these devices and not stored physically. This trend is evident in our work lives as well. It seems almost everything is digital now. We are even able to sign legal documents digitally and do not require physical, signed copies, which was unheard of just a few years ago.

We are in an age of secondary orality. As stated by Ong, “secondary orality (radio and television): floods the world with sounded words (and other sounds) again. But is the product of a writing and print culture (Brownson, 2010).” The shift from the written word to a digital culture of hypertext, blogs, and wikis puts many institutions in an interesting position.

Libraries, for instance, which originally focused on print material, are having to adapt to the changes in society to remain viable. Many offer online access via workstations and laptops. Card catalogs are digital and accessed via computer from within the library or remotely from our homes. Many libraries are becoming more like community cultural centers. At this time, print materials are still the largest part of physical libraries, but with a digital culture this may become a thing of the past. If libraries do not adapt to the digital age, they will become simply museums displaying a past way of life. However, they cannot abandon the past altogether. They must maintain a balance between the past and the future in response to what their patrons need and want. Therefore, for libraries to survive in the future they must continue to focus on physical materials.

History

While we generally associate libraries with printed material like books and magazines, libraries actually existed in ancient times. What is thought to be the oldest library, located in Alexandria, stored books and scrolls, many of which were taken from visitors to the area. It was destroyed by Julius Caesar around 47-48BC (Foster, 2020) The Roman empire had a system of public libraries from Spain to the Middle East which disappeared in the early medieval period (Agresta, 2014).



https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carnegie_Library_of_Washington_D.C.

In the United States, Andrew Carnegie donated \$300,000 in 1903 to build the first library in Washington, DC. From that beginning, Carnegie libraries spread across the United States. These libraries gave access to print materials to all citizens. Over the years, the Carnegie libraries have adapted to change in response to their patrons' needs. Computers have been installed and even cake pans are loaned out from one location in Iowa (Stamberg, 2013).

As we are moving toward a more digital culture where everything is available online, other libraries today have taken a bit of a hybrid approach to what they offer. They still maintain the stacks of books, magazines, and journals, but they also have gone more digital. In addition to digital card catalogs, most libraries include workstations to access the internet and offer eBooks for checkout. Many collections are digitized, but many others don't lend themselves to easy, useful digitization. The future of libraries depends on how the current physical spaces are adapted to account for the move to a digital culture.

Relevance

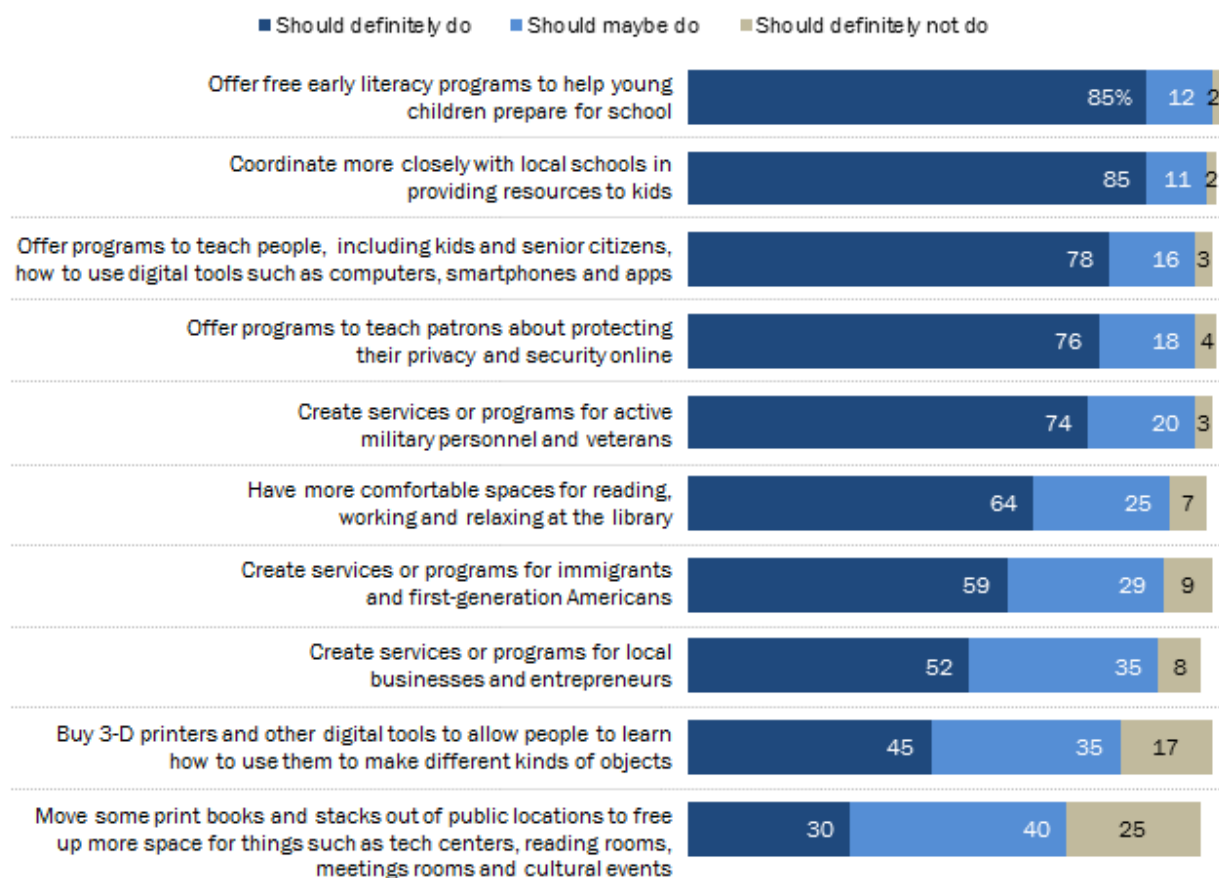
Access to library resources and preserving the information in the physical books and documents contained within them is significant to society because many things cannot be preserved digitally. From a physical standpoint, many items such as maps are large and difficult to view as a digital file, so an overall view of their contents is not possible. From a visceral perspective, the ability to browse the stacks and the tactile experience of flipping through a book or magazine are lost in a digital version. The atmosphere of a library as a quiet place to be alone with the many documents and our thoughts is lost with the clacking of keys in a digital world.

"Libraries store the energy that fuels the imagination. They open up windows to the world and inspire us to explore and achieve, and contribute to improving our quality of life." Sidney Sheldon, writer/producer

In a Pew Research Center study, library patrons indicated what services they want in a library. The one thing most wanted was early literacy programs. The thing they least wanted was to replace print materials with more tech centers and cultural events. Patrons want to learn about technology from their local library and they want to get information about cultural events, but they do not necessarily want the library to provide those things (Horrigan, 2015).

Public Wants Libraries to Advance Education, Improve Digital Literacy and Serve Key Groups

% of those ages 16+ who say that libraries should definitely, maybe or definitely not do these things



Source: Pew Research Center survey March 17-April 12, 2015. N=2,004 Americans ages 16 and older

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

<https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2015/09/15/libraries-at-the-crossroads/>

Future

The future of libraries is undoubtedly in question. Libraries have tried to adapt to the digital age in several ways. Some have shown greater success than others.

"There is fantastic information in books. Often when I do a search, what is in a book is miles ahead of what I find on a Web site." *Sergey Brin, co-founder of Google*

One thing libraries have tried over the last couple of decades to keep up with the digital age is to add computers with internet access. However, this may not make sense in the future as $\frac{3}{4}$ of American homes now have internet access (Pew Research Center, 2021). With this type of access, people do not need a public source to access the internet.

Other ways to use libraries have been suggested. One idea is “maker spaces.” These are areas set aside for creative endeavors and can include sewing machines and 3-D printers. Some libraries have added art display spaces (Agresta, 2014). However, reports indicate this may not be what library patrons want or need from their library.

The New York Public Library attempted to remove the research stacks to a New Jersey location with the intent to create an open service-oriented space with fewer books. This idea was met with resistance from scholars and preservationists (Agresta, 2014). Again, patrons seem to want the print material that is available in libraries.

Other ideas include virtual reality, gaming, physical backups for digital versions, art displays, and research data services.

These ideas are an example of what libraries of the future *could* be. The question remains as to what they *should* be. Tim Coates, who runs the Freckle Project, a research effort focusing on the performance of public library services in the US, UK, and Australia, in an interview with Andrew Albanese (2020) stated “If libraries and publishers are to strive together to increase reading, as they should, I believe the priority should be the print backlist.” Coates supports this idea in the Freckle Report. The report indicates that library readership has declined 25% since 2011 due to less emphasis on print book collections (O’Leary, 2020). Coates makes several recommendations for what libraries must do to survive in the future. A few of note:

- Emphasize the importance of printed material.
- Focus on continuous growth of library service.
- Encourage and help reading by including a diverse range of books.
- De-emphasize digital material as it has not been successful (O’Leary, 2020).

This is not to suggest that there is not a place for computers, art, and maker spaces. Instead, the print material must be the focus with the other things acting as support to encourage a diverse patronage.

The Pew Research Report cited earlier supports Coates’ assertion that libraries must focus on print material. Patrons indicated they are not looking for computers to use or another community space. They come to the library to learn about these things because the library is free and accessible to them.

Conclusion

Since ancient Egyptian times, libraries have served the same purpose in their communities: collect and store print materials and make those materials available to their patrons. This purpose may have changed somewhat since the beginning of the digital age, but the importance of the print material to the public remains. As the Freckle Report found, library use declined because of less emphasis on print book collections. It did not decline due to a lack of interest in those materials from library patrons per the Pew Research Report. Data has shown that without the print material, libraries are nothing more than community centers. Patrons are not interested in their library as a community or technology center. They expect to gain knowledge from a source they can trust. They expect the library to focus on literacy for children. While this information can be obtained from the internet, information seekers remain more comfortable getting it from their local library. For these reasons, to remain viable in the future, they must continue to focus on physical materials while also providing the digital services and community spaces patrons have come to expect in the digital age.

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