

Mark Y. Herring: Are Libraries Obsolete? An Argument for Relevance in the Digital Age

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Alexander R. Lent¹

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The question Mark Y. Herring, Dean of Library Services at Winthrop University, poses in the title of his book *Are Libraries Obsolete?*, is one, he writes, that “many librarians... are reluctant to admit” that they think about (1). Librarians are not known to be a question-adverse group and they have not shied away from Herring’s question. A quick search yields dozens of books, articles, and professional conferences with titles like “Public Libraries at the Crossroads” and “Libraries and the Future.” Indeed, librarians have been talking about this for over 100 years: In 1883, Charles Cutter imagined what the Buffalo Public Library would look like in 1983, and concludes “that [the] library is not a mere cemetery of dead books, but a living power... which distributes its benefits impartially” [2].

The library Cutter imagined was far from obsolete, but Herring is worried. He writes that “[n]ationwide, public libraries, when not cutting their hours or having their funding cut entirely, are closing their doors” (216). But the Institute of Museum and Library Services reports that “[t]he number of public libraries has increased over the past 10 years” [[3], p 4], so Herring’s claim here is questionable.

When he characterizes public libraries as being “on life support” (182), Herring cites the American Library Association’s 2013 *State of America’s Libraries* report. Specifically, he cites the section about academic libraries, which is an odd choice to make when discussing public libraries. The section Herring cites does not even support his claim; it states (in bold) that “Academic libraries rise to the challenge by embracing transformation” [1].

But Herring is correct that library use is changing. I used Google to find the example books, articles, and conferences I alluded to in my first paragraph, and

✉ Alexander R. Lent
alent@minlib.net

¹ Millis Public Library, 961 Main Street, Millis, MA 02054, USA

Wikipedia provided me with a copy of Cutter's essay, now in the public domain. With Google, Wikipedia, and the Internet, some of the questions that used to require a library and a librarian to answer are now being outsourced. Herring sees this trend daily in his position as Dean of Library Services, noting that only "a small fraction of [the] students [at his university]" make use of the library's reference services (28). And yet, in the 2012–2013 library report from Winthrop University, Herring writes that his "library [has been]... quite possibly more busy in the last 2 years than at any other time in [its] history... [library staff] are answering more reference questions but the kinds or types of questions have changed" [[4], p 1].

I am uncertain what to make of this book. Herring certainly raises some worthwhile points and he is unquestionably an expert when it comes to academic librarianship. If Herring's purpose here is to play devil's advocate, then he has been successful. But this book has real problems, one of which is accuracy. A more serious problem, however, is Herring's willingness to go along with the idea that libraries are obsolete when they are thriving. The Internet, the maker revolution, e-books, the circulation of non-traditional items like board games and musical instruments, and a generation of library school graduates who have been trained to expect a turbulent and ever-changing library world have combined to make this a golden age of libraries. So no, libraries are not obsolete.

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