

The importance of university libraries

Abstract

The drastic changes undergone by university libraries over the last forty years have been accompanied in many cases by underfunding and low priority in university budgets. This situation has a detrimental impact on the image of the university and its role in the community. The purpose of the following note is to draw attention to this problem that should first be acknowledged in order to be alleviated.

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Ethel Groffier

McGill University, Canada

Correspondence: Ethel Groffier, McGill University, Canada, Tel (514) 935 4669, Email groffierm@videotron.ca

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Introduction

Even more than universities themselves, university libraries have been subject to drastic changes over the last 30 years. The physical environment has nothing to do with the studious atmosphere of the olden days. A forest of computers has grown where there used to be library services and reference works. Elsewhere, the space reserved for books has shrunk considerably to make way for communal areas, where students can work together or watch videos. Armchairs create bright patches of colour here and there. Books are a lot less visible. They are consulted less often, given the ever growing number of works online.¹ While there is reason to rejoice to see access to information greatly facilitated, one may wonder about the quality of reading online, especially in the bustling atmosphere of a library, in the midst of clicking computer keyboards and conversations in voices that are barely lowered. According to Daniel Tanguay, [...] books, because of their material nature and linear constancy, require time, patience and concentration from readers. In sum, while computers always force us to rush ahead, plunge us into a state of impatient excitement, and break our attention into an infinite number of fragments, reading books cultivates in us the habit of slowness and sustained attention to long chains of reasoning.²

While computers have become the research tools par excellence, it is true that reading a serious book online from start to finish may be problematic. As Alberto Manguel remarked: An electronic text is one thing, the identical text in a printed book is another, and they are not interchangeable, any more than a recorded line can replace a line embedded in an individual memory. Context, material support, the physical history and experience of a text are part of the text, as much as its vocabulary and its music. In the most literal sense, matter is not immaterial.³

The other reason space reserved for books is decreasing is because libraries tend to put books that are rarely or never consulted into

storage, and have less money to buy recent works.⁴ Their budget is eaten away by the outrageously high cost of subscribing to academic journals online. Subscriptions to some of them cost \$40,000 a year. The problem has become so acute that the Faculty Advisory Council of Harvard University advised professors to boycott journals by publishers who impose such prices, and to make every effort to have their articles published in Open Access.⁵ Wise advice. However, what can be done when university authorities—directors of departments, deans, rectors—insist that articles be published in the most prestigious journals?

The Open Access movement for scientific writing was born in the early 1990s. Its primary objective is to make research findings available to the research community. However, it also provides a means both for libraries to avoid subscription costs and for authors to avoid publication costs thanks to self-archiving of research documents freely available in institutional or centralized archives, as provided for in the 2003 Berlin Declaration on Open Access to Knowledge in the Sciences and Humanities.⁶

Professor Stevan Harnad of the Université du Québec à Montréal has done pioneering work in this field, resulting in the ARCHIPEL archive. The practice is spreading slowly, but surely, and is strongly encouraged in major research universities, such as Harvard. Once a majority of such universities have adopted it, publishers will be obliged to change their price policies. This goal would be easier to achieve if self-archiving were compulsory.⁷

Across all Québec universities, electronic resources account for 70 to 80% of acquisitions of new documents.⁸ Does this mean that books are destined to disappear? Umberto Eco was convinced of the contrary, and expressed it in an amusing book of conversations with an explicit title: *This Is Not the End of The Book*.⁹ Robert Darnton

*This note is based on a section from my *Réflexions sur l'université. Le devoir de vigilance*, Quebec, Presses de l'université Laval, 2014.

¹Loans of printed documents dropped by 31% over four years at McGill University and by 17% over five years at the Université de Montréal. *Les universités en chiffres, Le Devoir*. 2013.

²Daniel Tanguay. Une visite à la bibliothèque. *Argument, Politique, Société, Histoire*. 2009. 11 p.

³The Uses of Reading, www.manguel.com.

⁴Robert Darnton notes that in 1970 a university press could count on selling 800 copies of a book to libraries. By 2008, the number had dropped to around 300. See *The Case for Books, Public Affairs, USA*, 2009, 71 p.

⁵Faculty Advisory Council Memorandum on Journal Pricing. 2012.

⁶See: <https://openaccess.mpg.de/Berlin-Declaration>.

⁷Richard Poynder. Interview with Stevan Harnad. *A Prophet Whose Time Has Come, Information Today*, 2010, 27.

⁸Les universités en chiffres. *Le Devoir*, November 23, 2013.

⁹Umberto Eco, Jean-Claude Carrière. *This is Not the End of the Book*. Jean-Philippe de Tonna, editor. Polly McLean, Harvill Secker, UK, 2011.

agrees.¹⁰ There is also the question of long-term sustainability. A book is a more stable format than a digital file on a hard disk. The book is certainly not disappearing. In 2008, Françoise Waquet noted that the number of publications had never been higher: it seems that, worldwide, some 3500 social sciences journals, and in France alone 6000 books, are published each year in the human sciences.¹¹

When Michel Serres expressed his regret concerning the construction of the Grande bibliothèque in Paris because he thought that, with Internet technology, libraries would become superfluous,¹² he was allowing himself to be carried away by naïve enthusiasm for technology. It is true that digitalization makes it useless for libraries to acquire many journals, which are better placed online than on shelves, especially in areas such as medicine and law, in which knowledge evolves very quickly, giving writings from the recent past only historical worth. Putting articles online also saves considerable space and time, and gives a number of reader's simultaneous access to the same text. However, libraries do not consist only in computers and books lined up along shelves. They also include cataloguing services – and digital publications also have to be catalogued – as well as reproduction and reserve services for course materials, digitalization services and research services to meet certain needs of the university community. Technological resources have to be managed. Consequently, libraries have acquired new functions. In particular, they have to help students and researchers find their way through the maze of data bases.

Moreover, libraries are the custodians of rare books, special collections and archives: those that people have given or bequeathed to it, those with which the community has entrusted the library, and those that it has bought. Libraries thus play important cultural roles, parallel to that of the National Library, but different. While the latter, as its name indicates, is the repository of the nation's past, university

libraries specialize in certain areas, depending on the research done in the institution. For example, McGill University Library has one of the best collections in North America on the French and English Enlightenment. Osler Library in the same university is the largest library of the history of medicine in Canada.¹³ These collections and others will of course be digitalized someday. However, that does not make the material objects useless. An online manuscript has the advantage of being easy to access, but it cannot be dated – through examination of the parchment, paper and watermark – and counterfeits cannot be detected, for example. Finally, books do not disappear when there is a power cut or the Internet goes down. The latter means of communication, of which we can no longer imagine the absence, is fragile.

University libraries are the nerve centres of institutions with respect to communication of knowledge. They are also gateways to the community for making various university activities known to the public. They invite writers, hold workshops, set up exhibitions to show the treasures they own, publish news releases. In other words, they are involved in the cultural life of the community, and for that, they require means. Libraries are often at the bottom of the ladder of budget priorities for universities, far behind laboratories and sports facilities. Yet, they are among the principal means of opening up to the world and act as crucial factors with respect to universities' reputations.

Acknowledgment

None.

Conflict of interest

None.

¹⁰The Case for Books. 68 p.

¹¹Françoise Waquet. *Les enfants de Socrate*. Paris, Albin Michel, 2008, 291 p.

¹²Conférence inaugurale le 29 janvier 2013 pour le lancement officiel du Programme Paris Nouveaux Mondes, l'Initiative d'excellence du Pôle de recherche et d'enseignement supérieur.

¹³Anna Dysert, Christopher Lyons. Revisiting the Library as Laboratory at the Osler Library. In: Jillan Tomm, Richard Virr, editors. *Meeting with Books, Special Collection in the 21st Century, A publication of McGill University and Archives*, 2014, 161 p.