



Exploring the world of the digital library

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As we continue on our journey in the footsteps of an information professional, we explore the world of the digital library and the value we can derive from using these online resources.

The digital library is distinguished from the traditional library in that the information is displayed, arranged, stored and accessed in a digitalized format.

Digital libraries offer easy access to validated information via a single interface without the need for specialized knowledge of reference materials, indices or materials (Smith and Phillips 1999). A wide range of information resources and skills, including virtual librarians that assist users to access everything from transaction data and computerized databases to external reference materials, are generally available.

In addition, digitization of information resources enables this information to be more widely disseminated. For example, subscriptions to a single physical edition of a journal can now be traded for an electronic subscription that allows multiple concurrent accesses – allowing information to become more widely available (Taylor 2003).

Digital library draw cards

Access: Traditionally, the library is a safety net for the disadvantaged in society because it allows equal access to information and equal opportunity to learn (Taylor 2003). However, an article in the *Mail and Guardian* newspaper reported that less than 10% of South African high schools have libraries. There is only one library for every 25000 South Africans and, on a national level, the situation is critical, with library budgets plummeting from R22 million in 2000 to R12 million this year (Thumbadoo 2004). While access to the Internet is a further hurdle for these institutions, providing access to global digital libraries may be a solution, if one considers the Gutenberg Project and the African Digital Library (discussed later in this article).

Virtual librarian: The support structure of any information environment has to focus on the people who add value to the information, particularly staff members such as librarians, researchers, editors, guides and other content interpreters. The traditional library model emphasizes the need for human judgement and work rather than techno utopian visions of one giant computer brain (Davenport 1997). Hence, the virtual or online librarian becomes a big drawing card of using a digital library. The online librarian not only passively accepts requests but also actively evaluates and develops information sources, channels and programs for users who do not yet know they need the information. In a sense the information professionals become 'evangelists', constantly attempting to recruit new members and provide new services to those members.

Global users: The library's scope in collection and service is no longer restricted to local users but is extended to users from around the globe.

Lifelong learning: The pressures of the modern workforce demand that the population engage in lifelong learning, that is, the need to continually educate oneself to maintain or improve one's standing in the workforce. The increase and fragmentation of the workforce into diverse and specialist roles means library users increasingly search and demand access to specialist journals and resources that stretch a library's ability to meet the needs of its users.

Where do you find them?

While the following list of digital libraries is by no means an exhaustive one, the following sources are comprehensive in their online offering.

The African Digital Library (<http://www.africandl.org.za/>) is a collection of electronic books and available free of charge for residents in Africa. The collection of 8000 electronic books is divided into the ADL collection (3808) and a publicly accessible collection of 4000. Users are required to create an account which takes up to one week to process. The collection is particularly strong on business sciences.

The Library of Congress (<http://www.loc.gov/library>) is the United States' oldest federal cultural institution and serves as the research arm of Congress. It is also the largest library in the world, with nearly 128 million items including more than 29 million books and other printed materials, 2.7 million recordings, 12 million photographs, 4.8 million maps and 57 million manuscripts. Many of these resources are available via the Internet, for example a global gateway to world culture and resources, links to online galleries and subject areas targeted at researchers, librarians, teachers, children, publishers and people with disabilities.

Lib-web-cats (<http://www.librarytechnology.org/Libwebcats>) is a directory of libraries worldwide. While the majority of the current listings are in North America, the numbers of libraries represented in other parts of the globe is growing. Each listing includes links to the library's Web site and online catalogue. Other information available includes the geographic location, address, library type, current and previous library automation systems used, and the size of the library's collection. This directory lists 11 South African libraries, mostly academic ones.

The Berkeley Digital Library SunSITE (<http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/Libweb>) builds digital collections and services while providing information and support to digital library developers worldwide. This site provides links to global library servers in over 100 countries via the World-Wide Web and incidentally lists 15 library links for South Africa.

Bubl Link / 5:15 (<http://bubl.ac.uk/link/types/opacs.htm>) is a British based multi-disciplinary catalogue covering all academic subject areas and catalogued according to the Dewey Decimal Classification. This site provides links to 204 library catalogues.

LibrarySpot.com (www.libraryspot.com) is a free virtual library resource centre for educators, students, librarians, library patrons and businesses that are using the World-Wide Web to access valuable research information. The portal attempts to break the information overload of the Web and bring the best library and reference sites together. Site features are hand selected and reviewed by an editorial team for quality, content and utility. The portal boasts links to academic, film, medical, school and national libraries, a reference desk with links to biographies, dictionaries, directories and statistics, and a reading room with links to worldwide newspapers, magazines, poetry and speech sites.

Questia (www.questia.com) is the world's largest online collection of books and journal articles in the humanities and social sciences, including magazine and newspaper articles. The resources are selected by professional collection development librarians, and access to the resources is available via subscription.

Digital library resources

Although some of the digital resources have restricted access, especially in academic libraries, many digital libraries offer value-added services to anyone in need of information.

Digital libraries offer access to:

- Catalogues of physical and electronic resources;
- journal indices – a list of articles arranged alphabetically by subject. Indices can be general or related to a specific discipline such as business, education and nursing. Journal indices are useful when looking for the most current information. Smith and Phillips (1999) claim that a journal index is a good example of how the Internet and personal computers have made research libraries more accessible;
- online citations, which are written details of a book or journal article. A complete citation can include information such as author, page number, volume number and publication date;
- subject-related Web sites or links – these Web sites have been selected by the subject librarians and other library staff according to their potential usefulness to researchers in the various fields of study (<http://www.bubl.ac.uk/link/menus.html>);
- electronic books – for example, the Gutenberg project (<http://www.gutenberg.org>). It is the Internet's oldest producer of free electronic works available in the public domain. All the publications may be downloaded, read and distributed for non-commercial use;
- commercial electronic databases. Access to these databases via academic libraries is generally restricted to academic staff and students and is for study and research purposes only and may not be distributed for commercial purposes. In certain instances, pay-for-use access is available (Taylor 2003);
- virtual librarians, which gives access to subject and reference librarians via email. For example, the Library of Congress offers an online reference service (<http://www.loc.gov/rr/askalib/>);
- fee-based information services – literature and information services are offered to library users http://www.sun.ac.za/library/eng/services/Info_service.html;
- multimedia resources – access to multimedia resources such as film and music (<http://www.libraryspot.com/libraries/filmlibraries.htm> and <http://www.libraryspot.com/reference/music.htm>);
- current awareness services – a customized information service informing of the latest publications in a field of interest. Profiles are compiled of keywords, author names and journal titles relevant to the topic, generated weekly to retrieve all the latest matching bibliographic references; and
- publishers' alerting services – free email alert to notifying of contents of the latest journals and books <http://www.unisa.ac.za/Default.asp?Cmd=ViewContentandContentID=7412>.

Conclusion

The slogan 'more than a library' displayed on the Library of Congress Web site sums up the value of digital libraries. Instant access to a worldwide network of information resources evaluated by information professionals is a journey well worth indulging in.

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ISSN 1560-683X

Published by [InterWord Communications](#) for the Centre for Research in Web-based Applications, Rand Afrikaans University

