

Chapter 5

Digital Libraries in the Clouds

ABSTRACT

The business of free represents a radical cultural shift, and many social institutions will need to adapt as a result. This chapter examines the situation of libraries and museums, which are both facing a marked struggle to compete with free and convenient online content. In fact, it seems that for-profit companies, in using various strategies, have essentially beat libraries and museums with their own free content model. Recent decades have seen a decline in public interest in the services museums and libraries provide, which may have multiple possible causes and has led to a loss of revenue. In order to remain solvent, these institutions will need to make changes in their business models to adapt to new technological realities and market conditions. Some efforts to add value to the traditional library or museum experience have already been initiated, although cultivating sustainable funding sources may represent a significant challenge.

INTRODUCTION

The rise of the information age and the business of free have completely changed the face of business, industry, and, equally, many of the cultural and educational institutions we have long relied upon and held in great trust. It is no longer a simple matter of which business models can compete against increasing digitization. It is a matter of which aspects of culture will become antiquated and archaic and which will survive the transformation.

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The business of free is driving the online economy in many of our long-standing social institutions. While previously we may have paid content providers or gone to a corporate, university, museum, or public library to access information and services, with sites like Wikipedia and Google we can access the same information and services for free in our homes and offices. We can watch TV, read books, conduct research, and look at paintings online, also usually for free. The interesting thing to note, though, is that this business of free isn't just a new way to do business; rather, it's a complete shift that affects some of the very foundations of our culture. In a world where books are distributed freely and read online, what becomes of the library? If Google Image Search can let one look at any piece of art in the world, what becomes of the museum? If one can access scholarly journals and conduct detailed research online, what becomes of the library's vast journal collection? The Internet is not simply becoming freer: this shift is also driven by the fundamental change in our expectations around information—namely that it is, or at least ought to be, free and readily accessible online. If it is not, then people won't use it.

THE NECESSITY FOR REFORM

It is no real surprise that some of the institutions hardest hit by the rise of the information age are academic libraries and museums. Once the de facto sources of public knowledge and archives of important records, both of these types of institutions are suffering from diminishing interest and funding as fewer people are utilizing their physical space and print collections. Across the country, libraries and museums are cutting back services or even closing up shop altogether, citing a lack of public support as well as insufficient funding from local government.

Some of the recent library casualties have been especially noteworthy. On March 23, 2010, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that the city of Los Angeles would be forced to shorten its libraries' hours of operation substantially and close them completely on Sundays (Reston, 2010). Granted, these libraries were caught in difficult economic times, but it is significant that libraries are high on the list of institutions targeted for budget cutbacks. The city of Birmingham, Alabama has undertaken even more drastic measures: on June 18, 2010, the *Birmingham News* published a story stating that three of the city's public libraries would be forced to close entirely by the end of July (Wolfson, 2010). While not as populous as Los Angeles, Birmingham is still a sizable city. Historically, it could support multiple branches of its public library—but apparently that is no longer the case.

It's not just public libraries that are feeling the pinch, either: research libraries at universities and colleges across the country are beginning to see diminishing use of

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