Check it out: Public libraries more relevant than ever

By Steven Campbell

Over the past three decades, countless people have predicted that public libraries would soon become obsolete institutions and librarians would go the route of milkmen. Fortunately, these *people would make very poor fortunetellers.* Mark Twain once wrote, "The reports of *my death are greatly exaggerated.*" The same can be said for public libraries.

When the internet appeared in the 1990s, many people issued public libraries their first death warrant. However, libraries adapted and quickly began offering computers with internet access for the public. Later, they began offering free Wi-Fi access, too. Today, millions *of Americans rely on public* libraries for internet, Wi-Fi

and computer access to complete government forms, file their taxes, create resumes, apply for jobs, send emails and perform other essential tasks.

The internet certainly *changed public libraries, as* enormous print reference collections gradually disappeared and moved online. Although many people still say, "I don't need the library, I can just use Google," the reality is that the internet is full of inaccurate, out-of-date and incomplete information. Literally, anyone can put anything on the internet.

Whether everyone believes it, libraries are still the best place to go for accurate and current information — *and that doesn't only mean* books. Libraries purchase

subscriptions to dozens of online research databases, which contain information taken directly from reliable print sources. People can access these valuable resources online for free with a library card. When people are seeking information on subjects such as medicine and health or investments, accuracy is critical, and a library's research databases are the safest places to go. Despite the internet and Google, librarians continue to answer around 250 million questions from the public each year.

In the late 1990s, libraries faced their next challenge: giant bookstore chains. They offered coffee shops, comfortable seating, author events, easy-to-browse inventories

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and even storytimes. Many people said they would singlehandedly destroy public libraries. Instead, libraries adapted again, and many began to offer these same amenities. Today, due to the emergence of Amazon and other online competition, many of the giant bookstore chains have declared bankruptcy and closed thousands of locations across the country. Public libraries continue to thrive, better than ever. In the early 2000s, e-books and audiobooks gained popularity. Once again, people said that they were a death knell for public libraries. However, libraries adapted and began offering e-books and audiobooks for checkout. In 2020, over 400 million e-books and audiobooks were checked out from public libraries.

No one should really be surprised. Libraries have always adapted to change. They moved from dusty card catalogs to online catalogs. As formats evolved from vinyl records and 16 mm films to digital music and streaming video, libraries kept pace, too.

Until the 1960s, most public libraries were simply buildings filled with books. Programming was limited to storytimes and book discussion groups. Today, they have evolved into community centers, gathering places with comfortable seating, public meeting rooms, coffee bars, outdoor spaces and homes for adult, teen and children's programs on countless topics. They provide outreach and programming to preschools, day cares, schools, nursing homes

and assisted-living centers. People can obtain passports, notarize documents, register to vote, take free computer classes and check out a telescope, microscope or fishing pole at their local library.

Today, over 172 million Americans have a library card. In 2019, people visited public libraries in the U.S. 1.3 billion times and checked out over 2.1 billion items. More Americans visit libraries than attend all sporting events combined, including the NBA, MLB, NFL, NHL and NASCAR. Public libraries have continued to adapt to new challenges and have proven themselves more relevant than ever.

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