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Valuing our treasured print history in the era of the 'bookless' library

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Author

Michelle Smith

Research Fellow, Deakin University

Are libraries destined to be archaeological sites of the pre-digital age? Chris Devers, CC BY-NC-ND

Today we eagerly embrace new technology for fear of being left behind. A toddler with an iPad in hand is a welcome sign of a child learning to succeed in a digital world.

Remainders of the pre-digital age, including libraries, are adjusting to new expectations about how we source information. Websites, databases, digitised resources and ebooks are now necessities for research and pleasure, much like the printed books that were once the essence of libraries.

The changing face of the library

While many local libraries aim to strike a balance between community events, providing computer and internet access, and maintaining collections of books and other media, the concept of the bookless library is becoming a reality.

The bookless library? oneVillage Initiative, CC BY-SA

Last year, San Antonio's BiblioTech became the first American digital public library. It is stocked with computers and tablets that can be borrowed in order to read ebooks. A number of school libraries within Australia and internationally are also beginning to dump their entire collections of printed books in favour of "virtual resource centres".

Yet when the move toward libraries as spaces for people to tap into free WiFi and engage in group discussions reaches our major research libraries, the arguments in favour of minimising the centrality of books do not hold up to public scrutiny.

Not all library users want to go digital

After a significant campaign, including an online petition with more than 10,000 signatures, representatives of the State Library of New South Wales recently agreed to abandon their plans to convert the historic Mitchell Library reading room into a space devoid of books, librarians and researchers.

The State Librarian Dr Alex Byrne had explained that the idea was to open the Mitchell Library to the "public" in a new way. The public response, lead by more than 200 authors, journalists and artists, nevertheless suggests that many Australians do not want state libraries to sacrifice books and

research facilities for generic spaces to relax, sip coffee and browse the internet.

Inside the reading room at Sydney's Mitchell Library. littleyiye, CC BY-SA

The deep vaults of legal deposit libraries

State libraries have a special purpose as legal deposit libraries. Every book, newspaper, pamphlet, leaflet, musical composition, map, chart, or plan published in each Australian state must be lodged with a state library. The comprehensiveness of state library collections is without parallel.

Legal deposit libraries are invaluable because we often do not know what kinds of information will be important to researchers, historians and the community in the future. The role of state libraries as custodians of our printed history is only becoming more critical. A disturbing number of public and university libraries and archives are discarding and destroying segments of their collections.

Digitisation has made a sizeable number of books and magazines freely available online. But the gleeful abandonment of printed books and periodicals, bolstered by the idea that everything is at our digital fingertips, remains problematic.

The perils of digitisation

Nicholson Baker's book Double Fold describes how in the 1990s the British Library decided to sell or pulp its hard copies of international newspapers dated after 1850. The look and feel of the original broadsheets, and detail of the illustrations, some of which were printed in colour, were lost in the black and white microfilm reels that replaced them.

We have discovered that microfilms with blurred sections and missing or faded text are no substitute

for the originals that research libraries discarded during the 20th century in order to reclaim shelf space. Moreover, we are now unable to digitise materials with today's technology that have already been sold off or destroyed.

Boxes of microfilm piled high in storage. vanherdehaage, CC BY-NC-SA

As with microfilm, it is also possible we will encounter difficulties with digitised versions of our print history in the future. We already know that computer technology becomes obsolete rapidly. We have no real sense of how digitised texts will be stored, managed or shared in future decades, let alone centuries.

Much digitisation is being performed by private companies operated for profit. In the future, do we want the only copies of rare and important books and periodicals to be controlled by businesses rather than public libraries that are free for all?

State libraries are the only places we can count on to safely store and provide access to the breadth of Australia's collective print and music publishing past and present, from ephemeral advertising to old school textbooks. Physical collections are vital to ensure that millions of pieces of Australia's literary and cultural history will remain preserved for anyone to discover.

Those who lead the campaign for the Mitchell Library to remain focused on books and research would not deny that libraries must adapt to changing needs for information. Yet it is loss to us all if libraries downplay the continuing importance of collections of Australia's printed history.

Maintaining the accessibility of our shared cultural archive into the future must always be prioritised.

🏷 **Books**   **Libraries**   **Digital humanities**   **Digitisation**