Will Books Survive In Tommorow's Library?

Pat Newcombe
Western New England University School of Law, pnewcombe@law.wne.edu
How far will libraries go as they turn increasingly to electronic information resources?

Picture a researcher somewhere in the United States entering the Chicago Public Library in cyberspace — via computer, modem and a telecommunication point of service — to utilize its information access tools. He connects to the library's home page, enters his query and waits for an expert system to process the request. A selection of materials appears almost immediately. He then downloads the relevant volumes and has completed his information search without ever physically entering a library.

The idea of the virtual library — a set of information resources made accessible over computer networks without restrictions of time and place, where users can simultaneously access the same information — has captured the imagination of millions of library users over the past several years.

In this virtual library, resources may have no physical counterpart. Holdings may consist of a synthesized collection of links to other sites — where actual data is stored — or of Web pages created as original work.

Technological change has always been a way of life for libraries. Librarians have embraced information technology since the early 1960s, and are meeting the digital revolution head on, transforming library services. While the "virtual" library described above is still a utopian fantasy, the digital library of today — a physical library where bytes augment books — is a reality; one in which many holdings are found on electronic shelves. These holdings may be World Wide Web pages, CD-ROMs, or online services. By offering patrons remote access to these holdings, libraries serve a much larger audience.

DIGITAL HOLDINGS GROW

The premise that technology will revolutionize the library is not a new one. Even small public libraries are making some research tools available digitally. Palm-sized CD-ROMs contain books and encyclopedias that previously took up bookshelves of space. They make reference searches simpler and faster.

The American Library Association's (ALA) 1996 Technology in Public Libraries Survey found that 94 percent of public libraries, serving a population over 100,000, offer CD-ROM products for patron use inside the library. In addition, 28 percent of these libraries allow patrons remote access to CD-ROM reference tools, which they can download from home.

More importantly, public libraries are making some of
the most useful and frequently requested information, such as online catalogs, available electronically. In the 1990 ALA technology survey, 90 percent of public libraries said they offer online public access (OPAC) to their collections. Of these libraries, 74 percent offer modem access to their OPAC from locations outside the library. Patrons simply dial in, type the name of a publication, author or subject, and within seconds determine the availability and location of materials. While this technology continues to provide access to many digital libraries, use of a Web browser is supplanting modem and Telnet access as the new standard for access. The Boston Public Library receives over 200 electronic queries per hour from users around the world via dial-in. Telnet and the Web.

Nearly 45 percent of the nation's public libraries reported an Internet connection of some type, according to a 1990 National Commissio...
time draw them into the library to utilize local resources.

For example, Krueger reported that SIBL puts up a lot of user guides on its home page <http://www.nypl.org/research/sibl/index.html>. “We have a guide on how to find company information, which walks people through the standard steps,” she said. “If there are appropriate Internet resources, the links are there. If you are at home and decide you really need our SEC filings for a company, we have a hotlink to those electronic versions that are available over the Internet. But we also give referrals to print resources that are here and to databases that are here.”

DIGITAL LIBRARIES AREN’T CHEAP

The cost of converting printed material to electronic format is astronomical. To create a full-text digital library: from a collection of 150,000 books would cost $327.6 million or $2,185 per book, according to an ALA Library Technology Report published in 1999.

So far, digital library projects seldom address the cost issue. Most are funded by external sources, such as educational foundations or corporate sponsors, rather than by library operating budgets, so they are at least partially protected from justifying the full cost of digitizing information in print.

Library leaders doubt that all printed material will ever be converted to digital form, and as Krueger explained, “For many things there just will never be the overwhelming economic demand for it.”

In Future Libraries, Crawford and Gorman argue that computers in libraries will always have limits. “The facts are that books work and they work better than any alternative for sustained reading. Today and for the foreseeable future, no electronic medium can begin to compete with ink on paper for readability, even if we discount the aesthetic pleasure of the book or the magazine itself as a factor. Only the most fervid futurists and some fellow-traveling librarians still speak of electronic books as imminent and inevitable replacements for printed books.”

Library leaders foresee the library of the future providing a complementary combination of both digital and book collections. “All print media will never be in digital form, but the function of libraries will be to provide the integration of this print media into the multimedia communications that are now so rapidly proliferating around our country and the world,” said Young. The complexity of technology change will call for librarians who are just as comfortable navigating a cyberspace of electronic information resources as working with traditional resources. Libraries in the future must maintain a balance between the extremes of the digital library and the low-tech library of the past.

Michael Fiels’ words of caution put it best: “Be ready to start running two libraries.”

“The Internet and digital collections are a good supplement to, not a replacement for, the traditional library.”

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