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Assignment 4: Impact of Technology

“The ELP Library will contain no printed books or other printed material of any kind... All information resources will be available only in digital formats and accessible only electronically.”

With these words Norman D. Stevens presents a view of the future in which all library resources are available only in electronic formats. While libraries will continue to acquire emerging technologies, the fully electronic library containing no printed materials of any kind is unrealistic in the foreseeable future. In keeping with the Five Laws of Library Science, and in order to meet all users' needs, libraries will continue to provide information in a variety of formats, including printed materials.

The context of Stevens' prediction leads the reader to question its validity. The article in which it appears, *The Fully Electronic Academic Library*, describes the involvement of Stevens' Molesworth Institute in the planning of the “Edmund Lester Pearson” academic library at “Ezra Beesley University.” Routledge, publisher of Stevens' *Archives of Library Research from the Molesworth Institute* describes Stevens as a library humorist and director of the “mythical” Institute. The library's outlandish characteristics also lead one to question its practicality, if not its legitimacy; the library closes on February 29 so that it can operate 365 days a year and the starting annual salary of its employees is \$100,000. As it appears in an article that lampoons the concept of a fully electronic library, Stevens' view of the future is questionable.

Although Stevens spoofs the fully electronic library concept, his prediction reflects a very real concern: the growth of technology and its impact on the library. Richard Rubin describes the situation as follows: “The introduction of new technologies has caused librarians to redefine

and restructure library services, and in the process the library itself....Will the physical library ultimately disappear as the digital library increases in use? Only time will tell" (79). The digital library offers many advantages. Users can consult scholarly information without visiting the physical library space and digital information can be accessed by multiple users at all times and updated quickly. Recognizing these advantages, many libraries now offer both electronic and print resources; Rubin describes these libraries as "hybrid" (96-97). The impact of the web and digital technology can be seen in many areas, including the online catalog, digital reference service, collections, preservation, and staff (Rubin, 104-113). Unquestionably, emerging technologies impact libraries and many more changes will come; however, the availability of information in electronic form does not preclude the use of print materials and traditional library services. Electronic resources and the digital library require "that various value-added services be provided, including searching, user profiling, authentication services, and user interfaces" (Rubin, 97).

While changing, the historical roles of libraries and librarianship remain relevant. Writing on academic libraries, Karl Bridges notes that libraries represent beliefs about the value of knowledge and learning that continue to be applicable (54). Bridges argues that libraries need librarians; those who point to virtual services as a replacement for and not a complement to traditional services are "less interested in good library service than in promoting some current fad in academic management" (54). The entirely electronic library fails to fully address user service needs: "the use of electronic tools is being promoted as a substitute for service instead of what it should be- a supplement" (Bridges, 54). Traditional and online libraries serve different functions: preservation and collection versus division and dissemination (Weinberger, 29). On a practical note, digital libraries are not simply about access and must serve the traditional administrative, business, and curatorial library functions (Greenstein, 291). Digital sustainability requires stewardship, as "meaning does not reside in the technology, and data streams cannot

sustain themselves. In sustaining digital information it is necessary to consider the organizational, socio-technical, and economic infrastructure” (Bradley, 151). Libraries and librarians are needed to organize, protect and sustain these information resources. The Five Laws, as updated by Gorman, recognize the continued relevance of the traditional library’s role in an increasingly electronic information environment, telling us to “respect all forms by which knowledge is communicated” and “use technology intelligently to enhance service.”

Libraries can and will respond to the increasing emphasis on and availability of electronic resources without abandoning traditional print materials. “We should embrace technology in libraries,” notes Bridges, and “need to focus on service and view technology for what it is- a tool- not as an end in and of itself” (54). Manoff notes that the proliferation of electronic resources and the ensuing “confusion and destabilization” present an opportunity to address the limitations of traditional libraries (872). “Rather than viewing the ambiguity of the electronic object as disabling, we should view it as an opportunity to rethink and reformulate library collections and access” (Manoff, 874). Libraries are finding middle ground between the “fully electronic library” and one composed entirely of print materials. They will continue to “align themselves more closely with the information-seeking behaviors” of their users. By doing so, they can fulfill modern library science’s Fifth Law by balancing the old and new.

Ten years ago, Michael Gorman wrote that rational people “look at the reality of library use, library collections, and library services and project from that. Extremists dream a future and make assertions that have no basis in reality or common sense” (23). Stevens’ dream of a fully electronic library does not align with the reality of the present or future library; he takes this vision to its extreme in his mythical institute’s planning of a fictional university library. Future libraries will utilize emerging technologies while continuing to provide access to information in a variety of formats. By doing so, they can meet user needs and “honor the past and create the future.”

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