

# Library as a Verb: Technological Change and the Obsolescence of Place in Research

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## Abstract

In recent years, it has become almost routine to speculate on the obsolescence or perseverance of the library. These speculations usually conflate the institution of the library with its physical location. This essay presents an overview of existing opinions on whether libraries will persevere, shows how changes in technology and the research process affect the concept of the library, and ultimately argues that the library may be better viewed as a process than as a place.

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## Introduction

There has been a tendency for at least the past ten years to talk about the disappearance or obsolescence of the academic library as an institution. Many of these gloom-laden prognostications are tied to the drastic acceleration of technological change in the past two decades—specifically, how this has spurred equally big shifts in research. Historically, libraries were easy to define as a place alone. As Michael Lapidge states in his history of Anglo-Saxon England, libraries at one point were “simply a collection of books . . . acquired and arranged for the purposes of study and the pursuit of knowledge” (2006, p. 1). If we try to argue for the continued usefulness of libraries on this idea alone, it is clear to see where the doom talk is coming from.

In the past five or six years, however, librarians and other interested parties have begun to more openly question whether the library is on the brink of extinction at all. Librarians are quick to draw attention to the fact that the place or space a library occupies physically does not make up its entire existence. Recent studies also note that forecasts of declining print usage from the beginning of the online information boom have not borne out: access to digital-only resources has, in fact, *increased* print usage. The academic library, far from being obliterated by the Internet and other access-anywhere sources of information, is bolstered by them.

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## Where We Are Today

It is not my intent in this paper to argue for or against the obsolescence of the academic library as a physical place or an institution—although I do not think either is going away any time soon. Instead, I want to examine the underlying assumptions of arguments on both sides of the debate, and of those who take a neutral position or seek to side-step the issue altogether, and whether, given the proliferation of digital information, rising informational literacy, and the steadily lowering costs of always-connected devices, it makes sense to identify the physical location of an academic library with its status as an institution.

Sennyey, Ross, and Mills, in a 2009 article exploring the future of the academic library, point out that the word “library” does not have a single, unambiguous meaning. They pull three definitions from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, and use them to argue that the word can refer either to the library as place, the library as collection, or the library staff (Sennyey, Ross, & Mills, 2009, p. 252). Upon reviewing the literature, it becomes apparent that most authors make no such distinctions. The main arguments for or against the death of the academic library are underpinned by an assumption that the institution and its location are inseparable. In general, these arguments fall into one of three camps, which I will label the “moderate,” the “radical,” and the “conservative.”

### **Moderate Positions**

The vast majority of articles which discuss library obsolescence are moderate—or, perhaps, pragmatic. They posit that libraries are not obsolete, and are unlikely to become so, but that patrons are likely to visit for various reasons. Consequently, the kinds of services and spaces available in libraries need to be reconfigured. Most of these changes are technological in nature: computer labs are the most common addition, but “socially oriented” services such as group study areas, cafes, and other places for communal education also feature. Moderate authors generally see a need to move from in-person services to online models in conjunction with a shift in the types of in-person services offered.

In general, moderates believe that “libraries need to change and ... that change must address our approach to our work, the work itself, and how we organize ourselves to respond to our customers’ expectations” (Stoffle, Leeder, & Sykes-Casavant, 2008, p. 4). Specifically, these responses deal with the need for changing what buildings are used for, often with the expectation that print collections will be replaced “with areas designed not just for machines but also for people, and more specifically for collaborative learning” (Stoffle, Leeder, & Sykes-Casavant, 2008, p. 16).

In conjunction with this is the idea that libraries must act soon, as they “still enjoy considerable institutional good will, many, if not most, are still well funded, and the cultural associations with the library remain strong,” but this may change with continuing changes in technology (Sennyey, Ross, & Mills, 2009, p. 257). Another thing moderates agree on is that, while the library is not going away any time soon, “the design of academic libraries has changed dramatically in recent decades as a result of digital technology and new pedagogy formats, and will undoubtedly continue to change” (Lin, Chen, & Chang, 2010, p. 349).

Ultimately, moderates are pragmatists who accept the reality of changing research but reject the idea that it will efface the institution of the library any time soon.

### **Radical Positions**

Radical theorists tend to argue that the library-as-we-know-it is finished altogether. “How long will it be,” they ask, “before libraries disappear, when there are signs that many librarians are ready to discard printed materials for good?” (van Orsdel & Born 2002, cited in Lin, Chen, & Chang, 2010, p. 340). Not very long, is the implied answer. In place of the soon-defunct library,

radicals see a replacement made up entirely of websites and search engines, databases and wikis—the places patrons already go to as their first point of access when searching for materials. Most of the radical articles come from the early, heady days of the digital information boom in the late '90s and early '00s.

### ***Conservative Positions***

In direct contrast to the radicals, conservative authors deny that the library will ever change—let alone that it might one day become obsolete. Jeffrey Gayton is symptomatic of this kind of librarian/scholar, arguing that despite the “declining circulation of print materials and reduced use of reference services in academic libraries” caused by electronic materials, library patrons will continue to visit the library because of the “communal” values of the place it embodies: the “experience of seeing and being seen by others, quietly engaged in the same serious, studious activity” (2008, p. 60). As a result, he says, “the death of the academic library has not only been exaggerated, but misunderstood” (Gayton, 2008, p. 64). Instead of focusing on ways to change the library, conservatives believe that we should stick to a model that we know works, from long centuries of experience.

Regardless of whether any given argument is moderate, radical, or conservative, it is usually clear that “library” refers foremost to a central, fixed location. Those who want to uphold the library mostly as an important physical area take this position of necessity—if you believe that, technology notwithstanding, people carry out their research in one central location, the idea of a library existing without a building is nonsensical. Interestingly, though, even theorists who advocate accepting the obsolescence of the academic library and replacing it with a purely digital alternative build their arguments on the idea that a library is defined by one (or more) physical locations.

## **Changes in Technology and Research**

Although there are exceptions (e.g., Stoffle et al, 2008, who argue for economics as the main impulse), most authors who approach the idea that the library is in danger of vanishing assume that the increasing rapidity of technological changes is the root cause. Specifically, the continuing evolution of information storage-and-retrieval systems—and the subsequent shifts in library patrons' research habits—force us to change the way we look at and operate academic libraries.

It is true that, as a consequence of technology, we can no longer define an academic library as a collection of books and its attendant staff. Although personal computers, and the media which accompanied them, marked a major shift in research behavior—generally speaking, from browsing/serendipity to searching/structure—the Internet has had the biggest and farthest-reaching impact thus far. In the centuries before the creation and proliferation of the Internet, research necessarily had to be performed where the materials were. The rise of web-based information technologies means that patrons can now access materials—and perform research—from anywhere with an Internet connection. There are three particular related changes that have most affected the research process.

The first of these changes is the Internet itself, which radically de-centered the library. Although David Tyckoson (2011) notes that non-present researchers are hardly new—librarians have provided materials through mail and other methods “from the earliest times”—it is nonetheless true that the Internet drastically increased the numbers of patrons using library resources from a distance. In fact, in most cases, even patrons located in the physical library building now use tools designed for distance researchers.

Once the Internet had been established as a placeless ‘place’ to find information, the search engine interface was born. Just as the Internet moved researchers away from the physical stacks, the search engine—whether in the early iterations of Google, or the latest, most sophisticated nat-

ural-language-algorithm enhanced smartphone app—has moved them from a browsing-based model of information-seeking and to a search-based model (Williams, Nichols, & Rowlands, 2010, p. 196). While search-based models certainly make it easier to find information of *some* sort, search tools are not always the most effective method of finding useful results. Additionally, inexperienced researchers may incorrectly assume there is no data on their topic when the problem is actually related to their terminology or tactics. Even though search algorithms and associated tools are improving, heavy users of search engines tend towards “surfing” type behavior, preferring shallow, broad results to in-depth information.

One example of this is the app “Summly,” created by a teenager in his spare time to help study for his exams. The app “summarises and simplifies the content of web pages and search results,” providing the user with a brief bullet-pointed list of their central points (Wakefield, 2011). Summly, of course, is not meant for the serious researcher, but as its meteoric rise to the top ten apps in Apple’s App store just hours after its release indicates, summarized information may soon replace skimming for the average consumer of news stories and other media (Summly, 2012).

While it is true that e-books, electronic journals, and article databases *do* provide more useful, in-depth information, even these systems are not without flaws. Researcher William Noblett (2011) recalls his experience searching a supposedly full-text database of digitized newspapers from the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century, in which his search for a book auctioneer’s name was only successful due to his knowledge of the subject area.

Regardless of the shortcomings, the decentralized nature of modern research is unlikely to go away. If anything, improvements to and increased usage of search engines, specialized databases, and other online tools mean that more and more people will move away from looking at original documents in a single location.

## The Problem of Place

All of these changes in technology mean we can no longer easily define the library as a place—or as place at all. Unlike the Anglo-Saxons, we cannot define our libraries by where they are or what they physically contain and/or provide access to. In order to come close to describing the library as a place, we would have to string together quite a long statement indeed, something along the lines of “A library is a place with books; computers used to access the Internet and electronic journal databases, as well as other non-print sources; offices which can be used to request materials from other libraries; servers which hold born-digital resources and provide off-site access to electronic journal databases and other Internet-based materials...” and so on.

Clearly, a place-based description of the library no longer makes sense.

In fact, there are some problems with the notion that researchers access materials using the library at all. Williams et al. cite a 2006 survey by the Research Information Network which found that, even among university-based researchers, Google searches were much more common as starting points for research than library-based resources—including online databases and library catalogs (Rightscom, 2006, quoted in Williams et al., 2010, p. 197).

If place is no longer directly relevant to most researchers, we must look for alternative formulations of the “library” concept. The ubiquitous library provides one such avenue—Nancy Davenport (2006, quoted in Watson, 2010, p. 49), suggests thinking of “place as library” instead of the other way around, switching the focus from the building to the patron. With rising mobile adoption, this may be the *de facto* approach: Fred Barnhart and Jeanette Pierce (2011) argue that smartphones and other access-anywhere devices are moving librarians “closer than ever to the idea of providing service and content to patrons anytime and anywhere” (p. 289).

Another approach—and, I want to argue, a simpler one—is to abandon “place” as fundamental to the library at all and replace it with something else entirely. This may seem to be taking a similar approach to the “radicals” I describe above, but in fact it is not. I am not arguing that the location of a library cannot play an important, central role to some researchers; nor do I believe that libraries’ physical shells should be abandoned. Instead, I am arguing that, when we consider libraries, we avoid getting tangled up in definitions which start from an assumption that the library is, and can only ever, be located in a single place, or in a physical space entirely.

In fact, many library definitions in the literature already privilege not what a library *is* but what it *does*, or at least what *patrons* do there. The academic library “is a place for the production of knowledge” (Stoffle et al., 2008, p. 5); patrons use journal databases for “finding and retrieving articles” (Sennyey et al., 2009, p. 254). Lin et al. (2010) point out that academic libraries are places patrons go to “experience learning and discovery in a multitude of meaningful ways,” and list some aspects of the “student learning experience” such as critical thinking, reflecting, and the social construction of knowledge (pp. 339-340).

We might also gain insight into what really makes up a library by turning to Eli B. Cohen’s (2009, p. 6) philosophy of Informing Science, which studies how to most effectively deliver information to clientele (e.g., library patrons) in a variety of environments. Informing Science is useful to librarians in this case because it is focused not on the physical location where an information transfer takes place, but on the process itself. Viewed in this light, we might even argue that the library too can be viewed most efficiently not as a place but as a process.

If we remove the unnecessary place-based aspects of some of the statements just cited, we can see how such a view makes matters clearer. The library is not a “place for the production of knowledge,” it *is* “the production of knowledge.” Libraries are not places patrons go to “experience learning and discovery,” they *are* the experience of learning and discovery. Likewise, a definition of “library” which is process-oriented removes the problems of all the various technologies library buildings now house. We can redefine the word as a verb instead of a noun, and simply say “To library is the process of researching, regardless of format and location.”

## Library as Verb

Moving from a static, locational understanding of the library as a place in space to a more dynamic, process-oriented conception of library-as-activity makes it easier to define the role of the library in patron’s lives. Much as Google has become a verb meaning “to search on Google,” we need to start thinking of the library not just as “a building where research is done” but as a verb meaning “to do library research” (or whatever else it is our patrons need help doing). We should, instead of asking the question “What do our patrons want from the library?” be asking “How can we help our patrons library more effectively?”

Some of the answers to this question may in fact be place-based. Just because we are throwing out the idea that a library’s location and its functions are not inseparable does not mean that we cannot often meet our patrons’ needs in what is traditionally considered the library. However, that does not mean *all* of the answers will be place-centric. The answers may not necessarily be technology-based, either—unless we take books to still be technology, after all these years. Librarianship (much like Googling) is platform-and-place-agnostic. You can library from home on a PC. You can library from the coffee shop on a Mac. With smart phones, you can even library on the bus. And—despite what some proponents of the ubiquitous academic library may believe—you can certainly still library using paper, pencil, and printed materials within the academic library building itself.

Likewise, the job of librarians is changing. Due in part to near-ubiquitous e-resources, the clichéd description of librarians as the “gatekeeper” of knowledge no longer holds (Sennyey et al.,

2009, p. 255). Instead, academic librarians must spend more time than ever teaching people *how* to library. This includes general research guidelines—advice on formulating search terms and queries—but also and especially how to make educated decisions about the relevance, accuracy, and reliability of any resources, regardless of media. Due to the disparate nature of search engine front-ends, librarians must also spend time teaching patrons the more practical aspects of scholarly resource seeking such as common design problems, common terminology, and the idiosyncrasies of specific pages or databases.

## Conclusion

It is clearly not librarying itself that will become obsolete; instead, it is the concept of the library as a centralized place that no longer matches up with patrons' information-seeking behavior. In fact, we might convincingly argue that libraries have always been processes instead of places, and that librarians have always acted more as educators than as gatekeepers. It is simply that changing technologies have clarified the roles of libraries and librarians, forcefully separating from us the illusion that research is relegated to a single building.

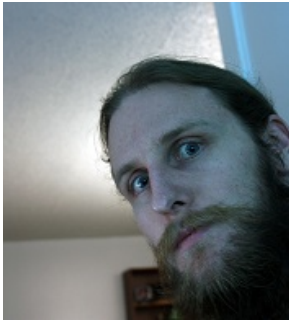
As John Maxymuk (2010) points out, it is our job to help our patrons succeed, not to worry about the changes this job causes to our environment (p. 130). Librarians need to look for ways to provide services which respond to the process of librarying. We need to stop asking what or where a library is and focus on when and how patrons make use of its services. To do otherwise in the face of increasing decentralization driven by technological change risks, at best, making our patrons' research more difficult. At worst, it may actually put libraries (or librarying) in danger as patrons seek out more usable—but less scholarly, and less effective—resources.

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## Biography



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