

Probing Question: How is the computer age changing libraries?

May 21 2009, By Jesse Hicks



Image: Dan Chibnall

For those of us of a certain age — no need to put a number on it, thank you -- the word "library" still conjures forth memories of solid wood cabinets filled with hand-typed cards, each pointing to a book housed on imposing, steel-blue shelves. All those books -- representing centuries of learning -- took up a lot of space and gave the library a slightly intimidating air. It was a quiet, austere space devoted to solitary thought and research.

Fast forward to today's world. Want to have a peek at Mozart's composition notebooks? Interested in audio narratives of former slaves? Need to see the mathematical proofs of Archimedes? With archivists racing to digitize their collections, armchair scholars can tap into the world's treasure trove with a click of the mouse.

Wireless technology has enabled Internet access virtually everywhere, while computers have shrunk to pocket-size. [Wikipedia](#) has largely supplanted the dead-tree Encyclopedia Britannica. If everyone can now carry a virtual library in his or her pocket, what happens to actual, real-life [libraries](#)? How are digital media changing libraries?

"The image of a library as a staid and outdated place is untrue," says Lisa German, assistant dean for Technical and Collections Services at the Penn State University Libraries. "Libraries are vibrant places, full of life and change," and with the rise of digital media over the last two decades, libraries have evolved accordingly.

While digital media make it easy to use research materials almost anywhere, German doesn't see the physical library going away any time soon, or becoming simply a bank of computer terminals. "People are coming to libraries -- at least to Penn State's libraries -- as much as they ever have, if not more so," she says. What's changed is the way in which students use the library space.

Unlike its brick-and-mortar counterpart, a library's digital presence is open around the clock, a feature today's scholars have come to expect. Like the Internet, today's libraries must be everywhere -- digitally. As German explains it, "We're trying to not only draw people into the libraries to make our materials accessible; we're also pushing the materials out to them."

Michael Furlough, assistant dean for Scholarly Communications at the Libraries, sees today's students collaborating more than their predecessors. Able to do solitary research from anywhere, students increasingly take advantage of the social aspects of the library, such as open study spaces and group meeting rooms. Recent studies suggest that digital media, far from turning students and researchers into lonely, disconnected readers, have actually promoted more networked modes of

learning. (Digital humanities scholars, for example, seem to do much more collaborating than their "traditional" counterparts.) Digital media have helped transform libraries into communal spaces for students to research, discuss, and study together—which, notes Furlough, has made them much louder places than you may remember.

Easy access to material has changed the nature of scholarship, notes German, but so has the sheer quantity of material available. Massive digital databases have allowed researchers to re-discover overlooked knowledge, to make new connections among and within disciplines, and to find work they never knew existed.

German points to Google's project to digitize the world's libraries as an example of this era's expansiveness. More information makes possible new knowledge, she allows, but it can also make a student's task more difficult.

Furlough agrees that "the more material we get out there online, the less people are able to easily digest it and filter it all out." For students with little experience of research in a university setting, many of whom grew up with "media centers" rather than traditional libraries, information overload can be paralyzing. (Imagine using the Internet without knowing how to use a search engine.) As German and Furlough see it, one future role of the library and librarians will lie in helping students navigate a vast and shifting sea of information—a sea that only grows wider and deeper as digital media proliferate.

Perhaps the function of the library hasn't changed much at all in twenty years. Though its walls have grown porous and its reach global, it still represents a repository of human knowledge. And though librarians no longer school us in the [Dewey decimal system](#), they still are invaluable guides for travelers exploring an ever-expanding virtual storehouse of information.

Source: By Jesse Hicks, Research/Penn State

Citation: Probing Question: How is the computer age changing libraries? (2009, May 21)
retrieved 3 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-05-probing-age-libraries.html>

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