The Future of Libraries in a Digital World

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ARTS, HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES

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The Future of Libraries in a Digital World

Do traditional libraries and printed books still have a place in our increasingly digital world? In the last decades, we saw the development of many libraries from centres of intellectual life and the humanities to service providers for the sciences, which generally demand e-medias, not printed material. But libraries continue to serve vital functions in society and should adapt to complement – rather than be replaced by – digital technologies. Urs Bisig conducted an in-depth analysis of current trends in libraries and information science. His study makes a compelling case for the ongoing relevance of physical books and library spaces, even as digital resources expand.

Navigating the Information Deluge

One of the most critical roles for modern libraries, according to Bisig, is helping users navigate the overwhelming amount of information now available online. As the internet and digital publishing have made it easier than ever to publish and share content, the sheer volume of information has become difficult to manage.

Libraries can serve as trusted guides, helping users find high-quality, reliable information amidst the noise. Librarians' expertise in evaluating and organising information is more valuable than ever in an era of misinformation and information overload.

Bisig argues that libraries should focus on developing and maintaining sophisticated search tools and catalogues. While Google-style search engines are familiar to users, they often struggle with more complex or open-ended queries. Library catalogues that use careful categorisation and metadata can help users find more precisely what they need, especially for in-depth research.

The Importance of Long-Form Reading

Another key area where libraries continue to excel is in providing access to books and other long-form texts. The author contends that despite the prevalence of short online content, printed books remain invaluable for many readers in developing deep learning and understanding.

While academic journals and online articles are useful for staying up-to-date on the latest research, books provide the space to fully explore a topic, present multiple perspectives, and develop complex arguments. This makes them especially crucial in fields like the humanities and social sciences.

Bisig notes that many readers still prefer physical books for in-depth reading, finding them more comfortable and less distracting than screens. Libraries can cater to this preference by maintaining robust print collections alongside their digital offerings.

The Role of Libraries in Preserving Cultural Heritage

Another crucial role for libraries in the digital age is preserving our cultural heritage, both digital and physical. As more content is published exclusively online, libraries have an important responsibility to archive and preserve digital materials that might otherwise be lost.

At the same time, Bisig argues that libraries should continue to preserve physical books and documents. He notes that researchers studying historical periods benefit from being able to physically handle books and documents from that era, not just view digital scans.

By maintaining both digital and physical archives, libraries can ensure long-term access to our intellectual and cultural heritage.

The Need to Balance Digital and Print

A key theme throughout Bisig's study is the need to balance digital and print resources rather than seeing them as an either/or proposition. He argues that both have important roles to play in meeting diverse user needs. Even as e-books and online journals have become more prevalent, print books have shown surprising resilience. Print remains the preferred format for many types of long-form writing.

Rather than rushing to go fully digital, Bisig suggests libraries embrace a hybrid model that offers users choice in formats. This allows libraries to serve both tech-savvy users who prefer digital and those who still value print.

The Enduring Value of Libraries as Physical Spaces

The study also emphasises the continued importance of libraries as physical spaces. Even as more information moves online, Bisig argues that library buildings serve vital community functions.

Library spaces provide quiet areas for focused work and study that can be hard to find elsewhere. They also serve as community gathering places and venues for events and programmes. The author suggests that libraries focus on creating welcoming, comfortable environments for reading, research, and intellectual exchange. He argues that libraries should prioritise serving those engaged in reading and intellectual pursuits, rather than trying to become all-purpose community centres. While some public libraries have added amenities like 'makerspaces' and gaming areas to attract more visitors, the author cautions against moving too far away from libraries' core purpose.

Limited financial resources force libraries to specialise

Due to restricted financial resources, it is not possible for every library to offer all services, e.g. every title in e- and printed form. Therefore the author emphasises that libraries may need to specialise to best serve their clients. He outlines several potential types of libraries to consider:

- Information Centres, which would focus primarily on digital resources, with extensive e-book and database collections and expertise in online research tools. These would cater especially to fields like science and technology, where current research is mainly published electronically.

- Orientation Centres, which would specialise in print books and long-form texts, with rich physical collections and expertise in guiding users to in-depth resources on various topics.

But it could be necessary to supplement these collections with e-medias too, because some relevant longer texts exist nowadays only in this form. These libraries would serve humanities scholars, general readers, and others who prefer print.

- Universal Libraries, which would be large institutions able to offer extensive digital and print collections, serving as hybrid libraries that bridge both worlds. These would likely be major research or national libraries with significant resources.

- Public Libraries which may evolve into broader community centres providing diverse services and programmes beyond traditional library offerings.

Bisig argues that this kind of specialisation also allows libraries to develop deep expertise in particular areas. It also encourages libraries to see themselves as part of an interconnected system rather than trying to be all things to all users.

The Libraries of the Future

As libraries continue to evolve, the author emphasises the importance of maintaining their core values and mission. While adapting to new technologies is crucial, he cautions against libraries becoming too dependent on commercial tech companies and major publishers.

Bisig argues that libraries should have more confidence in the unique value they provide. Their expertise in organising and providing access to information, commitment to serving the public good, and role as community institutions make them distinct from commercial information providers.

Looking ahead, he sees libraries playing an important part in addressing key challenges in our information ecosystem. These include helping users navigate complex information landscapes, combating misinformation, preserving digital and physical cultural heritage, and ensuring equitable access to knowledge.

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A key theme throughout Bisig's research is the need to balance digital and print resources rather than seeing them as an either/or proposition.

By embracing their traditional strengths while thoughtfully incorporating new technologies, libraries can continue to serve as vital resources for learning, research, and community engagement well into the future. Bisig's study provides a valuable roadmap for libraries seeking to navigate the complex digital landscape while remaining true to their core mission of expanding access to knowledge for all..

MEET THE RESEARCHER

Urs Bisig

Urs Bisig completed his studies in psychology and economics at the University of Zurich, graduating with a lic.phil. degree, equivalent to a Master of Arts. Before retiring, Bisig was a subject specialist at the Zurich Central Library, where he engaged with evolving trends in library systems. His writing bridges the fields of psychology and library science, focusing on the adaptation of information systems to societal and technological changes. Bisig has published some papers on the new information world, contributing to understanding of modern information landscapes.

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📖 FURTHER READING

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