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COMO White Paper - Why We Still Matter

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Why We Still Matter

Would you believe it if I told you the keynote speaker at an attorney's conference told the audience they would soon be out of work because the Georgia Code was available online? How about if I said a speaker at a medical conference told the doctors that Google was launching a service with enough diagrams and medical information to replace them in the near future? No? Then why do speakers at library conferences often tell us how obsolete we have become and how Google will soon put us on the bread line?

Granted, the previous analogies are a bit of a stretch. After all, Google cannot perform surgery – although I would not be surprised if somewhere in a lab in Northern California they are working on it as we speak – and we cannot replace all the lawyers because, well, then who would we make jokes about? The point, however, is worth considering. I recall a recent library conference where a kindly gentleman presented statistic after statistic regarding technology trends, such as how many iPads were sold in the first month after their release and how many people now prefer to read books via personal reading devices. The crowd dutifully "oohed and aahed." After all, we librarians are nothing if not dutiful – and I do mean that as a compliment – and most of us are indeed very good "oohers and aahers." This gentleman's presentation and others like raise a lot of questions, however. Why would this put us out of business? Are technological advances and librarianship somehow at odds with one another? Shouldn't we be showcasing our strengths and hailing our accomplishments rather than letting others issue greatly exaggerated reports of our demise?

It is certainly true that we need to keep up with – and perhaps even stay ahead of – the latest trends in technology. It is probably fair to say that if we had not migrated to online catalogs and expanded our public access terminals for Internet use in the early to mid-nineties, we would probably already have gone the way of the dinosaur. Still, today's library is clearly not your grandmother's library. If we try to imagine what libraries were like when our grandparents or even our parents were our age – indeed even when we think back to when we were kids – it is easy to see that the history of libraries is filled with examples of adaptation to change.

The typical case for the demise of libraries and librarians often builds upon the seemingly omnipresent clanging of the death knell for books. One of the flaws in this line of reasoning is that those who say libraries will soon be obsolete most likely think of libraries as just stacks of old dusty books. Of course, what we know is that libraries offer so much more. From reference services to library instruction to comfortable study spaces to Internet and computing areas to cultural gathering centers, we are much more than the sum of our parts. Danuta Nitecki, dean of the Drexel University libraries sums it up well when she says, "We don't just house books, we house learning."(As quoted in a Time.com article entitled *Is a Bookless Library Still a Library?)* In an *Inside Higher* Ed article called *Bookless Libraries?,* Richard E. Luce, director of university libraries at Emory University, offers another defense of the bricks and mortar library. Luce is quoted as saying:

> The library still is, and will continue to be, the centerpiece of a campus.
> The history of libraries has been marked by evolution: They were founded as places where materials were collected and stored. Then they shifted their focus toward connecting clients with resources. Then, with the addition of creature comforts such as coffee shops, they became

'experience' centered. Now, we're really seeing the library as a place to connect, collaborate, learn, and really synthesize all four of those roles together.

Another major flaw in the argument that libraries are outdated is that the so called "death of the book" is really just a shift to a new format. After all, we have seen that e-books -- while they are not a physical printed object -- are still "information containers" that need to be collected, cataloged, stored, and circulated. These are things that we have done for years, so why would the increasing popularity of e-books spell doom for us? In the past we have demonstrated our willingness (sometimes a reluctant willingness, but a willingness nonetheless) and ability to shift to new media. Although I was not there to witness it, I am fairly certain sometime in the 1440s we successfully made the shift from a collection of hand-written scrolls to stacks filled with printed books. I cannot help wondering if folks at that time teased their local librarians about how that Gutenberg fellow was going to put them all out of work because scrolls were "so 14th century." A more recent and decidedly less flippant example of a shift in media that we accepted and embraced was the addition of non-print items to our collections. The days when one would find only books and print periodicals in libraries are not such a distant memory. Today, however, we cannot imagine a library without DVDs, CDs, and online periodicals. In short, books are not dead and neither are libraries; rather, they are both evolving.

Another point in the case against our relevance is the argument that technology is passing us by or replacing us. Really? As Barbara Genco of *Library Journal* says, "libraries are not strangers to technology." Genco was quoted in a *Publishers Weekly* report about a virtual summit entitled "E-Books: Libraries at the Tipping Point." As reported by *Publishers Weekly*, the data presented at the summit showed many of the positive – not negative – effects of e-books on libraries. For example, a survey commissioned for the summit revealed that the average public library has 1,500 e-book titles and the average academic library has more than 30,000. The survey also showed that 84% of public library respondents expected e-book circulation to increase in the year following the survey, while 77% of their academic library counterparts expected the same benefit. This type of symbiotic relationship and positive growth has also been reflected in the computer hardware we provide. I can remember starting work in libraries in the mid-nineties in one library that had only three public access computers. Today those libraries have thirty or forty computers in addition to wireless Internet connections, and they even circulate laptop computers. In academic libraries, students not only use our computers to conduct their research, they also rely on us as a place to print documents. Of course, our technology offerings do not end there. Most libraries – especially in the academic world – provide a long list of software programs. More recently, we have entered the world of social media.

Some might scoff at the number of students who use Facebook on library computers, but Internet access is a relevant service. As long as it is within our policy guidelines, students can use our computers as they wish. Furthermore, the fact that they are in the library underscores our role in campus life and the students' comfort level and appreciation for our services. In academic libraries in particular, we are also using online tools to provide an extension of our reference services and to strengthen our relationships with students. Here again, the statistics show an increase rather than a decrease in the number of students reaching out to us for help. Taking the case of Georgia Perimeter College as an example, our chat reference statistics (as compiled by librarian Amelia Glawe) show an increase from 741 questions asked during the 2009/2010 academic year to 2,277 questions asked during the 2010/2011 year. Of course, having the technology available is not enough on its own. The human help that librarians provide is even more important amidst the maze of automation in our lives. Anyone who has worked at a reference desk helping people navigate our periodical databases – or a complex Google search for that matter – can attest to this. Those who are convinced that everyone is staying at home

using Google for their research needs probably envision our buildings as empty as forgotten mining towns. The numbers, however, do not support that thinking. Again, taking the example of the Dunwoody campus library of Georgia Perimeter College as an example, the statistics compiled by library director Dr. Joseph Barnes for gate count (number of visitors), library instruction classes, and circulation (number of items borrowed) have been steadily increasing. For example, in the two years between the 2007/2008 and 2009/2010 academic years, the gate count increased by more than 57,000 visitors. The number of instruction classes taught rose by 14%, and the total number of items circulated went from 35,945 to 62,355. Surely, these numbers would surprise our detractors.

The *OCLC Perceptions of Libraries, 2010* report provides much more data that shows how much people rely on libraries, especially in these difficult economic times. While the report confirms the phenomenal growth of e-book sales (a 1,500% increase over 2005) and social media use, it also points out that "7 out of 10 public libraries report they are the only free source of computer and Internet access for their communities." Those the report defines as "economically impacted Americans" (people who reported experiencing a negative change in their employment status) showed an increasing reliance on the free resources offered by libraries. The report states that "more than a third (37%) of economically impacted respondents said they are using the library more often than they did before the economic downturn." Furthermore, increased library usage is not solely due to economic factors, since the report also finds that 23 million non-economically impacted Americans reported an increase in their library use, as well.

Of course, not everyone sees us as anachronistic. Numerous recent publications have extolled our work and made the case for our continuing relevance. Marilyn Johnson's recent work, *This Book is Overdue!,* is one such example. Johnson shares numerous examples of the good work that librarians do. These are not merely traditional examples of our commitment to things like offering free help and opposing censorship. Rather, these are examples of how librarians are migrating those concepts into the digital age. For example, Johnson discusses the librarians from St. John's University, who are teaching computer skills to students in developing nations. In her opening chapter, which juxtaposes the work of a real life librarian in a small South Dakota town with that of a librarian avatar in Second Life, Johnson refers to the "occasionally mind-blowing transition" our profession is experiencing. She sums up her point that our work transcends time and place this way:

> A library is a place to go for a reality check, a bracing dose of literature, or a 'true reflection of our history,' whether it's a brick-and-mortar building constructed a century ago or a fanciful arrangement of computer codes.The librarian is the organizer, the animating spirit behind it, and the navigator. Her job is to create order out of the confusion of the past, even as she enables us to blast into the future.

I wonder if Marilyn would like to speak at our next conference.

"Nobody goes there anymore; it's too crowded," is how the inimitable Yogi Berra once responded when asked why he no longer frequented a particular St. Louis restaurant.
This charming yet twisted logic might apply today to those who believe students eschew libraries and librarians in favor of Google or other freely accessible online resources. Whether they want to believe it or not, we have adapted to the digital age, and people are using libraries more than ever. Marilyn Johnson underscores this point with the subtitle of her book: *How Librarians and Cybrarians Can Save Us All.* Indeed, whatever name people choose to call us, we clearly still matter.

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