

INTRODUCTION

Two years ago I was at the doctor's office with my wife. We mentioned that we both were librarians, as was our son.

"I'm sorry to hear that," he said.

We were not sure why he would be, so we probed further. It turns out that despite his great knowledge about medicine, he is one of those people who believe that all human knowledge is on the Internet and that libraries are doomed. In his view it is a good thing that we are near retirement age, so we do not have to wait out the final chapter.

The next year I got my chance to write this book and visit 50 libraries in the city of New York. Nearly half of them have been in operation for 100 years or more. It gave me a unique vantage point to take the pulse of libraries in my city. Some are struggling, to be sure, but others are fabulously successful at navigating the world of information in a time of unprecedented change.

You cannot overstate the extent of the revolution. Years ago, I wanted to look at the lyrics to a song. Since I worked at a large public library, it should not have been hard to find what I needed. I was directed to a catalog case filled with index cards that had been lovingly maintained for decades. I found my song, but it was mentioned in only one book. That book had gone missing, so that was the end of my quest for the time being.

Ten years later I had a rather amusing exchange with a friend of mine who just could not warm up to this computer world. He told me that we could not compare the Internet age to the Gutenberg Revolution. Why not? Because Gutenberg's printing press empowered people to get their message out in ways that were not open to them in the past.

If anything, today's revolution empowers people too well. A year ago I was teaching a class of information literacy to a group of adults who were returning to higher education after starting careers in New York City. They had the belief that Google checked its information for accuracy before indexing it. To prove how wrong that was, I added the nonsense phrase "Sarah Palin can see the planet Jupiter from her back porch" into my own Website. While literally true (anybody can see the planet from their back porch), it did not add to humanity's wealth of information. Nonetheless, it showed up in Google five days later.

Most libraries in New York are managing to provide traditional services of books and archive materials while, to some extent, joining the digital world. As the librarians in these institutions told me their stories, I was prouder than ever to be a part of this profession.