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The Citadel and the Open Space — Will the Library Survive in the Internet Age?

Thursday, May 29, 2008



Few inventions can compete with the printed book in terms of changing human history and influencing the way humans think. The physical reality of the book — type on the printed page — made knowledge accessible on a scale never dreamed of in former times. The book, never completely stable through printings and new editions, nevertheless served as the most stable platform for information humans had ever known.

The modern world is inconceivable without the book, and without libraries. The library became the great collection of books, the repository of knowledge and learning and the very seat of scholarship. The rise of the modern research library goes hand-in-hand with the rise of the modern research university.

But will the great libraries survive in the age of the Internet? [Robert Darnton](#) considers that question in “[The Library in the New Age](#),” published in the June 12, 2008 edition of *The New York Review of Books*. Darnton’s article may well be the most sane and sensible essay yet written on the future of books and libraries in the digital future.

Darnton is uniquely qualified to write this essay. After years on the faculty of Princeton University, Darnton was appointed Carl H. Pforzheimer University Professor at Harvard University and director of the Harvard University Library. He is a historian of the book and a scholar of libraries, but he can look to the future as well as to the past.

“Information is exploding so furiously around us and information technology is changing at such bewildering speed that we face a fundamental problem,” Darnton explains. “How to orient ourselves in the new landscape? What, for example, will become of research libraries in the face of technological marvels such as Google?”

Some librarians and professors look at the digital revolution with unmixed fear and no little revulsion. Darnton knows that the future is digital, and he even sees the ambitious plan announced by Google to digitalize millions of books as a positive contribution to learning and scholarship. He also sees an important mission for research libraries in the future. In two eloquent paragraphs, he sets the issue before us:

To students in the 1950s, libraries looked like citadels of learning. Knowledge came packaged between hard covers, and a great library seemed to contain all of it. To climb the steps of the New York Public Library, past the stone lions guarding its entrance and into the monumental reading room on the third floor, was to enter a world that included everything known. The knowledge came ordered into standard categories which could be pursued through a card catalog and into the pages of the books. In colleges everywhere the library stood at the center of the campus. It was the most important building, a temple set off by classical columns, where one read in silence: no noise, no food, no disturbances beyond a furtive glance at a potential date bent over a book in quiet contemplation.

Students today still respect their libraries, but reading rooms are nearly empty on some campuses. In order to entice the students back, some librarians offer them armchairs for lounging and chatting, even drinks and snacks, never mind about the crumbs. Modern or postmodern students do most of their research at computers in their rooms. To them,

knowledge comes online, not in libraries. They know that libraries could never contain it all within their walls, because information is endless, extending everywhere on the Internet, and to find it one needs a search engine, not a card catalog. But this, too, may be a grand illusion—or, to put it positively, there is something to be said for both visions, the library as a citadel and the Internet as open space.

Those images are truly helpful in thinking about the future. The library as a citadel or fortress of learning and the Internet as a vast open space — these are images that make sense. Furthermore, they are images that are complementary. The citadel and the open space need each other and scholarship now demands both.

The portrait of modern students Darnton describes is now almost universal. The students go to the library only when they actually need something that is found only there. They do their searching on the Internet and they have never run their fingers through the worn cards of a card catalogue. They study accompanied by the aroma of their coffee or pizza, not the subtle smells of aging books, worn wood shelves, and polished floors. They think of the library as necessary but finite, and of the Internet as constant, primary, and endlessly vast.

Darnton writes with insight and passion about the library and about the future. He does not deny the obvious — that the democratization of knowledge through the digital revolution is the shape of the future (at least, until something new and even more democratic replaces the Internet). Yet, as his careful analysis makes clear, the digital revolution also has its limits. The great libraries will still house and care for the *books*, even as millions of *texts* may be found on the Internet.



As Darnton concludes:

In fact, the strongest argument for the old-fashioned book is its effectiveness for ordinary readers. Thanks to Google, scholars are able to search, navigate, harvest, mine, deep link, and crawl (the terms vary along with the technology) through millions of Web sites and electronic texts. At the same time, anyone in search of a good read can pick up a printed volume and thumb through it at ease, enjoying the magic of words as ink on paper. No computer screen gives satisfaction like the printed page. But the Internet delivers data that can be transformed into a classical codex. It already has made print-on-demand a thriving industry, and it promises to make books available from computers that will operate like ATM machines: log in, order electronically, and out comes a printed and bound volume. Perhaps someday a text on a hand-held screen will please the eye as thoroughly as a page of a codex produced two thousand years ago.

Meanwhile, I say: shore up the library. Stock it with printed matter. Reinforce its reading rooms. But don't think of it as a warehouse or a museum. While dispensing books, most research libraries operate as nerve centers for transmitting electronic impulses. They acquire data sets, maintain digital repositories, provide access to e-journals, and orchestrate information systems that reach deep into laboratories as well as studies. Many of them are sharing their intellectual wealth with the rest of the world by permitting Google to digitize their printed collections. Therefore, I also say: long live Google, but don't count on it living long enough to replace that venerable building with the Corinthian columns. As a citadel of learning and as a platform for adventure on the Internet, the research library still deserves to stand at the center of the campus, preserving the past and accumulating energy for the future.

Professor Darnton's approach is very helpful — especially for those of us who bear the stewardship of libraries and institutions of higher learning. The future will be digital (or whatever replaces digital media), but the future will also need the library. The library will remain as a citadel, where books need no batteries and reading requires no Bluetooth or wireless technology. The spirit of scholarship will always be most at home among books, and the soul committed to learning will always find nourishment in the library.

