

# Why the **INTERNET** Can't Replace the Library

By **Mark Y. Herring** From *American Libraries*

**T**HE great English essayist Matthew Arnold said, "Reading is culture." Given the condition of reading test scores among school children nationwide, it isn't surprising to find both our nation and our culture in trouble. Further, the rush to "Internetize" all schools, particularly K-12, adds to our downward spiral.

If it were not for the Harry Potter books, one might lose all hope who languishes here. Then, suddenly, you realize that libraries really are in trouble, grave danger, when important higher-education officials opine, "Don't you know the Internet has made libraries obsolete?" "Gadzooks!" as Harry himself might say.

In an effort to save our culture, strike a blow for reading, and, above all, correct the well-intentioned but horribly misguided notions about what is fast becoming "Intertopia" among many nonlibrarian bean-counters, here are 10 reasons why the Internet is no substitute for a library.

---

*Mark Y. Herring is Dean of Library Services for the Dacus Library, Winthrop University, Rock Hill, SC 29733. Condensed from American Libraries, 32 (April 2001), 76-78. Published by the American Library Association, 50 E. Huron St., Chicago, IL 60611.*

**1. Not everything is on the Internet.** With over one billion Web pages, you couldn't tell this by looking. Nevertheless, very few *substantive* materials are on the Internet *for free*. For example, only about 8% of all journals are on the Web, and an even smaller fraction of books are there. Both are costly! If you want the *Journal of Biochemistry*, *Physics Today*, *Journal of American History*, you'll pay, and to the tune of hundreds of thousands of dollars.

**2. It's really a needle in a haystack: The needle is your search, the haystack is the Web.** The Internet is like a vast uncataloged library. Whether you're using Hotbot, Lycos, Dogpile, Infoseek, or any one of a dozen other search or metasearch engines, you're not searching the entire Web. Sites often promise to search everything, but they can't deliver. Moreover, what they do search is not updated daily, weekly, or even monthly, regardless of what's advertised. If a librarian told you, "Here are 10 articles on Native Americans. We have 40 others but we're not going to let you see them, not now, not yet, not until you've tried another search in another library," you'd throw a fit. The Internet does this routinely and no one seems to mind.

**3. Quality control doesn't exist.** Yes, we need the Internet, but in addition to all the scientific, medical, and historical information (when accurate), there is also a cesspool of waste. When young people aren't getting their sex education off X-rated sites, they're learning politics from the Freeman Web page, or race relations from Ku Klux Klan sites. There is no quality control on the Web, and there isn't likely to be any. Unlike libraries, where vanity press publications are rarely, if ever, collected, vanity is often what drives the Internet. Any fool can put up anything on the Web, and, to my accounting, all have.

**4. What you don't know really does hurt you.** The great boon to libraries has been the digitization of journals. But full-text sites, while grand, aren't always full. What you don't know can hurt you, because: (a) articles on these sites are often missing, among other things, footnotes; (b) tables, graphs, and formulae do not often show up in a readable fashion (especially when printed); and (c) journal titles in a digitized package change regularly, often without warning.

A library may begin with one number of journals in September and end with another number in May. Trouble is, those titles aren't the same from September to May. Although the library may have paid \$100,000 for the access, it's rarely notified of any changes. I would not

trade access to digitized journals for anything in the world, but their use must be a judicious, planned, and measured one, not full, total, and exclusive reliance.

**5. What is on the Internet are about 20,000 academic book titles published before 1925.** Since 1970 about 50,000 academic titles have been published every year. Of these 1.5 million titles, fewer than a couple thousand are available. What is on the Internet are about 20,000 titles published before 1925. Why? There are no copyright restrictions that cause prices to soar to two or three times their printed costs. Finally, vendors delivering e-books allow only one digitized copy per library. If you check out an e-book over the Web, I can't have it until you return it. And if you're late getting the book back, there is no "dog ate my homework" argument. It's charged to your credit card *automatically*.

**6. The headaches and eyestrain from e-book readers won't let up any time soon.** Most of us have forgotten what we said about microfilm ("It will shrink libraries to shoebox size"), or when educational television was invented ("We'll need fewer teachers in the future"). Try reading an e-book reader for more than a half-hour. Headaches and eyestrain are the best results. Besides, if what you're reading is more than two pages long, what do you do? Print it. Where's a tree hugger when you really need one? Moreover, the cost of readers runs from \$200 to \$2,000, the cheaper ones being harder on the eyes. Will this change? Doubtless, but right now there are no market forces making it change. Will it change in less than 75 years? Unlikely!

**7. A fully "virtualized" library just can't be done—not yet, not now, not in our lifetimes.** The newest state university in California at Monterey opened without a library building a few years ago. For the last two years, they've been buying books by the tens of thousands because—surprise, surprise—they couldn't find what they needed on the Internet. California Polytechnic State University, home of the world's highest concentration of engineers and computer geeks, explored the possibility of a virtual (fully electronic) library for two years. Their solution was a \$42-million traditional library with, of course, a strong electronic component. In other words, a fully virtualized library just can't be done—not yet, not now, not in our lifetimes.

**8. The cost of digitizing would bankrupt any state that**

**attempted to have a virtual state library.** The cost of having everything digitized is incredibly high, costing tens of millions of dollars just in copyright releases. And this buys only one virtual library at one university. Questia Media, the biggest such outfit, just spent \$125 million digitizing 50,000 books released (but not to libraries!) in January. At this rate, to virtualize a medium-sized library of 400,000 volumes would cost a mere \$1,000,000,000!

Then you need to make sure students have equitable access everywhere they need it, when they need it. Finally, what do you do with rare and valuable primary sources once they are digitized? Take them to the dump? And you must hope the power never, ever goes out. Sure, students could still read by candlelight, but what would they be reading?

### **9. The Internet: a mile wide, an inch (or less) deep.**

Looking into the abyss of the Internet is like vertigo over a void. But the void has to do not only with what's there, but also with what isn't. Not much on the Internet is more than 15 years old. Vendors offering magazine access routinely add a new year while dropping an earlier one. Access to older material is very expensive. It will be useful, in coming years, for students to know (and have access to) more than just the scholarly materials written in the last 10 to 15 years.

### **10. The Internet is ubiquitous but books are portable.**

In a recent survey of those who buy electronic books, more than 80% said they like buying paper books over the Internet, not reading them on the Web. We have nearly 1,000 years of reading print in our bloodstream and that's not likely to change in the next 75. Granted, there will be changes in the delivery of electronic materials now, and those changes, most of them anyway, will be hugely beneficial. But humankind, being what it is, will always want to curl up with a good book—not a laptop computer—at least for the foreseeable future.

The Web is great; but it's a woefully poor substitute for a full-service library. It is mad idolatry to make it more than a tool. Libraries are icons of our cultural intellect, totems to the totality of knowledge. If we make them obsolete, we've signed the death warrant to our collective national conscience, not to mention sentencing what's left of our culture to the waste bin of history.

No one knows better than librarians just how much it costs to run a library. We're always looking for ways to trim expenses while not contracting service. The Internet is marvelous, but to claim, as some now do, that it's making libraries obsolete is as silly as saying shoes have made feet unnecessary.

*ed*