
Visioning the Future of the Digital Library

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ABSTRACT

THE ELECTRONIC OR DIGITAL LIBRARY is just beginning to take shape throughout the world, including the world of libraries. To talk about the electronic library for children requires a futuristic approach. This article is a well grounded fantasy with practical insights revealing a scenario for a library of the future.

INTRODUCTION

There is a young man who comes into the library frequently. He is about thirteen years old, one of the brightest in his school. He works for hours on the computer, surfing the Web or playing Sim City. Sometimes he chats with friends, trading computer secrets. Sometimes he spends hours patiently mentoring younger children on the computer. When this young man grows up, becomes a father, and brings his children into the library, how will the library look and feel? What tools will be available? Will there still be books? Let's step ahead a generation and imagine our future.

Most importantly, the library is still a place; a community gathering place bustling with activity. Children and adults gather to work together, read together, talk with each other, learn both from the resources there and from each other. The library is the community's center for learning, one that recognizes that individual children have individual unique learning styles.

Learning takes place in a wide variety of forms. A child can play chess on a computer solo or interactively with another child in Mexico.

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He can also play chess the old fashioned way with his friend or join the after school chess club and receive professional mentoring by a grandfather who volunteers his time at the library. He visits regularly with national experts via teleconferencing but sometimes that isn't as much fun as playing in person.

There are hundreds of computers and computer docks throughout the library. The computers come in all sizes, from small pocket computers, to laptops, desktops, and large screen community theater style computers. All of the computers work, always, and they are connected to an international information network. Via this network, a child can log into the Kid's Place, a global information center that provides opportunities to access, explore, and interpret information. The technology provides opportunities for children to experiment with information by manipulating, creating, and re-creating projects. The publishing industry has expanded its format to include online products; virtually any popular topic is available. A child can watch a video, interact with educational software, solve a puzzle with other children who are online, read a magazine article, listen to a radio snippet or, of course, access a book. Children have instant and archival access to news and cultural events. There is an online author center where children view authors talking about their careers and listen to readings from their favorite books. Libraries and bookstores still bring authors for visits and book signings, and these presentations are more widely available because they are published via the network.

Books have the comforting look and feel that they always have, but they also connect to computers providing a new panorama of opportunities. When connected, all books become "books on tape" if the reader would prefer to listen to them being read. Some literature, especially the classics, link to multimedia critiques and cultural explanation, including historical context. Reading is multisensory, integrating visual and audio with text. Literacy is defined as the complete understanding of a subject, not just developing the skill of reading. In a high tech environment, human interaction still has the highest value. Reading remains a favorite way for families to spend time together. Thus, circulation of books continues to be one of the library's main functions, particularly children's books and popular adult materials.

The library has become a publishing center. Children and adults alike use this area to produce their own presentations and communications. Children build electronic portfolios documenting their schoolwork, and the library has become a center for this homework production. In this virtual studio, stocked with the most sophisticated technological equipment, children experiment with sounds, animation, graphics, language, textures, and inventions. Many children work together on projects because they get ideas, motivation, and excitement from collabo-

rating. At the library there is always someone to help them with a new computer program. A favorite place for high school students to work part time is in the library publishing center. Their benefits include unlimited computer time as well as a fair salary.

Children have unlimited resources available at their fingertips in order to nurture and support their creativity. This includes access to video clips; clip art photographs; computer authoring tools; printers; both print and video; digital cameras; and, of course, scissors, paper, and glue. Sometimes working on computers becomes routine, and it is more fun to make a mask or build a diorama. Craft supplies, hands-on science projects, interactive puzzles and interpretives are available throughout the library for children to explore their ideas and their world. The library has become an interactive museum of the mind. This place of books has now become a playground for learning.

The community recognizes its library as an essential learning environment. Short term funding and long term financial commitment follow at the local and international levels. Countries are interdependent, relying upon the international information network not only for the education of their children but also as a lifelong learning environment that is critical to the continuing education of adults.

Children growing up with the electronic library take the virtual community for granted. Their perception of the world is shaped by their ability to navigate the electronic community to exchange ideas, foster relationships, and gather up-to-the-minute information. Journalistic credibility is held to high standards due to the global communication structure put into place with the Internet. Children's voices are heard and children's issues receive priority attention due to the empowerment achieved via their electronic voice.

Libraries take the lead in providing computer and information skills training for all customers, especially children. The ability to navigate, analyze, evaluate, and organize information becomes the critical skill which all children must master. The library provides formal training in these areas as well as an open-ended learning environment where children enjoy exploring information in a playful adventurous setting.

Perhaps this library isn't a generation away. Many of the building blocks are already available in some settings; for other libraries they are just a few years away. For library visionaries and planners, the most important element is always the customer. While it may be easy to get carried away by technology, the customer will always bring us back to reality.

The young man who is working on the computer stops for a moment, chats with a friend standing next to him, then proceeds with his game. The future is ours to create and discover; we need to proceed with the exuberance of childhood and the wisdom of experience.