The Future of UK Public Libraries

Richard Watson argues that people confuse the future of public libraries with that of books—innovations will maintain their relevance.

There was a letter in a newspaper a while ago about a mother whose six year old son had asked her whether he should put a slice of bread in the toaster "landscape or portrait?" I showed this to my ten year old son and he said: "He should have Googled it."
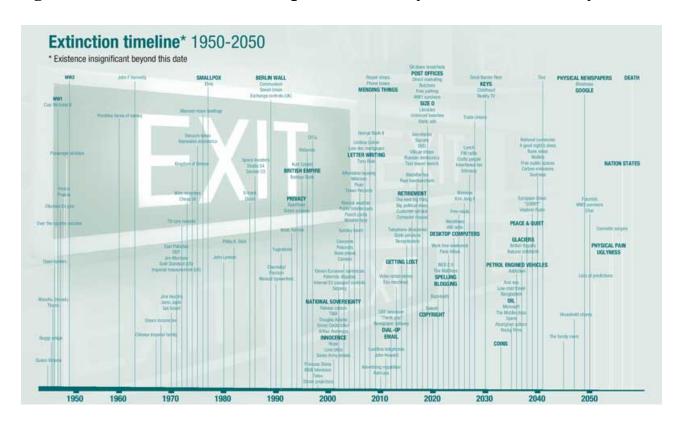
I mention this because I am interested in how places change how we think. In particular, I am interested in how new digital objects and environments are starting to change age old attitudes and behaviours, including how we relate to one another.

And this leads me to a very particular and very special place, namely public libraries in the UK and the question of whether or not they have a future. In short, what is the role—or value—of public libraries and librarians in an age of instant information?

Now at this point I have to put my hand up and admit to being wrong.

Probably. Some time ago I created an extinction timeline, because I believe that the future is as much about things disappearing as it is about things being invented. And, of course, I put public libraries (both in the UK and elsewhere) on the extinction timeline because, in an age of Kindles, iPads, Amazon, Google and Facebook who needs them?

This proved to be a big mistake. Especially when I made a presentation to a room full of librarians. I got roughly the same reaction as I got from a Belgian after he noticed that I'd put his country down as extinct by 2025.

Fortunately, as well as keen eyesight, most librarians have a sense of humour, so I ended up developing some scenarios for the future of public libraries in New South Wales looking ahead to the year 2030. And I now repent. I got it totally wrong. Probably.

This is because libraries aren't just about the books they contain, and because the future of books or publishing is not the same thing as the future of public libraries.

Let's start by considering what a public library exists for. Traditionally the answer would have been to lend books. This is where the argument that public libraries are now dying or will soon be dead originates. After all, if

you can download a book in 30 seconds, buy cheap books from Tesco or instantly search for any fact, image or human utterance on Google, why bother with a local library that's never open when you need it?

The answer to this is that public libraries are important because of a word that's been largely ignored or forgotten—that word is public.

Public libraries are about more than mere information or 'content'. Public libraries are places where local people and ideas come together. They are gathering places where people exchange knowledge, wisdom, insight and, most importantly of all, human dignity.

A good public library is a showroom for culture and learning. It's a place that celebrates creativity, encourages exploration and discovery, helps people to work productively, and provides community engagement and empowerment.

A good local library is not just about borrowing books or storing physical artefacts. It is where individuals become card-carrying members of a local community. They are places that belong to the public, where the public can ask questions or just sit quietly with nothing being asked of them in return.

Public libraries are keystones in the building blocks of social cohesion and in a democratic society we should guard our libraries as we guard our books. Both are custodians of our intellectual heritage and wellbeing in ways that short-lived companies and ephemeral technologies can never be.

They are where people come to ask for help in finding things, especially themselves. They are places where people come to improve themselves.

The fact that public libraries largely do this for nothing is nothing short of a modern miracle.

Much is made of the fact that so many things on the internet are free. Indeed a whole book has been written on this very subject (*Free: The*

Future of a Radical Price by Chris Anderson).

But the idea of free information is nothing new, and when free public libraries were invented the idea was even more radical because of the high cost of books and printed information.

Of course there is the argument that virtualisation means that we will no longer need public libraries; *In a democratic society we should guard our libraries as we guard our books* or that if they do continue to exist they will become digital hubs and librarians will morph into cyber-curators, instantly sending whatever it is that we want direct to our digital devices. And perhaps some libraries and librarians will do this for a fee rather than for free.

This would be a costly mistake because it focuses purely on the information at the expense of overall learning and experience. In particular it focuses upon a crude commercial exchange and takes no account of wider social value or longer-term costs.

Many of those who do support the move towards virtualisation have argued that 'content' is now king and that the vessel or channel is irrelevant. I disagree. Marshall McLuhan, the philosopher of communication theory, is still right. How information is delivered still influences the message and is, in some instances, more meaningful than the message itself.

As I've already said, libraries are about people, not just books, and librarians are about more than just saying "Shhh." They are also about saying: "Psst—have a look at this." Librarians are sifters, guides and co-creators of human connection. Most of all they are cultural curators, not only of paper, but of human history and ideas.

In a world cluttered with too much instant opinion and too little context, analysis and reflection, we need good librarians more than ever. Not just to find a popular book, but to recommend an original one. Not just to recommend *50 Shades of Grey* (hands-free edition), but to suggest something better, something that might exercise your mind.

The internet can do this too, of course, but it can't look you in the eye and smile gently whilst it does it, or use human empathy and insight to interpret and anticipate a user's real needs.*The idea of free information is nothing new, and when free public libraries were invented the idea was even more radical* In a world that's becoming faster, noisier, more virtual and more connected, I think we will need the option of slowness, quietness, physical presence, and device disconnection that libraries provide more than ever, even if some users are only there for the free computers (e-vangelists please note that 17% of UK homes, largely vulnerable low income and older households, still do not have an internet connection and may need a library to get one).

Public libraries are about access and equality. They are open to everyone and do not judge a reader's worth by the clothes they wear any more than they judge a book by its Hollywood movie. They are one of the few free public spaces that we have left and they are among the most valuable, sometimes because of the things they contain, but often because of what they don't.

Of course, we could put a Starbucks into every public library in Britain—and we could allow loud mobile phone use and piped elevator music throughout too—but then surely what we will be left with are more global

outposts of Starbucks.

What public libraries do contain, and should continue to contain in my view, includes mother and toddler reading groups, computer classes for seniors, language tuition for recently arrived immigrants, Lego building lessons, free desk space, family history workshops and shelter for the homeless and the vulnerable. In the future we might add to this list 3D printers and robot 'maker spaces' where people, especially children, can learn about robotics, and make their own robots.

Equally, public libraries should continue to work alongside local schools, local prisons and local hospitals and provide access to a wide range of e-services, especially for people with mental or physical disabilities.

In short, if public libraries ceased to exist, we would soon need to re-invent them. Now admittedly many younger people still see no need to visit*Marshall McLuhan, the philosopher of communication theory, is still right. How information is delivered still influences the message* a local library. But this could be because they still see libraries as spaces full of useless old books rather than places full of useful new ideas. Whatever. Just wait. Young people grow old and here, once again, libraries will come into their own as meeting places where older citizens can continue their education.

In my view it is inevitable that the ongoing digitalisation of culture will lead to an ever-greater integration of cultural institutions. Local libraries will shift from being just book places to places that curate our cultural and intellectual heritage and forge and renew our identity, especially at a local level, through books.

This change may not be a bad thing in itself, but we should remain cynical about anyone that wants to destroy the books themselves or totally replace paper with pixels because physical books represent a form of memory that's unique. Digital books can easily be erased, revised or

updated and each 'copy' is identical.

This, of course, means that the role of public librarians will change. The idea of professional librarianship will fade and in its place will emerge the idea of professional informational and cultural curation. And this will embrace a variety of new skills.

But let's bring this back to why the physical space that public libraries occupy is so important. Again, libraries are not important because they contain books per se. They are also important because of how a place full of books, especially books made of paper, makes people feel. The books are hugely important, but so too is the space. Great libraries, like all great buildings, can change how you feel and this, in turn, can change how you think and act.

For this reason alone that we should accept that public libraries with fewer or indeed no physical books would still be public libraries on some level, because they would continue to serve the traditional function of a library by providing community spaces where serendipitous encounters with people, ideas and information takes place.

We should consider funding public libraries in novel ways too. This could mean public libraries going back to their philanthropic roots and asking wealthy individuals to build libraries rather than football clubs. It could mean placing lending libraries and reading rooms in High Street stores (another old idea ripe for revival).

Or for the really radically inclined why not get the government to impose additional taxes on certain leisure pursuits such as online gambling that provide little mental nourishment or social cohesion and use the revenue to subsidise useful things— like public libraries.

There is a considerable amount of discussion at the moment in Britain about obesity. The idea is that we should watch what we eat or we will end

up prematurely dead. There are also healthy debates about the cost to society of binge drinking and smoking. But where is the debate about the quality of what and especially where we read? Shouldn't public libraries be lending a few thoughts on this?

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