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Are Librarians Totally Obsolete?

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33 Reasons Why Libraries and Librarians are Still Extremely Important

by: Will Sherman

Many predict that the digital age will wipe public bookshelves clean, and permanently end the centuries-old era of libraries. Technology's baffling prowess and progress even has one librarian [predicting the institution's demise](#).

He could be right.

But if he is, then the loss will be irreplaceable. As libraries' relevance comes into question, they face an existential crisis at a time they are perhaps needed the most. Despite their perceived obsolescence in the digital age both libraries – and librarians – are irreplaceable for many reasons. 33, in fact. We've listed them here:

1. Not everything is available on the internet

The amazing amount of useful information on the web has, for some, engendered the false assumption *everything* can be found online. It's simply not true.

Google Book Search recognizes this. That's why they're taking on the monolith task of digitizing millions of books from the World's largest libraries. But even if Google does successfully digitize the sum of human knowledge, it is unlikely that the sum of contemporary authors and publishers will not allow their works to be freely accessible over the internet. It is already prohibited by law to make copyrighted books fully accessible through Google Book Search; only snippets. And it'll be a long time before that must-read New York Times bestseller gets put up for free on the internet: current [copyright law](#) protects works for 70 years beyond the death of the author.

Even some public domain works are off limits. If an out-of-copyright copy includes prefaces, introductions, or appendices that are still in copyright, the [whole work](#) falls under copyrighted status.

2. Digital libraries are not the internet

A fundamental understanding of what the internet is – and what it isn't – can help more clearly define what a library is, and why libraries are still extremely important.

The Elmer E. Rasmuson Library at the University of Alaska at Fairbanks [clearly spells out](#) the difference between “Online Collections” and the “Internet or Web Sources”. The internet, this site explains, is a mass of largely unpublished materials produced by organizations, businesses, individuals, experimental projects, entrepreneurial webmasters, etc.

“Online Collections”, however, are different. They are typically provided by libraries and include materials that have been published via rigorous editorial processes. Works selected for inclusion in a library catalogue undergo vetting from qualified staff. Types of materials include books, journals, documents, newspapers, magazines and reports which are digitized, stored and indexed through a limited-access database.

While one might use the internet or a search engine to find these databases, deeper access to them requires registration. You are still online, but you are no longer on the internet. You are in a library.

3. The internet isn't free

While [Project Gutenberg](#) boasts 20,000 free, downloadable eBooks on its homepage, we are [promptly reminded](#) that these books are only accessible because they are no longer in copyright.

And books are just the tip of the iceberg. Numerous academic research papers, journals and other important materials are virtually inaccessible to someone seeking to pull them off the web for free. Rather, access is restricted to expensive subscription accounts, which are typically paid for by libraries. Visiting the library in person, or logging in to the library through your member account, is therefore the only way to affordably access necessary archived resources.

4. The internet complements libraries, but it doesn't replace them

To guide people in finding information, the Long Island University provides a [helpful explanation](#) of what types of resources can be accessed through the library. These include news, journals, books and other resources.

Interestingly, the World Wide web is among these resources as yet another approach to finding information. But it's not a replacement. The page goes on to differentiate and explain the advantages of libraries over the [internet for research](#). It does cite the benefits of the internet, including "sampling public opinion", gathering "quick facts" and "a wide range of ideas". Overall, the point is well made: libraries are completely different institutions from the web. In this light, to talk about one replacing the other begins to seem absurd.

5. School Libraries and Librarians Improve Student Test Scores

A [2005 study](#) of the Illinois School Libraries shows that students who frequently visit well-stocked and well-staffed school libraries end up with higher ACT scores and perform better on reading and writing exams.

Interestingly, the study points out that access digital technology plays a strong role in test results, noting that "high schools with computers that connect to library catalogs and databases average 6.2% improvement on ACT scores".

[View the press release here.](#)

6. Digitization Doesn't Mean Destruction

The eagerness with which libraries have jumped into partnership with Google Book Search is not the work of a lemming mentality. Libraries including Oxford University, University of Michigan, Harvard, the Complutense University in Madrid, the New York Public Library, the University of Texas, the University of California and [many others](#) have teamed up with the Google's project, not eschewed it.

In return for opening up their stacks, these libraries will have all their books electronically available for their own members. While it can be expected that fully out-of-copyright books will, on many occasions, be made fully accessible to the public, copyrighted materials – including subscription journals – will still be kept under restricted access.

The reason for this is in part because Google Book Search's indemnity clauses don't reach that far; Google Book Search won't shield libraries from any liability that they might incur for overstepping the bounds of copyright. And there's a real cause for caution – Google Book Search is currently facing two major lawsuits from [authors](#) and [publishers](#).

7. In fact, digitization means survival

Daniel Greenstein of the University of California cites a very practical reason for digitizing books: in electronic form, books aren't vulnerable to natural disasters or [pulverization](#) that comes with age. He even cites the [libraries destroyed by Hurricane Katrina](#) as an important reminder of the vulnerability of "cultural memory".

8. Digitization is going to take a while. A long while.

While book search has developed the air of an unstoppable movement rapidly breaking down library walls and exposing untouched treasure troves, it is breathtakingly far from reaching its goal. With an [estimated 100 million books](#) in print since the invention of movable type, the process has hardly made headway. Digitizing is expensive and complicated, and so far Google's million books digitized is just a drop in the bucket. "The majority of Information", [said Jens Redmer](#), Google Book Search's European director, "lies outside the internet".

But how long will it take to index the world's knowledge? In 2002, Larry Page boasted that Google could digitize approximately seven million books in six years. Since 2004 Google Book Search has been plugging along through a series of fits and starts. By 2007, they have managed to index a million books. So, at the rate of approximately half a million books per year, digitizing 100 million books would take about...200 years. Assuming Google could shake off the legal and logistical challenges and crank out 7 million books every 6 years, the earliest possible completion date would still be 2092.

In the meantime, a larger user base will rely on local libraries, or online collections of what have been digitized. Dumping physical libraries before digitization is complete would leave library patrons in the lurch.

9. Libraries aren't just books

Technology is integrating itself into the library system, not bulldozing it. Pushing this trend to its logical extreme (although it's likely not to happen), we could eventually see libraries' entire stacks relegated to databases, and have books only accessible digitally. So where does that leave librarians? Are they being overtaken by technology, the timeless enemy of labor?

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Not this time. In fact, technology is revealing that the real work of librarians is not just placing books on bookshelves. Rather, their work involves guiding and educating visitors on how to find information, regardless of whether it is in book or digital form. Technology provides better access to information, but it is a more complex tool, often requiring specialized know-how. This is a librarian's specialty, as they dedicate themselves to learning the most advanced techniques to help visitors access information effectively. It's in their [job description](#).

10. Mobile devices aren't the end of books, or libraries

[Predictions](#) of the End of the Book are a predictable response to digitization and other technologies, and the crystal ball of some in the pro-paper crowd seems to also reveal a concomitant crumbling of civilization.

One of the latest dark threats to paper (and society) seems to be Google's plan to make e-books downloadable to mobile devices. The iPod version of the novel is here. Google has already scanned a million books. Japanese train commuters are reading entire bestsellers on their cell phones. The end is near.

But if the mobile e-book is a hit and a lasting phenomenon, it's unlikely that they will be an all-consuming transition for readers. Radio lives on despite TV, film is still in high demand despite video, people still talk on the telephone despite email. People who like paper books will continue to read paper books...even if mobile downloads prompt the majority of publishers to release e-books instead of paper. After all, an immense backlog of printed books will still be accessible to readers.

Where do libraries fit in supposing that mobile e-books actually do completely overtake printed books, the presence of the digital library will continue to be extremely important, whether it's paper or electronically based.

11. The hype might really just be hype

Paper books aren't exactly doomed, even years after the invention of the e-book. In fact, by [contrasting the merits](#) of the e-book to those of the paper book, one could argue that paper books are actually a better product.

It would be premature to write off libraries and their freely accessible books amidst predictions of e-books' impending prominence. Society could lose valuable access to a trusted medium – even if e-books do take off.

12. Library attendance isn't falling – it's just more virtual now

With approximately 50,000 visitors a year, attendance at the American History Archives at Wisconsin Historical Society has dropped 40% since 1987. This statistic, when set alone, may prove sufficient for anybody casually predicting the Collapse of the Library. But it is only half the story. The archives have also been digitized and placed online. Every year the library receives [85,000 unique online visitors](#). The number of [online schools](#) offering [online degrees](#) is constantly on the rise as well. Many of these schools are improving their virtual libraries by the day.

13. Like businesses, digital libraries still need human staffing

Even online businesses rely on quality support for better sales and customer satisfaction. The availability of email, phone and live chat services improve the experience of people seeking goods and services. The same goes for people seeking information.

In return for paying taxes or library fees packaged with University tuition, library members should expect reliable “customer support” in exchange for their dues.

Librarians are indeed very important in servicing their visitors. And still today there is no equivalent replacement to the library, which provides access to mountains of content that is not available through search engines or even Google Books Search, which only provides snippets and links to retailers where books can be bought.

14. We just can't count on physical libraries disappearing

Physical libraries won't ever go away. Even as Google Book Search [picks up the pace](#) and libraries finance their own digitization projects, the future of physical library space continues to be necessary.

This is because many libraries aren't digitizing yet and many may never digitize. There's a good reason: it's expensive. At a low estimate of [\\$10 per book](#) (and probably much more for older, more delicate works), digitizing an entire library of, say, more than 10,000 books – well, [it adds up](#). And for many library users, they still depend on this traditional, effective approach to pinpointing information with onsite computers or librarians available to assist them.

15. Google Book Search “don't work”

If a Google-style indexing of all the world's books were to mirror the company's well-known search service, one might have that much more fodder for the argument against keeping libraries around. After all, Google has great technology for searching the web, right? Couldn't we just bypass libraries?

But [experts point out](#) that Google Book Search is far off from such user-friendliness as experienced with the company's internet search service. The lofty ideals of information-for-everybody are hindered not only by copyright lawsuits, but by the Google's own desire to be top dog. They're not about to hand over their index to other competitors, like Microsoft, Yahoo!, Amazon and other non-partnered digitizing projects. The user loses out by not being able to access everything through his or her preferred book search service.

By not giving up digital archives to their competitors, companies that take this competitive, corporate approach to digitization risk veering off the map, away from the philosophy of the public library. In the meantime, libraries should remain in tact and available to the general public.

16. Physical libraries can adapt to cultural change

The U.S. National Commission on Libraries and Information Science (NCLIS) is just one among countless groups that study and debate the evolving role of the physical library in the digital age. In a [2006 symposium](#) the NCLIS created a [report](#) that calls for a refining of what physical library space is. Less like “warehouses”, was one of the conclusions, and more like “intellectual crossroads for working, learning, teaching, and new types of programs.”

17. Physical libraries are adapting to cultural change

Anyone subscribing to the theories of 20th century thinker [Marshal McLuhan](#) might say that along with changed life patterns brought on by electronic technology, knowledge that was once encased in books and compartmentalized by subject area is now being liberally disseminated in an explosion of democracy, rendering obsolete the austerity of the lonely, echoing corridors of the Library. Interestingly McLuhan, who died in 1980, once even [said](#): “the future of the book is the blurb”.

Indeed, this cultural change predates widespread use of the internet, as well as Google Book Search. For decades society has been seeking a more holistic understanding of the world, and increased access to information. The search for new methods of organizing educational structures (including libraries) has long been active. And while libraries might not be on many peoples’ “Top Ten Cutting Edge List”, they have been adapting.

Washington State University director of libraries Virginia Steel, for example, is a proponent of maximizing the [social and interactive](#) nature of physical library space. Group study, art exhibits, food and coffee – talking, not whispering; this is the new library. It’s not obsolete, it’s just changing.

18. Eliminating libraries would cut short an important process of cultural evolution

The library that we are most familiar with today – a public or academic institution that lends out books for free – is a product of the democratization of knowledge. In the old days, books weren’t always so affordable, and private libraries, or book clubs, were a privilege of the rich. This started changing during the 1800’s, with more public libraries popping up and the invention of the Dewey Decimal Classification system to standardize the catalogues and indexes.

Libraries began blossoming under the watch of President Franklin Roosevelt, in part as a tool to differentiate the United States from book-burning Nazis. This increased interest in building a more perfect, liberal society culminated in 1956 with the Library Services Act, which introduced federal funding for the first time. Today there are tens of thousands public libraries in the United States. (More info on the [history of libraries here](#)).

19. The internet isn’t DIY

It could be said that the internet has endowed society with a giddy sense of independence. Access to all the world’s information – and [free search engines](#) to browse it with – calls into question the need for a librarians, moderators or other such middlemen; the web, it might seem, is a do-it-yourself medium.

But a quick look at the driving forces of today’s internet shows us something different. The internet is intensely social and interactive, and has created communities of users that are often remarkably as tight-knit as they are large. The internet is serving as a tool for humans to fulfill their natural community building instincts – sharing, interacting and doing business.

The online economy is driven in large part by the [web 2.0](#) philosophy of human interaction, peer review and the democratization of knowledge and analysis. Search engines rank web pages based on their popularity, social networking platforms pull in millions of visitors daily and the internet’s [most popular encyclopedia](#) is written by the same people who read it.

Like Wikipedia, the most popular online meeting grounds are often the best moderated. Since riff-raff and spammers are an inevitable part of any society (whether physical or virtual), quality control helps contribute to the best online experiences. Good citizenship among online communities (intelligently contributing to the

discussion, not spamming) is a surefire way to bolster your reputation as a helpful member of the group. In order to be fostered, this type of environment must be moderated.

Interestingly, the role of the moderator very much parallels the role of the librarian: to safeguard an environment in which knowledge can be accessed and ideas can be shared.

The notion that libraries are a thing of the past and that humankind has sprouted wings and flown into a new era of self-guided Truth is nothing short of farcical. Unfortunately, it's this same notion that could lead to the dismemberment of libraries as stuffy and out-of-date. In reality, the quality of the web depends on guidance from the academic, library model. While moderators do have brush to clear in the new and savage cyber-scape, librarians have trail blazed significant parts of the journey.

20. Wisdom of crowds is untrustworthy, because of the tipping point

The high visibility of certain viewpoints, analysis and even facts found online through social networking sites and wikis is engineered – ideally – to be the result of objective group consensus. Google's algorithm also hinges on this collective principle: rather than an in-house "expert" arbitrarily deciding what resource is the most authoritative, let the web decide. Sites with higher link popularity tend to rank higher in the search engines. The algorithm is based on the principle that group consensus reveals a better, more accurate analysis of reality than a single expert ever could. Writer James Surowiecki calls this phenomenon "the wisdom of crowds."

In a vacuum, crowds probably are very wise. But all too often we see the caveat to James Surowiecki's crowd wisdom in Malcom Gladwell's "tipping point", which, in this context, explains that groups are easily influenced by their vanguard – those who are the first to do something and who automatically have extra influence, even if what they are doing is not necessarily the best idea.

The highly social nature of the web therefore makes it highly susceptible to, for example, sensationalized, low-quality information with the sole merit of being popular. Libraries, in contrast, provide quality control in the form of a stopgap. Only information that is carefully vetted is allowed in. Libraries are likely to stay separate from the internet, even if they can be found online. Therefore, it is extremely important that libraries remain alive and well, as a counterpoint to the fragile populism of the web.

21. Librarians are the irreplaceable counterparts to web moderators

Individuals who voluntarily devote their time to moderating online forums and wikis are playing a similar role to librarians who oversee the stacks – and those who visit the stacks.

The chief difference between librarians and moderators is that while the former guides users through a collection of highly authoritative, published works, the moderator is responsible for taking the helm as consensus is created. While the roles are distinct, each is evolving along with the fast paced growth of the internet and the evolving nature of libraries. Both moderators and librarians will have a lot to learn from each other, so it is important that they both stick around.

22. Unlike moderators, librarians must straddle the line between libraries and the internet

Admittedly, libraries are no longer both the beginning and ending point of all scholarly research. The internet is effectively pulling students away from the stacks and revealing a wealth of information, especially to one who is equipped with the tools to find it. Indeed, the dream of cutting out the middleman is possible to attain. But at what price?

Media literacy, although an extremely important asset for scholars and researchers, is far from universal. Who is going to teach media literacy? [Many argue](#) that librarians are the best fit to educate people about the web.

After all, web moderators are concerned primarily with the environment which they oversee and less so with teaching web skills to strangers. Teachers and professors are busy with their subjects and specializations. Librarians, therefore, must be the ones who cross over into the internet to make information more easily accessible. Instead of eliminating the need for librarians, technology is reinforcing their validity.

23. The internet is a mess

As one pro-librarian [website](#) puts it, “The internet in very few ways resembles a library. A library provides a clear, standardized set of easily retrievable resources”.

Despite the slightly combative nature of this one-liner, its premise is essentially correct. Despite improvements in search technology and the creation of amazingly comprehensive sites like Wikipedia, the internet is still, in many ways, a free-for-all. Flooded with sites from all sorts of sources that inexplicably languish about or jockey for top positions in the rankings, the web is like an overpopulated Wild West. Many have taken confronted this chaos with grass-roots social networking sites or large, complex and highly successful efforts to organized information (Google, Wikipedia, et al). But despite these efforts, a morass of questionable pages still tends to be served up in many search results, and the credibility of each source accessed must inherently come into question.

Not that that’s a bad thing. The oceans of information, uncertainty and spontaneity on the web can provide an exciting, enriching experience. But if you need to limit your search to logically indexed resources that have been published and then vetted by a professional staff, then the library is still your best bet.

24. The internet is subject to manipulation

As long as the bright minds behind Google are coming up with a better search algorithm, the bright minds of search engine optimizers will continue to crack it. This could involve conforming to Google’s quality standards or, in many cases, skirting around them. It is important for the user to keep in mind the limitations of Google. In many cases the search giant succeeds in serving up good information. But in many cases it still falls short.

In contrast, it is extremely hard to enter into libraries’ indexes. Books, journals and other resources must be nothing less than high caliber, published material. If they’re not, they simply don’t get in.

Furthermore, the economic incentive to manipulate library collections is much less fierce than on the internet. It is estimated that only [4% of book titles](#) are being monetized.

Meanwhile, Google alone is experiencing [incredible earnings](#) through online advertising, not to mention everyone else positioning for a piece of the Internet pie.

But libraries simply aren’t facing this kind of pressure. Their way of providing information, therefore, will inherently be less influenced by corporate interests.

25. Libraries’ collections employ a well-formulated system of citation

Books and journals found in libraries will have been published under rigorous guidelines of citation and accuracy and are thereby allowed into libraries’ collections.

These standards are simply not imposed on websites. They can show up in search results whether or not they provide citation. With enough research, the accuracy of web resources often *can* be determined. But it’s very time consuming. Libraries make research much more efficient.

26. It can be hard to isolate concise information on the internet

Certain subject areas like medical conditions or financial advice are very well mapped on the web. Quality sites for more marginal subject areas, however, are less easy to find through web search. One would have to know which site to go to, and Google isn’t necessarily going to serve you exactly what you are looking for.

Wikipedia, which ranks well for a wide variety of specialized subject areas, is improving web concision. But Wikepedia is just one site, that anyone can edit, and its [veracity is not guaranteed](#). Libraries retain a much more comprehensive and concisely indexed collection off research materials.

27. Libraries can preserve the book experience

Consuming 900 pages on the intellectual history of Russia is an experience unique to the book. In general, the book provides a focused, yet comprehensive study that summarizes years of research by an author – or team of authors – who have devoted their academic to a particular subject area.

Through Google Book Search, the internet can be a tool to find where to buy a book. Normal [search results](#) also reveal a variety of book resellers, academic courses or upcoming web projects.

But even when the internet does provide actual content (as in a [search for the history of Russia](#)) the information is often snack-sized or the overall experience cursory – a sort of quick-reference browsing. Knowledge can be found, but the experience of delving into a book for hundreds of pages just doesn't happen online. The preservation of stacks, therefore, will help preserve access to this approach to learning and the more traditional form of scholarship can continue alongside the new.

28. Libraries are stable while the web is transient

In an effort to improve their service and shake out the spammers, search engines are constantly updating their algorithms. Often, however, collateral damage will knock out innocent sites including, perhaps, authoritative resources.

In addition, websites commonly go offline or their addresses change. Other sites that point to these resources (which were once good) could easily and unwittingly house a number of “broken links”. These sites can remain unedited for years.

Libraries, on the other hand, have a well-accounted-for stock of available resources and a standard indexing system that will deliver stable, reliable results consistently.

29. Libraries can be surprisingly helpful for news collections and archives

In many ways, libraries fall short of the internet when it comes to aggregating news content. Online TV, radio and newspaper sources – not to mention an abundance of blogs referencing and commenting on daily events around the world – can often satiate anyone from the casual headline browser to the news junkie.

Meanwhile, libraries continue to subscribe and stock a certain list of newspapers, and archive the back issues. This effort may seem humble alongside the lengthy lists of online news aggregators and instantaneous access to articles published within the minute.

Nevertheless, a library's news cataloguing can provide a number of advantages. For starters, many publications continue to exist offline. For someone seeking a specific article by a specific journalist, a library could yield better results – even if the publication had to be tracked down through inter-library loan.

Libraries often provide freely accessible issues of major periodicals that would otherwise require online subscription, like many sections of the [New York Times](#)

In addition, archives often disappear offline, or become increasingly expensive online. (Try Google's [news archive search](#)). This can leave libraries with the only accessible copies.

30. Not everyone has access to the internet

In less developed nations or even poorer parts of the United States, library access is often the only clear-cut way for an individual to conduct serious research. There are at least two major reasons that the internet may not provide even an illusory alternative to libraries.

Firstly, online access may be much more difficult to attain than library access. A public library may have but one computer console, while other internet access points may charge someone who simply doesn't have the means to pay.

Secondly, even if internet access is obtained, the lack of technological education in poorer areas of the world will render the technology much less useful than it would be for the person who has more experience navigating the web.

31. Not everyone can afford books

Outside of developed nations, books are more rare and often more expensive than their first-world counterparts. Compounding the problem is an incredibly low minimum wage making the real cost of books astronomical. The public library, wherever it exists, therefore becomes much more crucial to democratizing information.

Since the United States tends to be a trend leader, especially technologically, it must underscore the importance of libraries even as technology moves forward. Touting a culture of BlackBerry devices over books may jeopardize the existence of traditional libraries, leaving poor people without books *or* BlackBerrys.

32. Libraries are a stopgap to anti-intellectualism

It's not that the internet is anti-intellectual; its [academic roots](#) and the immense quantity of scholarly sites certainly attest to it being a smart medium.

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<http://www.nap.edu/readingroom/books/far/ch7.html> and the immense quantity of scholarly sites certainly attest to it being a smart medium.

But for some, the alluring immediacy of the internet can lead to the false impression that only immediate, interactive and on-the-spot online discussion is of value. Dusty books on tall shelves then seem to represent stagnant knowledge, and their curators (librarians), behind the times. Books and reading easily gets regarded as elitist and inactive, while blogging becomes the here-and-now.

But, as mentioned earlier, not everything is on the internet. Access to books and theories from hundreds of years of cultural history is essential to progress. Without this, technology could become the ironic tool of the sensational and retrograde cultural tendencies. Preserving libraries to store knowledge and teach the limitations of technology can help prevent the hubris and narcissism of technological novelty.

33. Old books are valuable

The idea of a library becoming a "book museum" in the age of digitization is sometimes tossed about as an apocalyptic figure of speech. It's a real scare for librarians. The term insinuates that, rather than become contemporary and useful, libraries could turn into historical fetishes like vinyl records or typewriters. And instead of continuing on as research professionals, librarians would be forced to become like museum curators – or, more likely, they would just lose their jobs.

But if the evolution of libraries grows to become an interactive meeting place for cultural events and the exchange of ideas, the preservation and exhibition of archival literary relics could be yet another facet to their importance (and, yes, intrigue). Indeed, old books are not only monetarily valuable, but they are part of cultural, historical memory that mustn't be lost to digitization.

Conclusion

Society is not ready to abandon the library, and it probably won't ever be. Libraries can adapt to social and technological changes, but they can't be replaced. While libraries are distinct from the internet, librarians are the most suited professionals to guide scholars and citizens toward a better understanding of how to find valuable information online. Indeed, a lot of information is online. But a lot is still on paper. Instead of regarding libraries as obsolete, state and federal governments should increase funding for improved staffing and technology. Rather than lope blindly through the digital age, guided only by the corporate interests of web economics, society should foster a culture of guides and guideposts. Today, more than ever, libraries and librarians are extremely important for the preservation and improvement of our culture.

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