

Libraries In A Digital World

Books are naught but a simple cover and many thin leaves of paper. Historically they are the receptacles of all human being's greatest discoveries and most valuable knowledge in hopes that it will be thumbed through and regarded by another human. However, a physical book can't be owned by everyone. This recorded information would usually not spread except through word of mouth, and there are those who do not have the means to purchase them. The public library offers these volumes of knowledge to anyone who wishes to use them and these libraries can service a wide area. The earliest "public" (there is much debate over what is considered a public library) libraries had began in Ancient Greece. The Alexandrian Library in Egypt was started by Ptolemy the First. His goal was to collect all books written in the Greek as well as the works of other nations' works, translated into Greek. Before it was destroyed, The Alexandrian Library was said to contain somewhere between 40,000 and 700,000 scrolls,¹ which equates to between "...30 and 70 percent of all books in existence then." (Scan This Book!, Kelly) The Alexandrian Library seems to have created the motif for libraries to follow in attempting to be the center of universal knowledge.

¹ Wiegand, Wayne and Donald Davis. Encyclopedia of Library History. (New York: Garland Pub, 1994) 19.

Since then we have seen fantastic leaps in communicative technology. Information is spread faster and faster, carried by the waves of these inventions. But, no matter what the new technology, libraries have housed the greatest volume of knowledge

In the 21st century the internet is now competing with libraries in possessing the most information. The internet, unlike a physical and still-standing library can be accessed anywhere in the world with a connection and computer. It has near infinite space, is updated with a plethora of new information each minute, and individuals like you or I can fill it with whatever information they want, so long as they can comply with (or sneak under the radar of) copyright laws. So, where a library may not have information on the latest nudist resort in Iceland, the internet sure does, and where a library may not have copies of ancient Mesopotamian texts, the internet sure does. Since this information is accessible from the comfort of your computer chair at home, is it affecting libraries?

What is the purpose of a library now, if all this information, both new and old, is online and growing larger by the second? Are they combating the internet, and holding books over their hearts? Are the old technologies of print indexes and microfilms still satisfying to a society saturated by the instant gratification of a Google search? To investigate these questions I have taken a look into Bennington College's Crossett Library, who has supplied books and other mediums of information to the campus since 1959.² I polled students to see how they are using the library and interviewed some of the library staff to see how they are reacting to this new technology.

² "Crossett Library Building History and Architecture," 6 Dec. 2009
<http://library.bennington.edu/screens/building_history.html>.

The main job of the library is to provide the best and largest array of sources of information possible.³ Therefore, they'd want to let the patrons of the library have the easiest time accessing it. By using online searches for resources in the library, users are able to input many different search terms to better expand what the results are. In the Crossett Library you are given access to thirty different databases where your query may be answered. With print indexes, you can only look up one term at a time. In addition, you are only able to browse from sources that whoever published the index was aware of or decided to include. For this reason, certain terms or subjects may be lacking in the resources given.

I did a search in both the Art Index from October 1938 – September 1941 and the library's website for "Persian Sculpture". In the print index I was given one article, but referred to "Persian Relief" with three results, all articles once again, and then referred to Sassanian, which had 7 different categories. This took me about five minutes with all the flipping back and forth. I compared this to an online search for the same query, and received 852 results, and between the years of 1938 and 1941 I had eleven results. I had obviously gotten more results from the online search, and, in the larger search, some of the texts were available to read right there on the computer from the databases in addition to some pictures and microfilm. In the dated search, I had gotten ten book results and one microfilm result, all in less than one minute.

Why don't libraries just get rid of these old resources if they're obsolete and inferior to online searches? The card index has been disposed of in the Crossett Library, mainly due to lack of use, and much of the microfilm had been removed with a few

³ "Issues and Advocacy: Access." 2009, American Library Association, 6 Dec. 2009
<<http://ala.org/ala/issuesadvocacy/access/index.cfm>>.

exceptions. The Crossett Library is certainly moving towards being more digital. Overall, they are in possession of 155,920 analog resources and 1,068,170 electronic resources (this is mainly because of 980,000 digital slides). In the test that I did, comparing the print index to the online search, I found that there were no suggested terms, on the online search, and that could be very helpful in developing a fuller picture on certain subjects. Also, the resources given by the Art Index were different than the ones given in the resource search.

“Even in this digital age, not everything is available on computer. Particularly if an article was written before the early 1980s it likely still must be found through a print index.”
(Print Indexes and Abstracting Services)

The information on these old tools, while valuable, require certain knowledge of library jargon and certain technical skills that aren't used anywhere else outside of a library. Few people today are comfortable with using the old technology. From my survey data, I have found that 50% of the participants were uncomfortable using the analog tools. Vanessa Haverkoch, the Collection Services Librarian, referred to the phenomenon of the information that is available offline and not online as the “moving wall.” Where certain resources are not online because of how dated they are. The wall is moving because these old resources are constantly being scanned and put online by archivists.

The Google Books project is trying to break through the wall and get the most complete universal library, which would be open to all people, at all times, involving all published volumes, all types of media, and it would allow for full-text searches. There are problems that arise with uploading all this information to the internet. To hold all this

information, one would need 50 petabytes (50m gigabytes).⁴ Space on the internet is not so much a matter of physical mass but of money. To purchase and maintain all of the servers needed to run all that information would require a lot of money. This would mean that people who wanted to access this information would probably need a subscription to pay for it, thus it is no longer free for everyone.

The availability of free information on the internet is easily accessed. A simple Google search would bring you to an adequate source for an average user, looking to satisfy a simple question. However, it is difficult to find a credible source. More often than naught one is guided to a Wikipedia page which could have been edited by, as Andrew Keen puts it, "...anyone with opposable thumbs and a fifth-grade education..." (Keen, 4). Kathleen Berry, the Tech Resources Librarian at Crossett and ex-bookbinder discussed the way that librarians today must be responsible for finding and discerning appropriate and credible information to share with the library community. Three decades ago, this was not as much of a problem as most information was put into books and these books were published by scholars and educated professionals in their fields.

The advent of the internet has changed the definition of the librarian. Now their title is that of "Information Specialist" and the library building to "Information Commons", something devoid of the library connotation, which is usually associated with books and only books. This is sometimes due to a lack of educational degree, but the title of librarian has come under scrutiny in modern times. What librarians do today is much different than how they used to run things. The new technology has prompted many professions, including librarians, to use it to do things much faster. The OCLC

⁴ Kevin Kelly, "Scan This Book!" May 14, 2006, New York Times, 6 Dec. 2009
<<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/14/magazine/14publishing.html?ex=1305259200&en=c07443d368771bb8&ei=5090>>.

(Online Computer Library Center) is an organization that "...promotes resource sharing..." (Wiegand, 475) between libraries and their organization, WorldCat, is responsible for the interlibrary loan. The interlibrary loan allows for libraries to share their physical resources on a global scale.⁵

Joe Tucker, Reference Librarian of Crossett Library, was one of the members involved in the work done to update the OCLC on their resources. The library would write their new additions to a CD and send it away and wait for six months for confirmation from the OCLC. Today, they are able to update the OCLC databases right on the internet in a matter of minutes.

The jargon of the library and the training needed to use the tools there is becoming more inherent. Much of the librarian's job used to be to teach newcomers the ropes of how to use the card catalog, copy machine and print indexes. However, most people are familiar with using a search engine. Joe Tucker is also in charge of informing students of Bennington College how to use the library's resources. This is becoming less and less a lecture on where to type in a search term and basic functions, and more about philosophical questions and helping the students to explore, as he puts it, "The ongoing process of inquiry."

When looking at how students use the library I found that the availability of the information elsewhere on the internet did not dissuade them from using the library. All the students who took my survey have used the library, half of them just for studying. All but one student knew how to use the online tools, but five out of eleven students only knew how to use those and not the analog tools like the print index. This would coincide

⁵ "A Global Catalog," 2009, OCLC, 6 Dec. 2009
<<http://www.oclc.org/us/en/worldcat/catalog/default.htm>>.

with the library's annual review which shows a 22% increase in database searching but a 3% increase in overall borrowing of books. My data also shows that most students use the library as a study area, which may account for the reason that not many books were checked out, because they were being used in the library and not at the student's room or elsewhere.

The most interesting thing to me was something under the "acquired requests" in the library's annual report for the 2008-2009 school year (enclosed). 1,523 students and faculty made requests in the 2008-2009 school year. This took up 67% of the book and film budget for the year. What struck me about this data is the fact that students and faculty make requests to be supplied by the library staff. This reminded me very much of the way that web 2.0 works. Web 2.0 is a form of internet where the user is able to share what they think is important with other users.⁶ For instance, say that I am a beekeeper and wish to give information on how to tend bees so I upload a video on Youtube explaining just that. This video is circulated amongst other people who are interested in beekeeping via their search queries or videos that have been linked to mine because of their similarity. In the same vein, I can request a book at the library that can be shared amongst the library community. The book can then be found by searching a common keyword in the library's search engine.

The augmented library project is another way that The Crossett Library imitates aspects of Web 2.0. The project was created by a group of programming students at the college who wanted to create a service that would allow students to leave comments or feedback on books that they've read for other students. This is like a web 2.0 service

⁶ Time O'Reilly, "What Is Web 2.0: Design Patterns and Business Models for the Next Generation of Software," 2005, O'Reilly Media Inc. 6 Dec. 2009 <<http://oreilly.com/pub/a/web2/archive/what-is-web-20.html?page=1>>.

because it allows people to rate and leave feedback on books for other students, much as one would “Digg” something, which would create a general buzz about the book. The other purpose of the augmented library was to create a connection between the electronic materials and the physical materials in the library. This attempt is another way in which the librarians are doing their job differently. Unfortunately, the augmented library has fallen into a lack of usage because there is nobody to maintain its patron information that each user must have whenever they log in. The staff in the library is too few to operate the augmented library to its fullest potential.

Since library-goers are, in a way, creating their own library it brings up a strong sense of community. My talk with the Director of Library and Information Services, Oceana Wilson, expressed how much the Crossett Library is trying to reach out and work with the community. She thinks that libraries today should act more as a “commons” than a place where one just goes to, to takeout a book or study. Seeing the library in this way certainly makes a lot of sense. In what other institutions of the world do people share so many things in common as the books in a library? Almost 100,000 books and thousands of other materials are offered to the whole of the Bennington College Campus. The library is used more as a study area, a common place where people not only do work in, but share their artworks and come together over a love of books. One of the most popular things that the library offers is the faculty recommended books that are sent out during Field Work Term. When the campus body returns in the spring, faculty and students share experiences and discuss with one another about these books.

The Crossett Library does not have any rules posted on the walls when you walk in, perpetuating the sense that people will respect one another and the resources offered.

On my travels to the library I do get this sense, people who use cell phones keep it quiet and are more than willing to leave if you ask them to, I have never seen carelessly tossed foodstuffs lying in the library, and the staff and other students are in general very helpful.

Oceana also explained one of the Library's visions, one of which was the "joy of serendipitous discovery." On the internet, I not only speak for myself but a number of my peers, people spend hours on Wikipedia going from link to link within articles and learning more about anything that tickles their fancy. In my research I found 92% of Bennington students use anonymous information sites like Wikipedia or Yahoo! Answers with great frequency. There is much joy when someone finds an interesting article about a vaguely unrelated subject on these websites, and the Crossett Library is trying to help get people excited about it in books by suggesting teachers use browsing assignments for their class. Students are often too busy to go through the many aisles of books and pick up anything that calls out to them. With a browsing assignment for a class, the student is encouraged to engage books in this fashion, and find things that may not have been inherently useful for the class but will further class discussion or broaden knowledge on the subject.

The question of whether or not libraries are still necessary in today's society with the amount of free information on the internet is a circumstantial one. If a library is not able to keep up and adhere to the new technology, using it to its fullest potential, and reproducing it in such a way that it betters the community, then they should not and, probably, will not survive. Most libraries in the United States are thriving with the new technology,

"Approximately three-fourths (71.4 percent) of public libraries report that they are the only provider of free public Internet and free public computer access in their

communities or service areas...” (Bertot, Public access computing and Internet access in public libraries: The role of public libraries in e-government and emergency situations.)

This is a very exciting time in digital information. The library has undergone a sort of surgery with each new kind of technology introduced. With the digital age in full blast the Crossett Library is shaping up to be a very healthy patient, embracing and intuitively using the resources at hand to better service the faculty and students of Bennington College.

Reflection

This was a very fun project for me to participate in, as I have been interested in studying library science after my time here at Bennington. Working with the staff was extremely rewarding, and I was given many bright insights. I enjoyed talking to each and every one of them, and learned many new things about the library and libraries in general each time. They were more than willing to help me with my interviews, handing me business cards, library statistics, and expressing their thoughts on all my questions with great delicacy and detail.

When I began this project I was more interested in how the amateur information of the internet had affected the professionalism of the librarians, and whether or not it was changing the way that they work. I soon reworked my interviews to address how the digital age, with its new technologies and free information is affecting libraries and librarians.

As for my student surveys, there was some tomfoolery when students were entering what they studied, but it was minimal, and that was the only complaint that I had on their part. I think that I could have formed my questions to better suit this project, but this paper's goal had changed since I started. One of my questions in particular:

Let's say you're having a conversation with a buddy, and they say that they "...really love to wrestle with steelheads." and you have no idea what a steelhead is. Do you ask the friend right then and there what a steelhead is, consult a dictionary, use a library, or use the internet. If you use the internet, please fill in what website you would go to in the open box.

This question was made when I was interested in how and when students are using the anonymous and amateur information of the internet. I should have made this into two questions, an in person one, and one where you are talking to this friend over the internet. I also should have created one where the person speaking is not a friend, but a stranger or public speaker.

I feel that I should have also addressed some faculty members as they use the library as well. However, given the amount of time I had to work on this project, and their work loads at the end of term, I felt that it would have been nearly impossible to fit in interviews or have them fill out questionnaires.

My presentation went well, though my poster shows why I'm not a visual arts student. Few people knew much about my topic, so I mostly just talked about what I had done and learned and did not receive many questions. This makes me wonder if I did a good job at explaining or if I just confused them.

Overall, I believe that things went very smoothly and I enjoyed working with everyone who helped out.

