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Visions of the Future: Libraries in the 21st Century

Are Libraries Obsolete?

Libraries are absolutely lovely. The crisp scent of an old book. The homeliness of a well worn novel that lays flat without a fight, just for your reading pleasure. The stark quietness contrasted by the subtle sounds of page turning, keyboard tapping, and far away activity, but while the library experience is still doing alright these days among bibliophiles, libraries are beginning to fade into obscurity with regards to research and reference.

In this Information Age, where the likes of Wikipedia and the Google search engine have (begrudgingly) become the supreme authorities on what is fact and what is fiction in the world, libraries in communities big and small are having trouble standing on the same ground they once stood proudly on. While one study in 2013 by the Pew Internet and American Life Project found that 91 percent of Americans 16 and older say that libraries are important to their communities, the common discourse often posits that "Since people can look up any and all resources online from any and all places, what's the point in physically going to a library?" This pretty simple question puts the future of public libraries as information centers in jeopardy, as though they be few, those who take a more more pragmatic approach to public funding and aren't swayed by the library

experience argue that almost any resource imaginable can be accessed through online means that don't have to be upkept by taxpayers, therefore, libraries should either receive less funding, be closed down, or have their resources be exclusively digital. These detractors frame libraries as a battle of technology versus libraries, when this is a gross misunderstanding and simplification of the truth of where libraries need to be in the 21st Century. However one thing can be said, the 21st Century Library needs to be; to exist.

Libraries Can't Just Be About Books Anymore

Libraries have been working for years now to address the points of their opposition, and prove their worthiness to remain members of their communities, and are making leaps and bounds at the local levels to make changes to libraries around the US to help them stay relevant. Specifically, they've been looking to what libraries might provide besides the books that they house, and how they can work to provide for their community's specific needs. As well, librarians are working to change the perception that digital technology is a threat to libraries.

Anthony W Marx, president of New York Public Library, the fourth biggest public library in the US, counters in an interview with Forbes Magazine that, in reality, digital technology is the greatest opportunity in the history of libraries. He believes that digital technology has put the public library in a position where it has the opportunity to "fundamentally revitalize itself."

Marx continues, stating that "The library is misunderstood as a repository of books. The library is a repository of information, and a sharing, and providing of access to information, and guide to using it."

Libraries though obscured by the dense fog of wifi signals and Macbook Pros, have been evolving in the background, moving toward not only housing books just-in-case someone needs them, but housing technology just-in-case too. Technology isn't a threat to libraries, rather it's actually a 21st Century library's greatest asset; a perception not quite picked up by the public, in part as a result of pop-culture ideas and misunderstandings about libraries, coined as "Library Nostalgia".

"Library Nostalgia" Doesn't Tell the Full Story

While "Library Nostalgia" paints librarians as overprotective bibliophiles, whose only job is to shush people from one generation to the next, in reality, librarians are incredible community assets, as being a knowledgeable and generous community member is a part of their job description. Librarians are like fantasy jack-of-all-trades class of the real world, and in today's world, they're dedicated to picking up and even going out of their way to teach people a variety of skills that didn't even exist a few decades ago, that way they can help every person in their community to the best of their ability.

The Harvard Political Review in their article, The 21st Century Library, presents perspectives of David Leonard, president of Boston Public Library, Eileen Abels, the dean of the Simmons School of Library and Information Science and a seasoned

librarian, as well as other librarians on the topic of how the role of a librarian has changed in the 21st Century.

Leonard tells HPR that librarians are moving from sitting in wait of library patrons, to making steps toward active community outreach, actively advertising their library and its resources, and taking what he calls an "inside-out" approach as opposed to the old "outside-in" one.

Suzanne Wones, director of library digital strategies and innovations at Harvard Library, states that Harvard Librarians are expected to be proficient in various digital skills, including coding, and data management, however, in the age of easily accessible and often unchecked fake news, skills such as information literacy and checking for veracity and bias, she urges, are more important than ever before.

Still however, Abels, in a study she conducted with a colleague asking 1,100 librarians what their most important skills found that "soft-skills" such as "warm interpersonal communication" and "working with diverse communities." topped the list, while more tech-forward skills in digital literacy came after them. Abels posits that these skills, while only beginning to break out today, will skyrocket in importance as they become more commonly integrated into their everyday job.

Outsourcing Knowledge

While search engines like Google are taking the place of students meeting their local librarian face to face for help finding sources, and sites like Wikipedia are replacing libraries as ground zero for research projects, both of which can be done in the comfort of your own home, what people forget, is that what libraries have over any online

resource is physical presence, as well as hospitality, two things integral to what makes them important asset for their communities in the first place.

Howard Besser, an award winning digital preservation and digital library scholar, in his essay, [The Shape of the 21st Century Library](), states that in an age where physical location and service can be separated, we need to rethink the roles that libraries play at the local level.

"Some of these roles are more tied to the library's physical presence in the community, while others may function very well if delivered from remote sites."

Besser writes that it's very possible that many libraries on the local level may give up completely on playing the role of a reference library or research center, either leaving those roles to a larger central library or handing the internet the car keys for navigating the 21st Century information superhighway. Libraries that do this, would focus entirely on roles that are tied closer to their physical being, such as a community activities center, community information center, formal education support center, independent learning center, popular materials library, or a preschoolers' door to learning.

"Who else is gonna do it?"

One final case for what libraries today should look like comes from librarian Pam Sandlian Smith, at her TED Talk, [What to Expect from Libraries in the 21st Century](). She tells a story of a little boy, who came into her library every week. One week, the boy wanted to take advantage of the resources at the library, and wanted to do a puppet show in one of the rooms that were available to check out. His puppet show was

successful, but after it, the librarians didn't see him for a few weeks. Eventually, the boy returned, on his birthday no less. In the end, it's revealed that this little boy lived at the homeless shelter, and with this is the revelation that he returned one final time to say that he was moving away. His family had finally found a job and an apartment to stay at, so he wanted to return and thank Smith for her time.

"Little did I know that when he asked that question, how important it was for him to have that space to create, to think, to fulfil some dreams. He needed someone to have the instinct to say yes, and I'm so grateful that I did. He needed somebody to be on his side. Isn't that what we all need?"

Libraries provide children a safe space from their home life, in the same way schools and afterschool programs do. They provide America's children a space to make things, a space for introspection, a space to feel safe and sound in their community, and a space to embark on their pursuit of happiness.

This video presentation shows a small-scale example of what libraries can do for our communities and the people living in them, and presents to us why it's so important that they stay part of our communities. At the end, she poses a question, "who else is gonna do it?" Who else is going to look after communities the same way our libraries do?

"Librarians Make Libraries Loveable"

Libraries according to the Chicago Tribune are reportedly [the most trusted government bodies](), and there's a clear reason. Libraries are unmatched in community

dedication, and hospitality, and as they move forward into the future, perceptions of libraries will too.

For now, in order to stay relevant in our 21st Century Information Culture, libraries must continue to grow and change from their roots, not only to stand out from their competitors, but to work hand and hand with them to provide the absolute best service for our communities, as they always have strived to.

While some people question the relevance of libraries today, the only question you need ask them-the only question needed to help them understand where they went wrong-should be as simple as this: "Who else is gonna do it?"

Editorial Analysis

The mentor editorial texts I used are by Charles Bell. I took inspiration from his articles because I like his informative and very organized style. His articles are longer, and have headings which give an interesting title to an idea he explores further in his body paragraphs under that heading.

For example, in his article School suspensions don't stop violence – they help students celebrate it, he using headings that clearly introduce the topics of his sections, such as "Doesn't deter violence" in his section where he discusses the anecdotes from students on why suspensions in truth don't do anything to curb violence in schools, as well as "Tough choices" in his section that discusses how hard it is for administrators and policymakers to make changes and make decisions on what to change about the current school suspension system.

In his other article, Poverty to PhD: An Insider Account on Structural Barriers That Affect Impoverished Students of Color, he uses headings like "Emerging Data: Crowdsourcing" to discuss how researchers use crowdsourcing to independently research criminal justice related statistics without possible bias from criminal justice sources.