



Public Libraries in the Internet Age

MAURICE J. (MITCH) FREEDMAN

Public libraries and the professionals who staff them still play key roles in assisting the public in navigating the oceans of information now available to them through the Internet.

Maurice J. (Mitch) Freedman is a past president of the American Library Association and the retired director of the Westchester County, New York, library system.

Futurists, editorial writers, and countless others have been ready to play a funeral march for the public library for years, arguing that the Internet will eliminate the need for libraries, even books. But visit a public library in the United States and you'll find they are being used more heavily each year. The Internet has led to dramatic increases in the circulation of all library information services and materials in ways that extend the use of those services well beyond the walls of the brick and mortar building.

Public libraries have absorbed, employed, or promoted the use of new technologies and media as they appeared over the past 150 years. The Internet and the access it provides to the world of information bring a technology and medium to the public library that is qualitatively different from the technologies and media that preceded it. The quantity of information accessible via the Internet is so vast that it brings about a qualitative change in the information offerings made by public libraries.

Photo montage: With the Internet providing 24-hour-a-day access, public libraries are busier than ever before. Patrons can reserve books and videotapes they wish to borrow or even download audio books from public collections, using their home computers. As libraries install more computers for public use, many people prefer going there to do research, surf the Web, and send e-mail. (All photographs from AP/Wide World Photos)

First, the Internet enables the public library to provide information services and access to materials online 24 hours per day, 7 days per week (24/7). People with Internet browsing capability—at home or anywhere else—can examine the online catalog of library holdings, place reserves on items that they would like to borrow, and renew items that are due or overdue—all as functions of the integrated library systems that are available to the public via the Internet 24/7.

The ability to reserve books online is especially appealing to online patrons. Most libraries have seen the numbers of reserves made online double and triple, in contrast to earlier manual systems involving a paper form. The Westchester County, New York, cooperative public library system, serving a suburban area around New York City,¹ saw an increase from 4,000 paper-filled reserves per month in 1999 to more than 93,000 reserves filled monthly in 2005. This was possible because the online catalog system is accessible anytime to residents of the county's computer-equipped homes.

Today's online catalog has vastly enhanced search and retrieval functionality, further enabling public access to the collections. Despite predictions of the demise of books and other printed materials, Westchester found that 30 percent of the book reserves filled were requests for books that had been published prior to 1990.² Librarians reported that books that hadn't circulated in years, sometimes in decades, were now moving from the shelves as browsers scoured the online catalog and found literary gems of the past that they might otherwise have overlooked. This is how the new technology offers a dramatic assist to traditional public library services, increasing their relevance in an era of new technology.

Numerous applications of the new technologies and media have helped improve traditional services and introduced others unique to the electronic medium.

The first service is access to the Internet. More than 90 percent of U.S. libraries provide Internet access to the public. Despite widespread Internet access in homes and businesses, people choose for a variety of reasons to come into the public library to access the Web, send or answer e-mail, and, where allowed, chat with others.

This immediately led to a service vital to the public library's continued support by taxpayers. Because of concerns, especially about Internet safety for children, public libraries offer courses in "safe" use of the Internet for parents, children, and others. Also, many public libraries use their Web sites to direct parents and children to other sites especially appropriate to children. Proactively educating parents and children has been the public libraries' preferred approach to dealing with safety concerns, rather than promoting filters, other forms of restriction, or censorship.

Exploiting the technology and the Internet's 24/7 accessibility, many public libraries offer reference services via e-mail and chat. Many users prefer to make an inquiry via e-mail, rather than a telephone call that may result in a lengthy wait.

Public libraries offer "Webliographies," an especially wonderful and high-impact service. Libraries also provide valuable annotated lists of linked sites organized by topic for people of all interests and all ages. Professional librarians validate and compile these lists, ensuring their appropriateness, accuracy, and timeliness, none of which can be assured about the results delivered by commercial search engines.



Photo montage: Libraries have been at the forefront of integrating computer technology into academic research. They took the lead in digitizing historic documents for online dissemination, and libraries equipped with state-of-the-art computer facilities bring together experts to consult on mutual interests. (All photographs from AP/Wide World Photos)

The New York Public Library (NYPL), which serves the Bronx, Manhattan, and Staten Island, has been a pioneer for well over a century in children's work. NYPL provides access on its children's home page, On-Lion for Kids [<http://kids.nypl.org/>], to *Picture Books Everyone Should Know* (newly revised) and *100 Favorite Children's Books*. These online lists reach many more people than the library's printed lists do.

Information-resource professionals offer further guidance for parents and children seeking appropriate materials on the Web site. Drop-down menus at the top of the kids' page include resources on science and technology, arts and games, events in the branch libraries, reading and books, people and places, sports, holidays and celebrations, and more.

Public library users also have access to commercial full-text databases. With these tools, NYPL, for example, brings the home user thousands of periodicals and millions of articles [<http://www.nypl.org/databases/>]. In large libraries and small, databases allow access to periodicals and other publications that libraries would otherwise need to purchase for their users.

Many states have bought licenses to databases that make them available to all citizens of their respective sites. This means that a leased 3,000-title database of periodicals can be made freely accessible to a tiny community whose library can afford only 50 hard-copy subscriptions. Now all public libraries in New York and many other states promote access to electronic versions of thousands of periodicals, exponentially increasing the amount of information all public libraries make freely accessible to their users 24/7.

All of the aforementioned services highlight how the Internet has dramatically increased the relevance of public libraries to their users and the use of public library services.

Public libraries flourish and meet their users' information needs precisely because of the existence of the Internet.

Access: People flock to the public library and overwhelm the libraries' available Internet computers, contrary to the belief that virtually everyone has a computer at home and access to the Internet. There never seem to be enough machines available at peak and other periods.

Seniors: Seniors are one category of high-volume library Internet users. Perceptions that the elderly cannot adapt to change and are afraid of computers is not borne out by the hosts of seniors who use the Internet to exchange e-mail with children, grandchildren, relatives,

and friends; research information about health and welfare programs; and explore whatever else interests them, all at their local public library.

Homework: Numerous public libraries, public library consortia, and even states have contracted with *Tutor.com* [<http://www.tutor.com>] to provide students with online homework help and assistance with school projects. Part of what makes the service so valuable is that the online tutors are actual school teachers.

Laptops: The Bronx Library Center is one of many libraries that loans laptops to users for in-library use. All the laptops have in-library wireless network connections that enable people to use the Web for any of a variety of applications; they also have microcomputer programs.

Browsing: Libraries' online catalogs give users a chance to review dust jackets, tables of contents, first or sample chapters, and reviews for thousands of book titles. Now users can find out a great deal of information about items they might borrow without having to be at the library or physically handle such books.

Online Reviews: Some libraries have launched specialized reviews of books online. For example, the Ossining, New York, Public Library recently added to its Web site the *Ossining Review of Books* [<http://www.ossininglibrary.org/bob/default.aspx>], a new online guide to contemporary writing with involvement of prominent local writers and reviewers. The site features recommendations of books by writers with ties to Ossining. It also will give Ossining residents the opportunity to post their own comments and book reviews.

Today, public libraries are more relevant than ever to people fortunate enough to have new technologies and media in their homes. And for those who don't, computers and a wealth of other services await them at the library. Using media of a new century, the public library retains its traditional status as a community center, a gathering place, and simply a nice place to enjoy and share knowledge and information.

1. The population of Westchester County is 923,000 with 38 independent public libraries in its system. Westchester is similar to a number of affluent suburban counties that border major U.S. cities.

2. Westchester's filled reserves included all media, e.g. books on tape, DVDs, CDs, and other materials available at libraries. ■

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