



Supplemental Content to the article “So Now What?: The Future for Librarians,” appearing in the January/February 2012 issue of *Online Searcher* (Vol. 37, No. 1), pp. 41–48, 56–57.

The Doomsday Scenario

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In “The Decline and Fall of the Library Empire (<http://www.infotoday.com/searcher/apr12/Coffman—The-Divide-and-Fall-of-the-Library-Empire.shtml>), my article in the bygone *Searcher* magazine’s April 2012 issue, I traced the attempts of libraries and librarians to play a strong role in the digital transformation that has been reshaping the way we create and consume information and entertainment during the past 50 years.

Some of these attempts, such as cataloging the web and Library 2.0, never really got off the ground. In others, such as virtual reference, we built something that generated great interest and excitement among those of us in the profession, but failed to attract the attention of the millions of users migrating to the web, users who seemed to prefer Google to working with a live reference librarian. In other cases, such as database searching and public access computing, we truly have played pivotal roles in helping people find information on expensive online research services requiring a professional searcher. And we have helped bridge the digital divide by installing hundreds of thousands of computers in our libraries (with the generous support of the Gates Foundation in the U.S.), making it possible for millions of users—who otherwise would not have been able to afford it—to search the internet, use email, and update their MySpace and Facebook profiles to their hearts’ content.

However, advances in technology coupled with steep reductions in available funding have eliminated or are in the process of eliminating the library’s role as an intermediary in each of these areas. Of course, libraries got out of the mediated searching business years ago as content moved from proprietary databases to the web and Boolean logic was replaced by the Google Search Box. That same process is now at work with public access computing, as the cost of internet access has now declined to the point in which almost anyone can afford it, and more and more users are reaching for their smartphones or tablets when they need

access to the internet, rather than putting up with the hassles of using a library computer.

Finally, we took a look at ebooks—the current digital cause célèbre of the library community. We examined the problems libraries have in just getting ebooks, including the fact that most of the major publishers either won’t provide ebooks to libraries, charge us three times the retail price, or limit the way we can use them—i.e., Harper Collins’ 26 circulation limit. The lack of a “first sale” doctrine for ebooks; the fact that we generally don’t own the books but license them, and those licenses can mean our entire collection can disappear should we decide not to renew; not to mention the annual subscription fees we pay to ebook vendors for their “platforms”—it’s just barrier after barrier.

To be fair, some in the profession have been working hard to overcome these obstacles: ALA has tried negotiating with major publishers on numerous occasions now, so far to little avail. Douglas County and others have built their own ebook platforms and are negotiating with smaller, second- and third-tier publishers to buy titles directly and get around the lease problem. And some, including the Califa consortia in California, have even gone so far as to buy “self-published” ebook titles in bulk from outfits such as Smashwords. What a change! Up until now, librarians would have thought long and hard before adding even a single self-published title to their collections, but now they are going out and purchasing 10,000 self-published titles at once. I guess only time will tell whether our patrons are interested in reading them or not. Suffice it to say, however, that these books are no bargain—even at a purported \$3 apiece—if nobody cares to look at them.

Even if one or more of these strategies do pan out and we do overcome the current obstacles to ebook lending in libraries—there’s a much more fundamental question we must face: Why do we need libraries in an ebook world anyway? What value do we really bring to our readers and our

communities when Amazon and Google offer far larger collections than almost any traditional library, and when many of these titles are available for free and even Amazon titles average only \$7.72 per title.

So, after 50 years or more of toiling in the digital fields, ironically, we are right back where we started. The digital library we all dreamed of and worked so hard to realize has been created, all right. However, although we certainly had a hand in creating it, the digital library is not ours. The books are provided by Amazon and Google, social media for readers by Goodreads and LibraryThing, reference services by Google, and access by AT&T, Verizon, and smart-

phones. As for us, we are left with what we had when this all started: more than 20,000 public and academic libraries in the United States; more than 2 billion books and other materials on our shelves; 1.6 billion people who walked through our doors last year; 188,189 librarians and other staff who were there to greet them; and one big burning question: “So what do we do now?” Much of the answer to that question depends on what happens to what has been our stock in trade from the very beginning—the book.

Disclaimer: The ideas expressed in this article are Steve Coffman's alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of LSSI or the libraries it supports.