

Public libraries remain vital in digital age

By **Dwight McInvaill** *Published Thursday, September 12, 2013*

Occasionally, I have heard public libraries compared to record stores — something on the verge of becoming increasingly irrelevant and ultimately extinct.

Yet, nothing could be further from the truth.

The vitality of public libraries in our modern age was succinctly summarized recently in Forbes Magazine: “They are dynamic, versatile community centers. They welcomed more than 1.59 billion visitors in 2009 and lent books 2.4 billion times — more than eight times for each citizen. More than half of young adults and seniors living in poverty in the United States used public libraries to access the Internet. They used this access among other purposes to ‘find work, apply to college, secure government benefits, and learn about critical medical treatments.’ For all this, public libraries cost just \$42 per citizen each year to maintain” (David Vinjamuri, *Why Public Libraries Matter: And How They Can Do More*, Forbes, Jan. 16, 2013).

Even more granular detail on the vibrancy of public libraries in the United States was provided this year by the Pew Research Center’s Internet and American Life Project in three groundbreaking national survey-based studies entitled *Library Services in the Digital Age* (Jan. 22, 2013), *Parents, Children, Libraries and Reading* (May 1, 2013), and *Younger Americans’ Library Habits and Expectations* (June 25, 2013).

Findings included these facts

- Book borrowing was for 80 percent of people surveyed a very significant library service.
- Reference service was viewed by 80 percent as a quite important provision in libraries.
- Free public computer access was underscored by 77 percent as exceedingly desirable in libraries.

Preschool literacy achievements of libraries were highly valued by 94 percent of parents with 84 percent underscoring that “libraries help inculcate their children’s love of reading and books” and 81 percent saying that libraries are crucial because they provide “children with information and resources not available at home.”

As for the next generation (younger Americans ages 16-29), the Pew Research Center’s findings might be astounding to some doubters of public libraries’ ongoing dynamic nature: “As with other age groups, younger Americans were significantly more likely to have read an e-book during 2012 than a year earlier. Among all those ages 16-29, 19 percent read an e-book during 2011, while 25 percent did so in 2012.”

However, at the same time, print reading among younger Americans has remained steady: When

asked if they had read at least one print book in the past year, the same proportion (75 percent) of Americans under age 30 said they had, both in 2011 and in 2012. In fact, younger Americans under age 30 are now significantly more likely than older adults to have read a book in print in the past year (64 percent of those ages 30 and older said they had). Additionally, 85 percent of older teens ages 16-17 read a print book in the past year, “making them significantly more likely to have done so than any other age group.”

As of November 2012, 65 percent of young Americans had a library card; 86 percent of those age 30 or under had visited a library facility in person; and 58 percent had frequented a library in the past year.

Public libraries remain really strong, and the Georgetown County Library is a great case in point. While the recession hit our public library hard — with cuts to annual technology and book budgets reducing support from \$160,000 to just \$100,000 from 2008 to 2013 — new patron registrations have remained strong with more than 3,000 new borrowers registered yearly. In a service area of 60,000 residents, our public library has had about 50,000 persons checking out materials annually.

Public-program attendance every 12 months regularly exceeds 35,000 to 40,000 individuals. During the depths of the recession, circulation of books and other materials increased from 167,217 in 2008 to 181,930 in 2010. And in 2012, usage of our public access computers by locals and visitors reached a new high of 70,547 persons.

While individual library records are kept strictly confidential according to state law, we do nevertheless track the general nature of public access computer utilization patterns by the hour. In the course of the year from July 1, 2012, to June 30, 2013, here's what we learned:

- Out of 171,516 sessions, only 3,673 directly involved Facebook.
- 13,620 were related to usage of content-production software ranging from such products as Microsoft Word, Excel and Power Point.
- 4,975 were focused specifically on job searches.
- Much of the rest of the statistical balance was due to news media searches and general usage of web browsers.

Folks have come to the public library not only to play but also to work.

As noted this summer in National Public Radio's special eight-part series, “Keys to the Whole World: American Public Libraries,” modern public libraries in the U.S. are creative places, veritable incubators of ideas on better serving the literacy needs of our citizenry. Such current public library innovations have encompassed a broad spectrum ranging from the new Digital Commons at the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library in Washington, D.C., to improved natural disaster responsiveness in New York area public libraries for victims of Hurricane Sandy.

With roots in an exclusive library founded in January 1799 for the local rice planting and merchant elite, the Georgetown County Library has also seen much change during its almost 215-year history. For its innovative work during the last decade alone, this public library received in 2006 the National Health Information Award for Libraries Grand Prize, in 2007 the National Medal for Library Service from the

Institute of Museum and Library Services, and in 2011 the ICMA Library Innovation Award from the International City-County Management Association. A glance at the Georgetown County Library's website shows now a plethora of dynamic programming ranging from Senior Scholars to "Money Rocks," to a Heritage Center art exhibition, "Birding the Waccamaw," children's programs and more.

During 2012, the Georgetown County Library used grant funding for a couple of important projects touching lives at two ends of the generational range. One effort focused on the creation of our Small Business Center to promote commercial success for entrepreneurs and for job seekers with a special web portal, a small business collection of 1,660 books, eight workshops on small business issues, video interviews of 12 local successful small business owners, four video public service announcements featuring kids and teens, a large job fair and a traveling small business exhibit.

Another 2012 effort involved the provision of Early Childhood Literacy Center materials in branches throughout the county. In 2013, we are employing grant funds to promote basic financial literacy amongst our county's most needy citizens. We are also embarking on a special endeavor called "Sacred Accounts" to digitize the records of the 12 Churches of the Georgetown City Historic District.

The face of public libraries may be changing, but clearly, they remain vital and relevant parts of the communities they serve, and they aren't going the way of record stores any time soon.

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