

The Library and Internet as Milestones of Civilization

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for the Sunday Gazette

"Today the sight that discourages book people most is to walk into a public library and see computers where books used to be....Computers now literally drive out books from the place that should, by definition, be books' own home: the library "

—Larry McMurtry, *Books: A Memoir*, 2008

There's nothing that can be done about McMurtry's lament, as much as I, both a cybernaut and bibliophile, sympathize with its sentiment. Not only is the practice of granting free Internet access to patrons now a given at public libraries all over the country and much of the world, I predicted this, in some sense, 45 years ago. Here's the background.

In 1965, shortly after my appointment as Director of the then non-existent computing center at the State University of New York at Albany, now a.k.a. the University at Albany, I was asked to give a series of conceptual computer tutorials to key faculty and staff. In attendance at one of the first sessions was university librarian Alice Hastings (who retired in 1970 and now lives in Slingerlands). There is now an Alice Hastings Murphy scholarship named in her honor.

I have mislaid my notes for that tutorial, but I distinctly remember saying that the time would come when there would be no difference between a library and a computing center. Less distinctly do I remember what I meant by that. I don't think I anticipated the invention of e-books in particular, and the beginning of the Internet was still five years away. I just imagined that someday every book in the Library of Congress would be digitized and made available in some form in libraries whose interiors would look like computing centers rather than shelf after shelf of hardcover books. Thank goodness that precisely that has not yet happened.

But something like it has. For one thing, there is no longer a need to replicate the equivalent of billions of actual books in every library in the kingdom. The collective memories of the millions of computers at Internet nodes could easily accommodate one copy of all that material (with extra copies only for the security provided by redundancy) and let us download "books," one at a time, as interest and money to pay for the service allows. Of course, we could also attach to our personal computers a \$120 external hard drive that holds two terabytes of memory—two thousand gigabytes!—enough to hold two million 250-page books. And, irony of ironies, they are being sold by Amazon.com, which, as a start-up just a few years ago, sold nothing but real books.

Google Books is well on its way to making two million free e-books available to you, many scanned with the complicity of supposedly reputable university libraries. But by now Google, to its credit the best research tool on the Internet, has had its knuckles rapped and has to be more respectful of copyright. So most of the top two million books you want to read won't be free, but the two million you will be able to access will, at a book a day, keep you busy for 5,000 years. (OK, I made the arithmetic easier by assuming 400-day years.)

.My friend E.T. (not an extra-terrestrial), knowing that I am an SCPL trustee, thinks that I should ask our Board to mandate acquisition of e-books, the kind that can be read on our computers or on our Kindles, Nooks, or iPads (none of which I have yet deigned to buy) and let our patrons "borrow" their content just as free of charge as a hardcover book or a DVD or CD. But that would likely run afoul of copyright laws, and it would bother the author in me that already regrets that no mechanism has yet been found to compensate scribes for the lost royalties that result from people borrowing library books rather than purchasing them.

Despite the last comment, I consider the invention of the library to be one of the significant Milestones of Computer Science and Information Technology, the title of my Greenwood Press book of 2003. The last passage of its entry for Library reads “Although electronic books (e-books) are becoming popular, most people find no substitute for the real thing. In this age of automaton, only a few computing centers contain books, but all libraries of any size contain multiple Internet-ready personal computers.”

In my book, the concept of a library was not made its number one milestone. If I had had the audacity to commit a Milestones of Civilization, it would have been. So what was deemed number one? Why, the Internet, of course. This piece started out to be a partial regurgitation of the book I reviewed at the Library three weeks ago, “The Shallows: What the Internet is doing to our brains” by Nicholas Carr. A full discussion of his subject will have to wait for another round.

Larry McMurtry, he of the quote at the top, writes in the same book that he fears that there will come a time when people will no longer build personal libraries of hardcover books. This bothers him not only intrinsically, but because he has been a lifelong purchaser and reseller of books purchased from private collectors who are downsizing or have passed to a realm where they either know nothing or know everything and have no need to read, eat, or procreate. McMurtry has built what is probably the world’s largest used bookstore, “Booked-Up,” in a remote corner of Texas called Archer City. I have been there, once, a tale I must also save for another day.

My own book’s entry for “Internet” extols its virtues rather than its dangers. It ends “The Internet, the ‘First Wonder of the Modern World,’ now consists of thousands of servers and many millions of users. Because no central computer or authority controls the Internet, it cannot be destroyed. And no one owns it.”

But if the Internet were to be offered to me in trade for my personal library, I’d keep my library. McMurtry and I are almost the same age, so it’s touch and go as to whether I’ll get to buy his library or he’ll get to buy mine.

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