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The Future of the Library: From Electric Media to Digital Media

By Robert K. Logan with Marshall McLuhan
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Libraries: A Pillar of Society

Soon after the skill of writing was developed, more than 5,000 years ago, the need to save what had been written led to the phenomenon of the library. To understand the library's history and role in society, no resource is more important than Marshall McLuhan's and Robert K. Logan's 1997 seminal text, *The Future of the Library*.¹

With its focus on the public library, the original manuscript, which lay as an unpublished book for some 36 years, tracks and analyses the library's entire history and changing role up to the 1990s, in terms of its "ground" and "figure".² The text also considers the alphabet, the written word, the phenomenon of the book, and reading, all of which are integral to the library's definition and purpose, communication, and the pursuit of knowledge.

Generalists and students of library sciences are bound to be amazed by *The Future of the Library*, now updated and published in book form. It reveals the library to be far more important and complex than is generally appreciated. The journey is full of twists and turns, but inquisitive minds – and those who enjoy knowing how the world works – will find this book a treasure trove.

Despite occasional forecasts of its demise, the authors provide compelling evidence that the library is here to stay (as are books and printed material). In fact, physical and online use of libraries is growing, across the United States and around the globe. Libraries have always been the principal and most efficient means of collecting and organising information and making it accessible. They are all the more important today given the worldwide information glut which overloads our daily lives, the need for instant communication, the spread of specialisation, and the diverse populations now served.

¹ McLuhan, M. & Logan, R. K. (1997). *The future of the library: An old figure in a new ground*. Unpublished manuscript, kept at the National Archive of Canada until revived by Robert Logan in 2015.

² The library's "ground" is its physical structure and its political, economic, technical, social and cultural context. Its "figure" is the content which fills it, including its books and other holdings/resources – and its users.

The Future of the Library: From Electric Media to Digital Media supercedes the original McLuhan-Logan book project. In this updated version,³ Robert Logan notes that “the most significant changes to the library, as well as the ground or environment in which it operates, has been the emergence of digital media” (p. xiii).⁴ He examines how digital media impact on the library, librarians and the library’s services. New facts and analysis are presented through parenthetical comments incorporated into the flow of the original text, which is retained in its entirety. The addition of two new chapters and a new section in the Summary are devoted to digital media.

There is an astonishing amount to know about libraries. Here are a just a few enticing highlights:

- The alphabet enabled the book and the library. The phonetic alphabet and notions of “words” created a climate that supported the spread of reading and development of the book. An entire chapter of this book examines the nature, historical role, and effect of the alphabet on Western civilization. Another chapter is dedicated to the role and future of the book itself.
- The library has relied on the written word and reading, more or less, at different points in history. The use of digital media (even more so than the electric media preceding it) favors the reading of shorter texts and works against serious deep reading. However, the various uses to which digital media are put today involve the library more with the written word and reading now than electronic media do.
- As society has become more infused with digital media, users have had to become more literate. In the original *Future of the Library* manuscript, McLuhan and Logan noted that the “sophisticated technology upon which we have developed an almost total dependency would break down without literacy”. In fact, they say, “the loss of literacy would mean the loss of technology and, subsequently, the loss of civilisation.”⁵

³ McLuhan died in 1980, soon after the original *Future of the Library* manuscript had been completed. The preface to this updated version contains a fascinating account of how Logan and McLuhan came to work together on their “library project”.

⁴ The digital media are defined as the personal computer, the Internet, the Worldwide Web, the highly portable notebook computer, the smartphone, the tablet, and the plenitude of Internet and Web applications now available, such as email, websites, search engines, blogs, YouTube, Flickr, Instagram, Facebook and Wikipedia. During McLuhan’s lifetime, only mainframe and mini computers existed.

⁵ See pp. 91–92, on “The impact of electricity”.

- The library was originally a book repository. Now it also houses all sorts of other technology and information and services. It engages in online networking with other libraries to expand its audio, video and print resources and its user services. It is a place for social, entertainment and fundraising gatherings, a meeting space for educational programmes (including adult education and literacy instruction),⁶ a venue for online continuing education, a centre for children’s enrichment activities and a quiet reading, research and working environment for its clients. It gives organised access and meaning to the information overload that constantly envelopes us all and shows no signs of letting up. It offers its own instruction and provides direct access to a vast array of information resources. It promotes knowledge development opportunities, and increasingly fills an educational role. It is an organic, vibrant, ever-evolving enterprise wherever it is situated. It even attracts new users and new kinds of users today through innovative outreach initiatives. Several illustrative programmes and trends are explored in the book. The Library HotSpot lending program of the New York City Public Library⁷ is an especially exciting current example known to this reviewer.
- Originally, the library served scholars and the “elite”, but down through history, with the advent of technology and changes in its “ground”, it has evolved into a place that serves people of all ages and their diverse interests, where interactivity is common, and where librarians are trained to be proactive in developing users’ knowledge and in guiding them in the effective use of the library. Importantly, educational institutions and other centres of learning and research rely as heavily on libraries beyond their own walls and on their holdings as the general population does.

With the advent of electronic media, it was feared that the book’s importance would erode. As it turns out, this has not happened and, according to McLuhan and Logan, it will not. Moreover, while e-books now account for 20 per cent of the American book market, printed books continue to be more heavily used and preferred. They are easier to read, especially when deep reading is important,

⁶ See Spangenberg, G. (1996). *Even Anchors Need Lifelines: Public Libraries in Adult Literacy*. New York: Spangenberg Learning Resources. Available at <http://www.caalusa.org/anchorswhole.pdf> [accessed 3 May 2017].

⁷ See Logan and McLuhan 2016, pp. 133ff. Also see “City Council speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito joins New York Public Library officials to launch second round of Wi-Fi hot spot lending” (New York Public Library webnews 23 April 2015), at <http://www.nypl.org/press/press-release/april-23-2015/city-council-speaker-melissa-mark-viverito-joins-new-york-public> [accessed 3 May 2017].

and they are better suited to recreational reading. According to Logan, this is partly because “the codex book is easy to flip through”, while the e-book, which requires scrolling, represents a step backward.⁸

In 1979 McLuhan and Logan had already found that “the library is becoming a center for media ecology instead of remaining more tied to the culture of the book”. In the updated version, Logan adds: “This is even more so the case now than when McLuhan and I wrote those words ... Libraries are now fighting back with the full array of digital media.” He takes this to be a “healthy sign of vitality.”⁹

Yet, despite the library’s increasingly vital and pervasive role in modern life, *The Future of the Library: From Electric Media to Digital Media* ends on a sobering note.

For example, according to 2015 data drawn on by Logan from the work of John Palfrey,¹⁰ federal and state funding for public libraries in the United States has declined dramatically since 2000. This is “counterintuitive”, Logan states, considering that over 90 per cent of Americans feel that “libraries are a vital part of their communities”, and that libraries now serve the vast majority of the U.S. population.¹¹

People everywhere will benefit from reading this updated classic by McLuhan and Logan. But more than that, considering the fundamental importance of libraries worldwide, leaders across the globe should seek to understand the role of libraries in their societies and insist on sensitive public policy and solid library funding. The library is a pillar of society. It is unique – in terms of understanding, the breadth and depth of its holdings, enlightened discourse, clear communication and knowledge development. Indeed, libraries enable progress itself, and a civilised world!

⁸ See p. 174, the chapter on “The future of the book”.

⁹ See p. 5, the chapter titled “The physical extension of man’s memory”.

¹⁰ Palfrey, J. (2015). *BiblioTech: Why libraries matter more than ever in the age of Google*, New York: Basic Books.

¹¹ See p. 202, “Library futures: summing up”. Also see Amien Essif’s review of John Palfrey’s book *BiblioTech*: Essif, A. (2015). *Why libraries matter more than ever in the age of Google*, AlterNet [online news magazine], 23 May. Retrieved 2 May 2017 from <http://www.alternet.org/books/why-libraries-matter-more-ever-age-google>

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