

## Libraries: Going Online

For as long as can be remembered, libraries have offered mass amounts of free information that is easily accessible to the nearby community. This unlimited access has been an asset to communities everywhere for research, educational and recreational purposes. Patrons could go to the library and access all this information for free, keep it for a set time, and return it later. All seemed to work well and both library and patron were happy.

However, patrons encountered one large problem with libraries: their inability to be accessible at all hours of the day. When patrons needed to return a book late or pick up one early, they would encounter the discouraging pictures of closed doors. Enter the online library, a place that contained all the same information as an actual library with the added bonus of being accessible at all hours of the day from any location. By simply using their library cards, patrons could have access to these online portals. With the online library, a patron does not have to worry about finding their book or movie by closing time because no such time exists. Also, if the information a patron needs is contained within another library, they do not need to wait for their library to send for it but can instead access it immediately on the web. However, if the patron wishes to view the information in hard copy form, they can also order it and pick it up at their library.

Among the more popular of these online innovations are the Internet Public Library and Thomson Gale's AccessMyLibrary, two sites granting access to a number of libraries in one spot. These online libraries offer the same resources as traditional libraries, but now the information can be accessed quickly and easily. Patrons can search for books and media by title, author, subject, genre, and even dewey decimal system in some cases. Besides searching for books, patrons can also search for newspapers and individual articles found on the web. The search capabilities in online libraries often compete with search engines; however libraries have the upper hand. Searching in a library often yields results that are more relevant and focused than those found on a normal search engine.

The information searched on an online library is not limited to what is contained within the true library (if one is even attached to the online library), but is open to a world of resources found on the web. Material that was too expensive or otherwise inaccessible through traditional libraries is made readily available on online versions. Information from magazines, journals, newspapers and more is searched to find exactly what the patron is looking for. Online libraries often work with databases such as Gale/Thomson's InfoTrac Databases, Ebscohost Research Databases and infoUSA's Reference USA.

Opening up the net to the information stored in a library also presents the library itself with benefits. No longer does storage space become an issue for a library because all its content is stored in electronic form. Offering content online also allows for better communication between the library and its patrons due to e-mail capabilities.

Do not be swayed that online libraries will leave librarians out of a job. Content must be monitored to ensure its relevancy and sites must be maintained by those knowledgeable in the library field. Librarians are also used on some sites for an "ask a librarian" feature that allows patrons to e-mail a question to a librarian and get a response in a couple of days. Librarians are essential to keeping online libraries going.

With the establishment of online libraries, patrons and libraries are kept happy and busy. Content is no longer denied due to over stocked shelves and doors are never closed to those eager to learn. Going online has allowed libraries to reach across states, countries and continents and grant millions access to a wealth of knowledge.

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