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We Love LIBRARIES!

Obsolete or Essential?

by Keith Jones

Debate was heated at the county budget hearing. One person spoke in favor of the library allocation. Then county employees and allies of a commissioner began to speak strongly against the slight increase that had been requested in library funding. The objections of those who wanted the money spent elsewhere can be understood as simple self-interest (perhaps with a little 'job-preservation' spice thrown in for good measure.)

But one of the objections stood out. "Libraries are obsolete," asserted a local businessman. "Everyone can get anything they need from the Internet. Books are going digital. Why are we even spending anything on a library, when they're clearly on the way out?"

Since no one was allowed to speak other than those who had registered with the county ahead of time, there was no opportunity to discuss this assertion. It simply hung there. But was the assertion, in fact, true? Are libraries obsolete now, or will they be so in the near future?

By vocation I am a minister, a writer and editor, and a storyteller. In each of these, I deal constantly with text, context, meaning, and application. Let's examine the businessman's assertions using these tools.

Text: "Everyone can get anything they need from the Internet."

Context: "Everyone" probably means, in this context, "My friends, business associates, family and I." But in the larger context of the whole community, many people do not have easy access to the Internet. In fact, the library is, for many people, their only access to the Internet. For others, it is a more convenient or economical connection than any other.

Meaning: This part of the statement is false on its face, unless "everyone" is considered to be only those who have unlimited access to the Internet. Somehow I don't think the mom who has to choose between buying food for her family and the "luxury" of Internet access would appreciate being considered less worthy.

Application: There is still a significant portion of the population in need of libraries.

Text: "Everyone can get anything they need from the Internet."

Context: "Anything they need" is hard to pin down. "… from the Internet…" is even harder to fathom in this context.

Meaning: Certainly a great deal of information is available on the Internet. However, so is a great deal of misinformation! And not all information is available on the Internet. In addition, the format of information might not be suitable for the needs of everyone. What if the person needs a proctor for an examination so that they can qualify for a job? Can the Internet provide this? Of course not. But library staff members provide this service, and many more, all the time.

Application: Libraries provide information and services that are not yet (and seem unlikely to be) available through the Internet.

Text: "Books are going digital."

Context: Certainly there is an explosion of digital media. Some pundits have predicted "the demise of the book."

Meaning: Especially for those without other access to the digital world, libraries provide an entry point to the wider world.

Application: Contrary to dealing only with an obsolete information-sharing technology (printed books), many libraries are ahead of the curve, providing access to digital media from books to music to film/video programs.

Benjamin Franklin is often credited with forming the first library in what is now the United States. But it was not the famous, elder statesman Franklin who did this, but the struggling lower-middle-class printer, who sought to improve himself, his business, his circle of friends, and his community. Just as in Philadelphia of the mid-1700s, money spent on libraries in the 21st century help provide a "poor man's university," access to a larger world, and a place where people can interact with knowledge, each other, and their wider community. Far from being obsolete, they are essential.

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Keith Jones serves as Chairman of the Board of Directors for the Mountain Regional Library System. He is a Baptist minister, writer/editor, and storyteller who likes to say, "I tell the truth for a living and lie for fun!" He and his wife Debbie live in Fannin County. His love for libraries started early with trips to the bookmobile and helping his mother, a school librarian, update the card catalogs for his school library.

GLQ Notables

Georgia State University Librarian named to Library Journal's list of "Movers & Shakers"

Georgia State University Library's Sarah Steiner is already a prolific scholar and a successful instructor. She has nine high-quality publications and numerous awards, as well as an excellent teaching record. Now Sarah can add one more notch to her belt, as Library Journal has added her to its highly regarded list of "Movers & Shakers."

The March 2011 issue of the magazine recognizes new leaders who will guide libraries through their changing role in the 21st century. In place since 2002, the Movers & Shakers award recognizes people like Steiner as shapers of the future of libraries. Movers & Shakers try new ideas and strategies, use technology to solve problems creatively, and make a difference for libraries and their users.

Library Journal recognized Steiner as a "community builder" because of her commitment to professional development in the library discipline. Here are just a few examples of her accomplishments:

•Steiner co-founded the Atlanta Emerging Librarians group, which has provided a needed forum to connect library students and new professionals in a city where library programs are only available via distance education.

•She is heavily involved in the Georgia Library Association and currently chairs two of its committees.

•Steiner also co-founded and organizes GLA's Carterette Series webinars, which has proven popular and drawn attendees from all over the country. Two one-hour sessions are held every other month.

•She has published nine articles and book chapters, while continuing to regularly present at conferences. In 2008, the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) published her best seller with co-editor Leslie Madden, The Desk and Beyond: Next Generation Reference Services.

Steiner did all of this while finishing her second master's degree, in Georgia State's English program, from which she graduates this spring. As a Library Journal Mover & Shaker, Steiner continues to research, write, mentor and present innovative ideas. She extends these practices as a highly valued member of Georgia State's community, serving as both a faculty senator and our Social Work and Virtual Services Librarian.

Steiner serves as the associate editor of the GLQ, and she has been instrumental in beginning its peer review program for journal articles. -- The Editor