

Chapter LII

Digital Libraries as Centres of Knowledge: Historical Perspectives from European Ancient Libraries

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ABSTRACT

Using historical perspectives from ancient libraries in Europe, this chapter is focused on the core role of libraries as centres of knowledge. Though not intended to be a comprehensive historical account, these perspectives are seen as a starting point in the discussion in looking at digital libraries as similar centres or repositories of knowledge. The ways technological and social contexts have been adapted in ancient libraries are discussed, which helped to shed light on the next part of the discussion on digital libraries. Digital libraries are not only considered in terms of their technological aspirations, but also in their social constructions. It is hoped that the discussion will contribute to a collective understanding of immediate and future directions of libraries, their challenges and promises, and how they have evolved as places for local communities.

INTRODUCTION

Since its inception the study and practice of digital libraries have called on research and work dealing with the social construction, and the role of digital libraries in traditional libraries. Digital libraries have provided what people now refer to as hybrid libraries, typically referring to the implementa-

tion and use of digital technologies and resources within the walls of what used to be “traditional” libraries. Chowdhury and Chowdhury (2003) defined such libraries as “where digital and printed information resources co-exist and are brought together in an integrated information service accessible locally as well as remotely” (Chowdhury & Chowdhury, 2003, p. 6). The presence of digital

libraries within traditional libraries has provided a complex infusion of physical and digital spaces, which can become a powerful ally to small but growing libraries faced with space issues.

Given the increasing complexity of digital libraries, researchers have attempted to define their meaning and scope. Borgman (2003, p. 652) defined digital libraries as “sets of electronic resources and associated technical capabilities for creating, searching, and using information.” Within this definition lies the closely knitted relationship between digital contents and the technological functions and services concerning the creation, search, and usage of these digital resources. Waters (1998, p. 1) comprehended a broad definition, which stated that digital libraries

are organisations that provide the resources, including the specialised staff, to select, structure, offer intellectual access to, interpret, distribute, preserve the integrity of, and ensure the persistence over time of collections of digital works so that they are readily and economically available for use by a defined community or set of communities.

In a sense, going by this definition, any library that has allocated any resource (including staffing) to making digital works available for use by one or more target communities would already have a digital library.

Though an instrument that has widened the possibilities of design and deliveries of services; the presence of digital libraries can also be a rather perplexing one. Are they substitutes or perfect complements of traditional libraries? What is the future of libraries, given the changing circumstances and conditions of the larger societies? For the purpose of this article it is necessary to return to the historical beginnings of libraries; though this is not intended to be an exhaustive historical account.

Due to space limitations the discussion is focused on libraries in the European ancient world. The discussion begins with an account of the first

mega library of the ancient world: the Library of Alexandria. From there the discussion leads on, from the decline of knowledge and libraries during the dark ages till the renaissance period, a time of great revelations in knowledge when many geniuses and inventors also emerged. The renaissance period also reflected the rise of a new order for libraries—with the growth of university libraries and a society that were largely pursuing literacy and knowledge.

After drawing insights from the European accounts of technological use and transformations in libraries, the article will then focus on a more recent piece of library history: digital libraries. Are they replacements of libraries as new centres of knowledge or are they essential complements to libraries?

A VERY SHORT HISTORY

There has always been an innate knowing that knowledge is absolutely critical to status and survival. In the ancient world, the ability to know things about the seasons, farming, river tides, time, calendars, would often create the difference between the rich and the poor (Finley, 1965). While this is nothing new, it is imperative to highlight that libraries, in the role of knowledge cultivation and construction, have always involved technologies.

One of the greatest accomplishment in library history (Hessel, 1955), the Library of Alexandria, was founded around 300 B.C. A mega library and a centre of knowledge that was public, it was the first of its kind (Casson, 2001). The Greeks knew the importance of having a repository of records, archives, literature and scholarly works that was of quality and trustworthy—to a heightened intellectual life. Scholars attribute this growth to the emphasis on the centres of learning (other smaller private and public libraries) and the Library of Alexandria found there—creating a city of literacy based on knowledge production

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