

## Sharers of the World: Despite Predictions of Doom, Library Activity Is on the Rise

Written by Mike Schulz

Wednesday, 09 May 2007 02:33

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To hear their directors tell it, the future of libraries has always looked bleak.

"I remember when I was in library school," recalls Moline Public Library Director Leslie Kee, "which was in 1967. They told us that by the year 2000 there would *be* no books."

"They've been predicting our death for decades," agrees Ava Ketter, director of the Rock Island Public Library. "When microfilm became big, it was 'This is the death of public libraries.' You know, the chicken in every pot, the car in every garage. ... Every house would have, I suppose, cabinet and cabinet of *microfilm*."

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And it's not merely local librarians who've heard this theory. A March 2007 report by the American Library Association (ALA) stated that just 10 years ago, "some experts predicted the demise of the nation's system of libraries as a result of the Internet explosion."

This death knell, it appears, was a little premature.

Data released in the ALA's report (available at <http://www.ala.org/State>) indicates that "the number of visits to public libraries in the United States increased 61 percent between 1994 and 2004."

The report goes on to state that "overall circulation at public libraries in the U.S. rose by 28 percent during the decade," and that in 2006, "almost 1.8 billion visitors checked out more than 2 billion items."

Those 2006 gains, however, aren't strictly on a *national* level.

Ketter and Kee revealed that circulation and visitation (referred to as a "gate count") rose at both the Moline and Rock Island public libraries last year, and similar upswings were reported by Davenport Public Library Director LaWanda Roudebush and the Bettendorf Public Library Director Faye Clow.

For Roudebush, the continued appeal of libraries is simple: "I think, as much as anything, people love to *read*. They like the feel of a book - they want to go to sleep with a *book* in their hands, not a computer."

But recently, there's also been a *newfound* appeal, due in part to the opening of new facilities (in Moline and Davenport), the renovation of others (including last October's refurbishment of the Rock Island Public Library's downtown building), and the offering of more and better services and activities than ever before.

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As Clow says, "There are a *lot* of ingredients into why we stick around" - all of which, she states, boil down to one basic notion: "Libraries are the original sharers of the world."

### Data Swamp

I spoke with Kee on the phone, with Roudebush at the Davenport main library, and with Ketter and Clow in the *Reader* office, yet their theories as to why library activity has risen over the past decade were strikingly similar. (Sometimes the directors even made similar *jokes*

;

like Roudebush, Kee told me, "You can't curl up in bed with a computer.")

For instance, the directors readily agree that technological advances have led to an increased demand for information. And nowhere is this demand more readily facilitated than through the Internet.

While the ALA study reports that, as of 2004, "virtually every library in the United States - 99 percent - provides free computer access to the Internet," only 69 percent of U.S. households had home Internet access, making libraries a necessary go-to place for those who can't access Web-based information elsewhere.

Roudebush - who saw computer-usage in the Davenport libraries rise by 27 percent between July 2005 and June 2006 - states, "I think one of the things that's pushing people to use the Internet is that the federal government is demanding that we use all of these different services

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online," referencing, among other documents, the downloading of state and federal tax forms.

Yet the directors understand that the breadth of information offered by the Internet can be daunting, and the credibility of that information can oftentimes be suspect. For many, it's up to libraries to provide a safe entry into the electronic world.

"I think libraries and the people who work in them are pretty smart operators," Ketter says, "and if technology comes along, we adapt to it. Because underlying whether it's a book or [the] Internet or whatever, is people's need for information, and libraries supply that need. The need doesn't go away."

"One of the reasons why libraries are needed so much," notes Kee, "is that our staff[s] are professionals that have been trained on how to sort out what's a reputable Web site as opposed to a non-reputable one."

Taking, as an example, computer users who aren't aware of how to research subjects beyond a standard Google search, Kee says, "I think the very last thing anybody should ever do when you're diagnosed with some terrible disease is to go on the Internet and read about it, because God knows what site you're on."

She believes that "you need that professional guidance and expertise" that professional facilitators provide, adding that without their help, "People may or may not get everything that they *could* have gotten, may or may not get the right information."

"Far from hurting American libraries," the study says, "the Internet has actually helped to spur more people to use their local libraries because it has increased our hunger for knowledge and information."

And Ketter, whose three Rock Island libraries frequently offer workshops on computer know-how, agrees. "I love surfing the Web," she says. "I'm a 'Net animal myself; it can be huge fun. But it's also chaotic, there's not much time-depth on it, you don't get much in the way of historical perspective at all, and very little in the way of quality control. It's an overload, it's just a

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*deluge* - almost a data *swamp*."

Librarians, says Ketter, provide "quality information. There'll be some research behind it, you're going to know *who's* saying it, and *why* they're saying it."

And, of course, such information isn't confined solely to the Web. Roudebush points with pride to the Davenport Public Library's Richardson-Sloane Special Collections Center, which holds an extensive genealogy and local-history collection that include 23,000 books, 75,000 photographs, and 18,000 rolls of microfilm.

"We say our librarians are the greatest search engines," says Roudebush, "because they have the *human* interaction."

### Ahead of the Curve

Perhaps no age group requires this sort of interaction more than children. And while overall circulation rose by 28 percent between 1994 and 2004, the ALA report not only reveals "significant growth in circulation of children's materials, which grew by 44 percent," but adds that "attendance in library programs for children was also up 42 percent."

Certainly those gains have been seen in Moline. Kee says that with last summer's opening of the new Moline Public Library on 41st Street, circulation of materials increased by 49.6 percent

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over the previous year, and its gate count increased by 43 percent.

(She does add that those percentages are "mitigated by the fact that it is a new building," yet are inspiring nonetheless. "Because usually when a new building opens," Kee says, "you'll increase your 'circ' and gate counts by 20 to 40 percent, which is what we've done, and within a year we'll find that about 50 percent of that will be *permanent* growth - new users.")

Kee says that, in addition to the newness of the venue itself, many of those increases can be linked to the expansion of programs directed toward kids, including the Books Alive! Reader's Theatre program - a youthful introduction to folk and fairy tales - and the Book Buddies, in which children ages 10 to 12 read to children ages four to seven. "We had a children's program before," says Kee, "but now, it's really ... it's *cool*."

Meanwhile, at the Rock Island Main Library, Ketter reveals that attendance for the 2006 summer-reading program "didn't double" over the previous summer, "but it was *close*." And Ketter believes the key to their successes with children stems from "getting a lot of feedback from the kids themselves and their parents - what *they* want. Everything from the toddlers all the way up through grade schools and the teens.

"We keep trying for the teens," she says, smiling.

Bettendorf Public Library also saw an attendance increase for its children's programs; comparing the most recent fiscal year to the previous one, Clow says, "we went from 6,221 to 9,212 in just *little* kid attendance." But she agrees that teenagers have, traditionally, been a tough group for libraries to reach.

"They're just a little ahead of the curve," Clow says. "For us anyway. I think with social networking and texting and all this stuff that's happening - YouTube and Flickr and whatnot - that many libraries don't have a *presence* yet in those areas. There's a report out just recently in the way teens use social networking, and 60 to 80 percent of them are on MySpace. That's an area where libraries are weak right now but need to strengthen."

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The Davenport library itself does have a MySpace page, Roudebush reveals, as well as a Wikipedia entry. Yet she and her fellow directors also understand the need for *live* programming

Among events geared toward teenagers are the forthcoming Battle of the Bands ("This year," Roudebush says, "we're actually going to give a small stipend to the winners to have them play at two other events") and May 17's "Jedi Jamboree," held in conjunction with the 30th anniversary of *Star Wars*. ("I've been informed that we're all supposed to be in costume that day," the library director adds. And who will she be dressed as? "I have *no* idea," she laughs. "I thought my two sons would help me decide.")

"That's always a hard age to crack," Ketter says of the teen demographic, "and I think part of it is that they're so busy - the world's just exploding out socially and in every other way, and a lot of kids are *so* scheduled. So we try to catch them where they are. We have the teen board, and we do try to do as much outreach to them through school and through *interests*."

"If it takes clinics of skateboarding," she says, "we do clinics on skateboarding. Whatever their interests are. If we can get them *in*, a lot of times they'll rediscover the place."

### Community Dialogue

It's not only youths who are rediscovering local libraries, as many of the library's special events are directed toward a decidedly older demographic.

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"We have outreach to our seniors," says Roudebush, in describing recent additions to the library's programs for its older card-holders. "We have a van that goes out every week to different senior centers, and we make sure that people have things available to them. Another thing we do is what we call our homebound delivery. [Seniors] have a profile - they tell us what kinds of books they like to read, and what format they want, and they give us an idea of what they've already read - and then we put together lists."

Among recent programs added at the Rock Island Public Library, says Ketter, "we've done a Connecting Generations program that has been *wonderful*. Last year it was the African-American community and this year it's the Jewish community, where we get seniors who are interviewed by youngsters - 'What was your life like as an African-American, right here, when you were young?'" She calls the archived program "really an amazing experience. It really *did* connect the generations and talk about what history we have, right here, still living and breathing."

Ketter adds that the Rock Island libraries have also "developed a support system, and programming and resources, for the home-schooling community. ... They do a lot of get-togethers [at the Rock Island libraries], and they do try to treat us as their school library."

The ALA report cites specialized programs such as these as "the most compelling draw to bring more library visits," and says that respondents to a survey are particularly interested in "more free classes and programs for people my age."

And Clow says that in addition to providing expected offerings along the lines of book-discussion groups and summer-reading programs, the Bettendorf Public Library continually strives to offer more specific programs, citing the venue's recent presentations on Medicare Part D.

"We've made a concentrated effort to do *demand* programming rather than traditional library programming," she states, "and one thing we did last year that was different was Global Gathering. We heard from a community-advisory committee that Bettendorf was so homogeneous; we didn't have a heightened sensitivity to cultural differences. So in our strategic plan we decided that each year we would feature a culture, in the literary arts especially."



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"Last year was India - we did two months of programming on India - and that was *huge* attendance for us. You know, if we get 30, 40 people to a library program, that's good, and we were getting over a

*hundred*

. And this year we're doing the Middle East ... . We're bringing in, for that, a Palestinian poet named Naomi Shihab Nye, and we're bringing in a man named Paul Barrett - who has written a book called

*American Islam* -

who will talk about Islamic religion and its variations in the United States."

Nontraditional programming of this sort is also on frequent display at the Moline Public Library, which has recently hosted performances by the Amani Dancers and a production of *The Ugly Duckling* by

the Black Hawk College theatre department, and, in April, displayed the artworks of local artist Brent Langley. "Keeping art alive," says the library's children's services coordinator, Christina Conklin, "is

*very*

important to us."

As is keeping *discourse* alive, and Clow says that at among the special events offered by the Bettendorf Public Library, "We like to have candidate debates for local elections. It's a good place to come and hear points of view.

"But that's what libraries are there *for*," she adds. "Throughout our history, it's a place for community dialogue. And if you can't talk about issues at the library, where

*can*

you?"

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### We Didn't Know You Could Do That

Second to the addition of programs with more targeted appeal, the ALA report notes that respondents were seeking "the library being open more hours," a suggestion noted by the area's library directors. "We've increased our hours," says Kee of the Moline Public Library, "and the big change is that we will not go to summer hours this year - we will have the same hours year 'round. I believe we'll be the only library in the Quad Cities that will be open all 13 Sundays during the summer."

But for those making their first acquaintance with the new Moline Library, learning about the expanded hours generally takes a backseat to learning about the library *itself*.

"People are amazed at what we have to offer," says Conklin, who often leads tours of the new edifice to children's groups and others. "It's still new enough that people are *discovering* us."

"I mean, I still have people who didn't realize we had *DVDs*," says Kee with a laugh. "They weren't library users - they walked in 'cause it's a new building, and they find out it's this wonderful place."

Something similar happened, says Roudebush, after the January 2006 opening of the Fairmount Street branch. "People realized, 'Oh, *wow*, I haven't been to a library in a long time.' They had no clue that there were so many different formats available. We opened Fairmount and people said, 'Wow, we didn't know you could *do* that.'"

Yet, to the surprise of many, the opening of Davenport's Fairmount library didn't decrease interest in Davenport's *main* library. "People had said to me, 'When we open Fairmount, Main Library is probably not going to do, you know, that much business,'" recalls Roudebush. "But actually we have *increased* in users [from July 2005 to June 2006,

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total overall attendance was up 9 percent at Davenport Main over the previous 12-month period] because people discovered that we do have a number of different things that they did not know were available. So we *do* have the DVDs, we *do* have audiobooks on CD, and now we have a children's collection of Playaways [audiobooks on MP3 players that can hold up to 20 hours of audio]. Those are *very* new."

Other modern conveniences offered at area libraries include cafés, children's play areas, and a host of electronic offerings, and Ketter says that the opening of new libraries also increases interest in hers, especially when - as with last year's closing of Moline's downtown library on 17th Street - library users find themselves *without* a "home library" to go to. "When one library closes, [people] will go to another one," she says. "And some of those people came to us and said, 'Hey, I haven't been here before. This is *cool*.'

"That's always been a strength of the Quad Cities," Ketter adds. "We don't compete. We cooperate."

They also cooperate outside the Quad Cities. "Scott County is very unique in the state of Iowa," says Roudebush, "in that the people who have cards - whether they're within Bettendorf, Davenport, Scott County [library] headquartered in Eldridge, or LeClaire - their cards are good anywhere in this area. Nowhere else in the state of Iowa is that possible.

"But not only *that*," she adds, "because of our consortium across the river, you can go to Moline or Rock Island and check out something, and people from there can come here and check out something. They can use our buildings just as they use their own."

The consortium she refers to is Prairie Cat, an Iowa-Illinois conglomeration of 90 libraries that shares information and materials, and takes the place of Quad-LINC (Quad Cities Libraries in Cooperation), which previously included one-third as many.

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"We're now reaching as far north as Rockford," says Roudebush, "and going as far south as Joliet and the Fountaindale Public Library [in Bolingbrook] and Shorewood." The consortium also includes libraries in Iowa's Scott and Muscatine counties, among them those on the campuses of Scott, Muscatine, and Clinton community colleges.

"That's just remarkable to me," Roudebush says, "that they have this many libraries."

Kee is similarly impressed with the consortium. "We've got a wonderful partnership," she says. "We share books, we share information. ... I think it's just an *excellent* consortium that has really saved libraries, over the years, millions of dollars, by not having to replicate materials and services."

She adds that those with a library card in any one of those 90 locations have full access to the materials at the other 89, meaning that "somebody from Rockford could come with their library card and check out books *here*. I mean, it's wonderful. So much more has been opened."

"For the consumer of library services," agrees Clow, "it's fabulous. Absolutely fabulous."

"We always like to say we're cutting edge," Roudebush says with obvious pride. "We definitely want people to know that we have new things going on all the time, and we're not the same as the library in the '60s or '70s. Or '80s. Or even the '90s. Because we *do* keep changing."

## Humanizing Places

But the directors also concede that, with as many innovations and conveniences as modern libraries provide, they also provide the comforts of the familiar, which Ketter frequently senses at the Rock Island Public Library - the oldest in the state of Illinois. ("Not that we *brag* about it, of course," the library director deadpans. "That would be tacky.")

"Rock Island's an old city," says Ketter, "and it has deep roots, and it has a deep cultural sense - we're a great library town, and have been historically."

Certainly that appears true of the town's *recent* history. In addition to the October renovation of the Rock Island Main Library, the city's 30/31 branch (located at 3059 30th Street) was renovated in 1999 and its Southwest branch (at 9010 Ridgewood Road) in 2000, and the operating hours for both have, says, Ketter, been "hugely" expanded. (On April 30, the Southwest branch expanded its hours from 35 hours a week to its current 46 and a half.) "The city council, the mayor, the *public* have been very supportive of us," says Ketter. "It's Rock Island giving back to Rock Island."

And, in turn, giving back to the community as a whole.

"They're community centers now," says Kee of area libraries, "and that was one of the things we took into account when we designed our new library. Aside from all the meeting-room space, which is considerable, we also put these bay windows up on the second floor - kind of jutting out over 41st Street - and we call it the conversation nook. It's not unusual at all to go by and see three or four people kind of push the chairs together, and they've gotten coffee from the coffee shop, and they'll just be sitting there, talking about the events of the day. ... Yeah, we look at this as a safe gathering place for the public."

"That is one miraculous thing that I love about public libraries," says Ketter, "is that we really are *community* libraries. The people who live here and work in the cities and live in the cities and *us* *e* us, support us. They're really

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Places for which, Clow believes, no amount of technological innovation will ever be a substitute. "People, I just believe, seek some security," she says. "They can find things on the Internet ... but some people want the security of having a librarian help them, or verify it, or whatever. It's part of the fabric of a community's life, I think, and I don't think it's endangered at all."

And in the end, Kee believes, it all comes down to the books. "People want the *feel* of a book, the *scent* of a book, the *touch* of a book, the *romance* of a book, the *convenience* of a book ... .

"Libraries are just great places to be." She laughs. "Books aren't gone *yet*."

More information on Quad Cities libraries is available at their Web sites: Bettendorf Public Library ( <http://www.bettendorflibrary.com> ); Davenport Public Library ( <http://www.davenportlibrary.com> ); Moline Public Library ( <http://www.molinelibrary.com> ); and Rock Island Public Library ( <http://ripl.lib.il.us> ).