

DIRECTLINE

FRONTING UP TO THE CHALLENGES

Wednesday 20 March, 7.30am, mobile phone rings. It's 612 ABC Brisbane wanting to know more about 'dwindling library patronage' and 'is it all over for libraries now that we have ebooks and the internet?' Our president Vanessa Little fronts up to the mic on the breakfast show an hour later and shares the good news with radio listeners that libraries are alive, well, and thriving in the digital environment. You can listen to the interview on the website.¹

In her radio interview Vanessa pointed out that public libraries are no longer just about books, they are also important civic spaces with meeting places and study areas, providing essential programs and services to their communities.

When we are talking about books, the role of public libraries remains as relevant today as it was 20 years ago. Standard price points for popular new trade paperbacks are \$24.95 and \$32.95, putting new books outside the reach of the 1.7 million households experiencing low income and making it impossible for keen readers to buy everything they want to read. The move from print to ebooks will bring prices down but not by as much as readers may hope (the print and distribution is a relatively small proportion of the total cost of bringing a book to market) and the popular authors certainly won't be free.

It's not only public libraries that are being challenged about their future validity in a world where everyone is able to access free content on the internet. Colleagues in school, academic, government, health, law, and other special libraries hear the comment all too often from cost-cutting executives.

The assumption is that (a) everything will be available on the internet, (b) free content on the internet will remain free, and the information added in future will be free too, and (c) there will be easy ways of searching the internet, again for free. But there is significant evidence to the contrary:

(a) Everything is not available on the internet. As an example, the Google Books project, a partnership with major university libraries around the world, began in 2006. In March 2012, the number of scanned books passed the 20 million mark. However, the process has slowed down and there are still millions of volumes which are only available in print.

(b) Content producers who have been willing to provide information free of charge on the internet are now looking at ways of charging users. In 2010 News Corporation made the move into charging for online newspapers and in 2012 Fairfax Media announced its intention to erect paywalls.

(c) When people say 'we can just Google it' they're assuming Google, a company that has been around for less than 15 years, will be in business for many years to come. Eric Jackson writing for Forbes in April 2012, said, 'We think of Google and Facebook as Web gorillas. They'll be around forever. Yet, with the rate that the tech world is moving these days, there are good reasons to think both might be gone completely in five to eight years. Not bankrupt gone, but MySpace gone.'²

Instead of affordability improving over time, the evidence suggests a brief heyday of free online content, followed by a return to paid-for content – and paid-for content that not all Australians will be able to afford.

Speaking at ALIA Information Online in February, IFLA president Ingrid Parent talked about the need for a new definition for libraries. She reminded us that the Oxford Dictionary definition of library is, 'a building or room containing collections of books, periodicals, and sometimes films and recorded music for use or borrowing by the public or the members of an institution'.

For Library and Information Week this year, we are going to ask people to help us create a new definition for the term 'library'. If you would like to make an early start and help counteract this challenge about libraries' validity in the digital age, please email your suggestion through to advocacy@alia.org.au. We would love to hear from you.

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[1] http://blogs.abc.net.au/queensland/2013/03/brisbane-city-council-french-italian-citycat-terminal-library-patronage-down.html?site=brisbane&program=612_breakfast

[2] <http://www.forbes.com/sites/ericjackson/2012/04/30/heres-why-google-and-facebook-might-completely-disappear-in-the-next-5-years/>



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