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The future of libraries, with or without books

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Authors, publishing houses, librarians and Web sites continue to fight Google's efforts to digitize the world's books and create the world's largest library online. Meanwhile, many real-world libraries are moving forward with the assumption that physical books will play a much-diminished or potentially nonexistent role in their efforts to educate the public.

Some books will still be around, they say, although many of those will be digital. But the goal of the library remains the same: To be a free place where people can access and share information.

"The library building isn't a warehouse for books," said Helene Blowers, digital strategy director at the Columbus [Ohio] Metropolitan Library. "It's a community gathering center."

Think of the change as a Library 2.0 revolution -- a mirror of what's happened on the Web.

Library 2.0

People used to go online for the same information they could get from newspapers. Now they go to Facebook, Digg and Twitter to discuss their lives and the news of the day. Forward-looking librarians are trying to create that same conversational loop in public libraries. The one-way flow of information from book to patron isn't good enough anymore.

"We can pick up on all of these trends that are going on," said Toby Greenwalt, virtual services coordinator at the Skokie Public Library in suburban Chicago.

Greenwalt, for example, set up a Twitter feed and text-messaging services for his library. He monitors local conversations on online social networks and uses that information as inspiration for group discussions or programs at the real-world library.

Other libraries are trying new things, too.

The Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County, in North Carolina, has a multimedia space where kids shoot videos and record music. It also runs a blog dedicated to gaming and hosts video game tournaments regularly.

The library features an "info column," where people share digital news stories; an "info galleria" where

patrons explore digital maps layered with factoids; a digital floor that lets people immerse themselves in information; and RFID-tagged book phones that kids point at specific books to hear a story.

"The library has never been just about books," said Rolf Hapel, director of the city's public libraries.

Community Centers

Jason M. Schultz, director of the Samuelson Law, Technology and Public Policy Clinic at the University of California at Berkeley Law School, said libraries always have served two roles in society: They're places where people can get free information; and they're community centers for civic debate.

As books become more available online, that community-center role will become increasingly important for libraries, he said.

"It depends on whether we prioritize it as a funding matter, but I think there always will be a space for that even if all the resources are digital," he said.

Some libraries are trying to gain an edge by focusing on the "deeply local" material -- the stuff that only they have, said Blowers, the librarian in Ohio.

"How do we help add that value to a format like the Internet, which is expansively global?" she said. "So we look at what do we have here that we could help people gain access to by digitizing it."

That material can be used to start community discussions, she said.

Librarians

This shift means the role of the librarian -- and their look -- is also changing.

In a world where information is more social and more online, librarians are becoming debate moderators, givers of technical support and community outreach coordinators.

They're also no longer bound to the physical library, said Greenwalt, of the library in Skokie, Illinois. Librarians must venture into the digital space, where their potential patrons exist, to show them why the physical library is still necessary, he said.

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