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Are Libraries Necessary? Are Libraries Obsolete?

by Linda Silka

Joyce Rumery,

Guest Editors



Libraries are under siege. They face competing demands not only from different people but also from the same people at different times. Some assert that libraries must continue to strengthen their role as physical centers at the heart of their communities. Others argue that the future of libraries is at the leading edge of the revolution in digital information technologies. Linda Silka and Joyce Rumery introduce this special issue of Maine Policy Review on libraries and information. They provide an overview of the importance and complexity of the issues underlying these varying visions for how Maine libraries should serve their communities in the coming years. 

Much has been written of late about the fate of libraries: Are they becoming obsolete? Are they still necessary? The world is changing and much information is available online, which raises questions about whether people still read or even need books and whether physical libraries are still important as locations where patrons come to have their information needs met. Might it be the case that libraries belong to another time—the era of philanthropist Andrew Carnegie’s funding of library buildings in communities, for example—and will libraries be increasingly unneeded in a vibrant interconnected future?

What might be surprising, as this article and others in this issue point out, is that in this digital age, libraries are becoming ever more important. However, how libraries are needed and how they are being used is changing. Libraries have begun exploring new forms, new tasks, and new strategies in this hybrid “virtual nonvirtual” information age. In this article, we outline some of these changes in Maine and consider their implications for policy and practice.

As it turns out, Maine is a particularly apt place to examine the complex changes taking place in the world of libraries and information technology. Maine brings together the diverse issues seen in scattered form elsewhere in the country. Maine libraries reach people who make their living in remote settings while at the same time, Maine libraries are trying to meet the information needs of growing and increasingly diverse urban populations. And Mainers struggle with distances: long winters and sizable distances between towns make issues of access to libraries especially challenging. In addition, Maine’s libraries are not just on the mainland; they can also be found on islands where the needs of library users throw into sharp relief some of the access issues that all libraries continue to face.

Maine is a particularly good place to scrutinize the role of libraries in the new information age because the state has been in the forefront of developing innovative solutions to the challenges confronting libraries. Few other states have found ways to bring together diverse kinds of libraries—academic, public,

and special libraries along with the state library—in such innovative ways. Maine is now a model for other states in how different libraries can work together. In many states, communities are struggling with limited funding for libraries. Here, too, Maine has been able to find some effective solutions to sharing resources. So, there is much that can be learned by other states from an examination of how Maine libraries have addressed the challenges facing libraries.

This introductory article highlights some of the challenges and strategies that are being explored for addressing the rapidly changing context in which information is made available and used. Individual articles throughout this special issue provide in-depth analyses about the specifics of these challenges. Our intent is to provide an overview of some of the factors that are contributing to contradictory calls that libraries must change yet must stay the same. The central paradox is this: on the one hand, libraries are the places in communities perhaps most affected by changes in information technologies (the telling term used here is “disruptive technology”; cf. Anthony et al. 2008). In the face of information technologies that open communities to the world, some believe libraries should become less focused on or even give up their

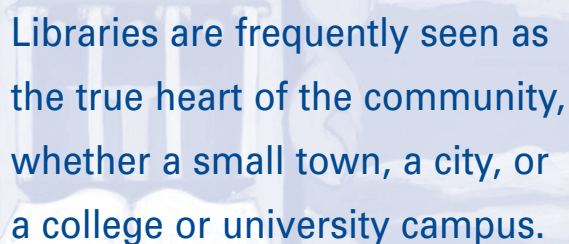


Bangor Public Library.

physical settings. On the other hand, libraries are becoming more important as physical places within communities where people can carry out activities that serve to maintain of a community's social capital—to draw on Putnam's provocative analysis in *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000). How libraries address this paradox will say much about how our communities prosper in this new century. Throughout the remainder of this article, we consider this central dilemma.

LIBRARIES AS PHYSICAL LOCATIONS

In the past, libraries were generally synonymous with physical locations and physical resources, with books, magazines, newspapers, DVDs, and CDs. These physical objects were considered the heart and soul of libraries. Yet, this characterization of libraries as edifices for holding physical objects captured only a small part of the roles that libraries played. Libraries have always provided a place to be, a place where people can gather, and a place where people can pursue information freely and without challenge. Even as the Internet has undercut the need for other sorts of physical spaces, this locational role of libraries continues to expand even as it is changing.



Libraries are frequently seen as the true heart of the community, whether a small town, a city, or a college or university campus.

Consider three ways in which physicality plays out as important in the libraries of today. First, in the case of emergencies (Hurricane Katrina, for example), libraries are important as places for people to connect with their communities and find the resources needed to obtain assistance (see Rumery and Abbott interview, this issue). Libraries have sometimes been the only place during a disaster with Internet access. During disasters, libraries become lifelines: people congregate

there, and they use the resources to get help or as some sort of diversion.

Second, sometimes the challenges communities face do not come in the form of a punctuated event such as devastating weather. The challenge may come through an economic downturn in which many in a community lose their jobs and can no longer afford to “buy” information in the ways they previously could. They are unable to purchase books, and they can no longer afford to pay for Internet access. Libraries fill that void. But libraries do more than this. During these economic downturns, libraries become places where training is offered to help people to get back on their feet—for example, training on how to write a resume or how best to apply for jobs.

Third, as other public spaces disappear, libraries take on new roles as public-gathering spaces. Libraries are places for lectures and art exhibits. They are places for children to learn and read. Libraries provide rooms for groups to gather for many reasons (a knitting circle, play readings, and many other activities). There is little that libraries do not offer, but most of all they remain places to gather with friends, a place to be alone to gather one's thoughts, a place to be part of something bigger.

So we don't lose sight of what libraries do, it is important to consider all the other essential roles they play. Libraries are frequently seen as the true heart of the community, whether a small town, a city, or a college or university campus. Their value includes working to address community needs and offering services that will have a positive impact on their communities. Providing speakers and lectures that contribute to lifelong learning help members of a community to grow together. Spaces and programs for children and teens foster a sense of belonging. To further illustrate these points, we consider some of the roles that libraries are now playing that are tied in complex ways to physical location.

Equalizing Sites and Opportunity Generators

Libraries have long provided access to information for those who cannot afford or do not have access to it. Formerly books and other materials, now Internet access draws users into the building. This demand has increased the need for connectivity and devices.

Libraries are also providing some materials online, so users at a distance have access to their resources. Users also take advantage of a library's wireless service to tap into the resources when the building is closed. Libraries are portals to resources and services in the public interest. Libraries have become place for legal aid, tax help, job-search help, and nurses. Could this be becoming even more important than it was in the past? How do we support this role now and in its evolving forms?

Libraries for Youth

Libraries make a difference for youth development. They have always been places where youth could come to get information. This traditional role is not going away. Rather it may be expanding to include gaming and maker spaces, for example—do-it-yourself spaces with equipment and supplies where people can gather to create, invent, and learn (see Visser, this issue). What does this mean now that youth want access to the Internet, but still also use the physical space of libraries? How do we support this role in its evolving forms?

Conflicting Goals

Libraries are likely to remain important physical spaces in communities well into the future—"third spaces" as described by Zurinski et al. (this issue). Yet the shifting goals embodied by libraries as physical spaces remain inadequately understood, and they often conflict. Should physical space be used for books or patrons? Libraries still purchase print books and anticipate doing so for years to come, but this is creating an issue of collection space being in conflict with space for users. The conundrum involves libraries as warehouses versus libraries as people spaces. Libraries want the users to win this conflict, but the books need to go someplace. How do libraries and their communities make sense of and weight these competing goals?

How, then, might libraries, their funders, and their patrons begin a discussion about integrating these goals? How might they do so in ways that will lead to re-envisioning and reinventing the roles of libraries? Discussions taking place in other areas about how to create innovation out of disruptive technologies can serve as models. Under this analysis, it is acknowledged that the introduction of new technologies is often

disruptive, but these dislocations offer opportunities that can be exploited for innovation. How might libraries seize these opportunities for innovation?

ENVISIONING THE FUTURE IN A TIME OF CHANGE IN INFORMATION TECHNOLOGIES

If the future is one where physical space and physical objects are not preeminent, what does this herald for the role of libraries? This is an important question, particularly in times of financial constraints. Those who are responsible for funding libraries, seeing the greater availability of online information and entertainment access, may reevaluate the costs of maintaining a physical structure or the staff to support a service no longer deemed necessary. They may believe that libraries are no longer useful and see an opportunity for repurposing library funding or staffing or building. Careful scrutiny of the value of libraries is underway in many communities. Such analyses highlight the need for a better understanding of the value-added services libraries have offered in the past and how the need for such services might change in a technologically changing environment. Some of these activities and roles are briefly highlighted here.

Intermediaries and Educators

Librarians have long served the roles of intermediary and educator, as guides to the use of information. More information means more need for a guide. There is now indiscriminate access to a vast variety of facts and information through search engines, blogs, YouTube, and other digital sources. The overwhelming growth of information sources has made it increasingly difficult for people to navigate them and assess their reliability and trustworthiness. The traditional role of libraries as intermediaries and educators thus takes on new urgency as librarians are needed to guide users to the most appropriate and authoritative sources. Librarians help users to learn to be appropriately cautious about online information sources, not to assume that information they happen across on Internet searches is accurate, and to also be aware of resources that may not be online. (See Averill and Lewis, this issue, for discussion of the role of librarians in promoting "digital literacy.") Librarians offer

workshops on Internet searching, they guide searchers at reference desks, and they answer questions that come by phone, email, chat, and “snail” mail. Their function as intermediaries and educators is still critical.

Upholding Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy

Another central and unique role libraries have played is as champions of free access to information. Libraries have long made intellectual freedom and the protection of information access cornerstones of their work (see M. Norman article on First Amendment rights, this issue). No other type of organization allows all to enter and protects their rights to information. There is no vetting of whose questions are answered, who may borrow a book, or who may attend a lecture. Yet in the new information age, people’s access to information and their anonymity in doing so have come under threat. Under increased concerns by the Department of Homeland Security, there have been recent efforts in which authorities have tried to find out what patrons are reading. Maine libraries work to keep this from happening. When buyers purchase e-books or books at some national bookstore chains or online, they are sometimes asked for identifying information or information is gathered from the online purchase that can be traced back to the purchaser (Cohn and Higgins 2012). Glib assurances are often offered that there is no need to be concerned because the information will not be used for any untoward purposes. In Maine libraries, however, all information about who has previously checked out a book is removed. The result is that no one can track usage.

In an article in the November 27, 2011, *New York Times Sunday Book Review*, Anne Trubek reported on what was touted to be exciting research on past Muncie, Indiana, library patron records with names that had been digitized and are available for research (“What Middletown Read” www.bsu.edu/libraries/wmr). Researchers heralded that all kinds of insights can be drawn from these records about reading choices as a function of income, education, and neighborhood characteristics. The response of librarians in Maine was to point out that Maine laws specifically protect the privacy of users and would be violated by such usage (see M. Norman, this issue).

Reinvisioning Information about a Place’s History

To perhaps a surprising extent, libraries as physical spaces in a community have been repositories about their place and their community. Thus, an important role of libraries has been as archives of community history (such as historical records or genealogical records).

The importance of the archival role cannot be overstated, but the intermingling of the old and the new, the physical and the digital, pushes this role in new directions. Recently, the Maine Historical Society, through its Maine Memory Network, has been collaborating with libraries, schools, local historical societies, and other community organizations to scan, photograph, and make available online many community documents, photos, and other historical items (see Bromage, this issue). Another example involves archival records at Acadia National Park’s research arm—the Schoodic Education and Research Center (SERC) Institute. Park leaders have discovered that Acadia is unique in the amount of records about climate, animal, and plant species that were kept by amateur naturalists, with more records covering a longer period of time than perhaps any other U.S. national park. These paper records have existed for many years, but were dispersed throughout uncoordinated physical archives and thus inaccessible. The push is now on to digitize these important records so that they can be used to analyze changes in climate and species in this important part of the Northeast. Libraries serving as archival repositories for their locales open up new possibilities with new technologies.

THE CHALLENGES AHEAD

As this article, and others in this issue, highlights, there are many challenges facing libraries as they attempt to meet the competing demands of being a resource for the Internet age and being a resource with a physical location in a particular place. Bringing these two demands together remains a great challenge. We’ll examine what some of these challenges look like.

E-resources and Information Technologies

With regard to e-resources, libraries have begun to think about the roles they may play in managing and preserving new forms of information. Although old

models provide some guidance, they may not cover all of the new contingencies. Lending issues have become more complex. Questions that did not come up in the past now come to the forefront: Do libraries own the e-resources for which they are conduits? How can the more complex copyright issues be addressed? (See articles by Allen and by Sullivan, this issue.)

Training Issues

The range of skills librarians will need is likely to be much greater now than in the pre-Internet age. As just one example, negotiation skills might be needed if librarians need to negotiate the best e-books deals in this fluid period where much (including price and details of allowable usage) remains in flux. The training that will bring greatest benefit may bear at best limited resemblance to what sufficed in the past. Yet, too often local libraries lack the resources to provide electronic devices or up-to-date technical training for their librarians. The result is that librarians may fall behind in expertise on the very devices and resources that their patrons increasingly depend upon for information. If librarians are to continue to assist patrons navigate an overwhelming world of information, how will they be able to do this with limited training and resources?

The 24/7 World

Nowadays people see themselves as living in a 24/7 society, where information or entertainment needs to be available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It is no longer the case that little happens after hours. Instead many information resources are available around the clock, and people may increasingly expect that kind of access to their library. How does the library participate in this world? What happens to the role of guidance to the appropriate source, for example, if this is only available during the staffed times of the physical plant?

Obsolescence

Times of rapid change lead to rapid obsolescence of materials and technologies. Patrons might hunger after new technology, but if libraries invest in that technology, will it last? Will it be possible to assess what is a fad and what will have staying power? It is, of course, impossible to fully predict the future, but librarians must consider the lifespan of particular technologies,

ideas, and information and what this means for technology investments. These discussions need to be tied to the larger issues at play for libraries.

Connections and Collaborations

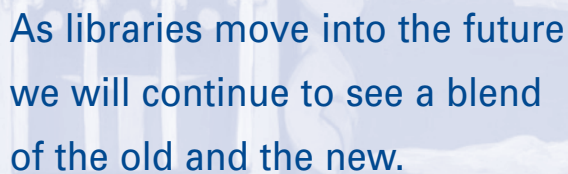
Maine libraries have a history of sharing their physical resources and have established ways to do so (see Sanborn and Nutty, this issue). Many libraries in the state share a catalog, for example, which allows patrons access to the resources of participating libraries. And libraries participate in a delivery system that allows the physical items to be shipped from library to library. Thus, the sharing of physical resources has been regularized, and libraries borrow from one another on a routine basis.

With the advent of e-resources, sharing has become more complex at the time that it is increasingly important because of financial constraints. Online resources raise new challenges, however. The growing collection of e-books and other online resources cannot be shared in the traditional way. Publishers have implemented restrictions whereby the sharing of materials is difficult if not impossible. This is an issue faced by libraries nationwide and will not be resolved in Maine alone. Nor will it be resolved quickly, as articles by Allen and Sullivan (this issue) discuss. As libraries attempt to solve this problem, they may find opportunities for innovation in how they get information to users in the digital age. As they explore print-on-demand and electronic-on-demand, Maine libraries have the opportunity to be on the leading edge in developing a plan (see Revitt, this issue).

CONCLUSION: POLICY AND PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

Although often considered “static,” libraries have always transformed themselves as times have changed. As the president of the American Library Association notes, “the library of today is not the library of our childhood, and the library that children see today is not the library we’ll see in 20 years” (www.shareable.net/blog/the-evolving-library). Users can rely upon libraries partly because of their traditions, but also because they are institutions that respond to the changing technologies and needs.

As libraries face these changes, they will need to deal with diverse policy issues. First, there is the concern of how to create robust practices that allow for continuity while also ensuring that libraries are responsive to potentially disruptive change. Second, in the face of increased emphasis on return on investment, what strategies can libraries use to measure returns on something as complex and multifaceted as the impact of libraries? As communities struggle to decide how to allocate their limited resources, can community-friendly decision tools be developed to help with the process? Third, since Maine is known for its strong tradition of local control, what are the policy implications if community libraries become part of a regional system with regional governance or if they rely on shared resources for which the decisions about content and purchases are no longer locally controlled?



As libraries move into the future we will continue to see a blend of the old and the new.

Throughout this article we have noted that things are changing quickly. Consider that in today's world people have ready access to all kinds of information at all hours of the day. Contrast this with the experience of someone growing up early in the 20th century. My mother [Silka] grew up on a farm in rural Iowa and attended a one-room school. She loved libraries and books. What did her library consist of? All eight years that she attended the same one-room school there was one small shelf holding the same books, perhaps 10 at most. She says that she loved those books—read them over and over—but hungered for more. It is hard to imagine how much has changed for her grandchildren. But people are re-imagining ways of approaching information. In his book *The One World Schoolhouse* (2012) Salman Khan turns traditional practices on their heads. In the case of schools, he asks why not switch the roles of the physical location and the Internet? He shows how children can use the Internet to receive lectures at home and use the

physical space of the classroom during school hours to make full use of a guide—their teacher—to learn hands-on problem solving and receive individualized guidance. These are the kinds of changes that libraries have begun to envision.

Reinvention will be important, as Portland's new bookmobile highlights. The bookmobile brings physical books to new locations, but also exploits the opportunities of Internet connections. The return of Portland's bookmobile (Podgajny, this issue) is intended to address the distance issues in ways that combine the traditional and the new to arrive at something that cannot be done with either alone.

As libraries move into the future we will continue to see a blend of the old and the new. Libraries have evolved to respond to new needs, employing new technologies, but have kept the essence of what they have always been—a community resource, responding to whatever their community needs. 🐟

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