

# Old libraries can—and must—learn new tricks

*By Shea Leading*

In 1996, a little girl with a red bow in her hair wormed her way into many of our hearts, dragging along a wagon full of books. Her name was Matilda, and she made magic real. Not just through telepathy, but through the power of being well-read. I doubt I'm the first person whose library romanticism is strongly tied with *Matilda*, which illustrated libraries as a place of wonder and an escape, and I really hope I'm not the last. There's something special about a library card, and about librarians, and the whole library experience, but as we continue to worry about the future of print, libraries must be on our minds as well.

There's often a tendency to associate libraries with schools and collegiate institutions, and therefore with research, work, and possibly even boredom, as opposed to houses of literary enjoyment. With ebooks expanding their territory, I've worried about the future of libraries as providers of books. Every advancement of ebooks presents the possibility that fewer people are spending time in libraries, lowering the traffic of print collections.

Only 4% of readers currently report being "ebook-only" readers, so our book temples *seem* to be relatively safe for now, but the number of adults who own a tablet or e-reader is only increasing. In January 2014, the number of Americans over 18 years old who own a tablet or e-reader rose to over 50%, up from 43% in September 2013 and continuing an upward trend that began in 2010. E-reader apps, like Kindle, are also available for computers and smartphones, so e-reading isn't tied to the original devices anymore.

And though 69% of adults report having read a print book in the last year, 53% of Americans (age 16+) believe libraries should offer more ebooks. Library websites are also growing in popularity, indicating a shift to online library services and away from the physical building.

I'm of a mind that this is a mistake.

Technology is great, and the internet is a huge resource, but not everyone has internet access, particularly in low-income households. According to the National Center for Children in Poverty, 65% of black children and 65% of Hispanic children in the U.S. live in low-income households, compared to 31% of white children. And according to the Pew Research Center, "Compared to whites, African-Americans and Hispanics are more likely:"

- to say libraries are important to them and their families
- to say libraries are important to their communities
- to access the internet at the library (and feel internet access is a very important service libraries provide)
- to use library internet access to hunt/apply for jobs

- and, to visit libraries just to sit and read or study

On average, African Americans and Hispanics also reported being 46% more likely to use new library resources than white people. Libraries clearly provide a bridge for low-income families who can't afford to pay for internet, or tablets and e-readers for that matter, to have the same access to resources as higher-income households.

But, as access to information becomes more and more decentralized—primarily because of internet access that allows users to search for whatever they need from the comfort of their own home, or dorm—libraries have to adapt in ways that make the physical space even more valuable, rather than focusing on just the information they hold.

So, where is the real future of libraries, if not as a source of reading material, but still as a technological hub?

To start, libraries need to focus on providing services that an ISP can't. Librarians, for example, are an incredible host of information and can provide clarity while researching. Here at Champlain, our librarians make class visits to give presentations about using library resources, how to make the best use of search queries, and how to find information outside of your normal range of results. They also make themselves available to students who need help while visiting the Miller Information Commons (MIC), Champlain's campus library.

Many of these librarians are also taking to the web (like Champlain's own Andy Burkhardt), creating blogs and discussing their fields and how to reach their market. They're working hard to answer your questions before you've even had a chance to ask them. That human element makes a difference.

But it's ultimately the effect of libraries as a source of community that makes them invaluable resources, and that's where their future needs to be headed. Another survey conducted by the Pew Research Center indicated that 82% of Americans believe that free literacy programs, particularly for children, are one of the key services that libraries should provide. This is one of the many programs that libraries can (and should) establish to make the physical space a place where members of the community spend time regularly.

Creating programs that encourage people to engage with one another in their local library helps aid in a social exchange that can be compared to concert culture. When a group of people attend a concert, they create a mobile community that feeds into the band's ability to reach their audience. The audience feels in tune with the creators and end up buying more merch. Establishing that culture makes hosting events like book tours advantageous for both libraries and authors; it forms destinations for authors to mingle with their readership, creates a lot of selling opportunities, and further enforce libraries as a place people don't just need, but want to spend their time.

Libraries can also become community performance spaces, or whatever else might be needed. Eighty-five percent of Americans think libraries should coordinate more with local schools, which could create opportunities for elementary, middle, and high school students to “go public” through events like poetry readings. Participation in national events like the Edible Book Festival are also elements that could be used to make libraries true community centers.

Now more than ever, it’s necessary for libraries to continue their evolution. Ninety percent of Americans say that the closure of their local library would affect their community, while 67% say it would directly affect their family. But providing literacy programs and other such services is easier said than done, however, when many public libraries are struggling to stay open.

Libraries face a lot of funding challenges: For three years in a row, more than 40% of chief officers of state library agencies have reported a decrease in public library funding. These cuts seem to primarily come from economic hardship; when cutting government funded programs, libraries seem to be considered a non-essential service, making them an easy target for cutbacks. Libraries as safe spaces and a community centers are things that many people often underestimate.

When closures can be avoided, these budget cuts have largely affected the services that can be provided within libraries, despite evidence they should be supported. Though the value of libraries is clear, it’s imperative that we stop pulling their funding and shutting them down before they can truly take their proper place in the community, as well as the hearts of Matilda-loving individuals like myself.