

# Apologia pro Bibliotheca: More than Information (Think Piece)

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## Abstract

A recurring assumption about libraries is that their work can equated with information. It becomes no surprise, then, when libraries are argued to be redundant and easily replaceable with online holdings. The present piece suggests ways in which this position, common even among librarians, fundamentally misrepresents the deeper project of the library.

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Even those who consider themselves supporters of libraries often get it wrong, and in the process can do more damage than even those who attack libraries directly. This paradox was on display in a dustup in 2016 over a proposed name change for the American Association of Law Libraries (AALL). According to the unanimous Board of Directors, the new name, "Association for Legal Information," would represent no serious change from the current mission. The intention was merely a rebrand to highlight a more contemporary, less dusty, and archaic word that glossed who its members are and what they do.

The premise that *library* is a synonym for *information*, however, signals a radically different understanding of what it means to be a library than that held by the majority of AALL members, who overwhelmingly rejected erasing the organization's identification with libraries.

In this digital age, though, we can admit that many do feel that the library can be reduced to its information. The mistake in this view, however, can be found in the reactions upon learning that a library has been destroyed by fire or other catastrophe. Even if every item in its catalogue exists elsewhere, so that there has been no loss of information, we rightly still feel diminished. We suspect something has been lost, but often lack words to articulate what that might be.

Important clues to the deeper significance of libraries, I suggest, can be divined if we explore that emotional reaction which, if we believed the alleged equation of libraries and information, would be irrational. If we therefore wish to eschew that claim, that the library is simply information, it may be helpful to be more explicit about what the term refers to. I offer here my opinion.

It may be easiest to begin by clarifying what a library is *not*, at least as suggested by the way we talk about it. The library is not the books, not least because the history of libraries long precedes the appearance of books. We can have lots of books without them ever becoming a library. Bookstores are an obvious example. More is needed before recognizing an accumulation of books as a library.

Similarly, a library is not the collections it contains. We speak of libraries “having” collections, but only awkwardly of collections “having” or “being” a library. *Library* is the superior, emergent concept, one comprised of collections, which in turn are comprised of books. Books, we may add, contain information, making that the most elemental unit within the chain leading upward towards the library.

To focus on information, therefore, highlights the most reductive element. The *library* is built up out of collective acts of selection and organization, while *information* decomposes those projects into their least common denominator. Far from being synonyms, *library* and *information* are antonyms standing at the opposite ends of the scale of organizational complexity.

Defining by negation may suffice to explain the rejection of the proposed name change, but it falls short of providing a positive response to the question, “What is a library?”

One popular answer is that the library is the people who work there. One librarian predicts that while libraries will disappear because everything is going online, librarians will prosper to help users navigate the digital wilds (Siess, 2009). Appealing and flattering as that response may be, it errs in the opposite direction, now totally ignoring the information within the library. Perhaps just as likely, though, is that all

librarians will be replaced with “customer service” representatives, for less money (LISNews, 2008).

The middle course focuses not on the good things that libraries do, of which there are plenty, but on what could not be done if the library did not exist. The unique impact of libraries is not always obvious, nor need it have anything to do with “information.” For example, when librarians are eager to shed their physical volumes, they work under a belief that the digital replacements will serve as well, and that the remodeled spaces will be as useful. Both of these assumptions are wrong. On the one hand, sizeable literature has demonstrated that users interact with digital texts differently than they do physical volumes (Baron, 2015), and, on the other, we now have some data that shows that studying in a book-rich environment yields better comprehension even when the books are not used at all (Donovan, 2020). We should therefore be more cautious in any action that implies that libraries are redundant or superseded because the bits of information they offer can be accessed elsewhere. To better recognize their unique purpose, we should recall some obvious facts about libraries.

No library comes into being whole and complete but grows from some initial holdings. Today’s Library of Congress’s 32 million books began with a purchase of 6,474 volumes from Thomas Jefferson; Harvard’s libraries of more than 13 million titles built upon a 1638 gift of 400 volumes from John Harvard. Through a process of additions and withdrawals driven by local priorities, interests, and tastes, a library evolves to mirror the community it serves. To become, in a real sense, its intellectual doppelgänger. Even in theory no library aspires to collect everything, but only what speaks to its patrons. For that reason, little can be said about libraries generically; every library is, like every person, specific, unique, and irreplaceable.

This hint becomes clearer when considering the targeting of libraries during armed conflicts. “Books,” according to Fernando Báez (2008, p. 12), “are not destroyed as physical objects but as links to memory, that is, as one of the axes of identity of a person or a community.” Rebecca Knuth, who has written extensively on the military targeting of libraries, frames the relationship thus: “When the goal of battle is the obliteration of a culture (as opposed to simply unseating a regime), the conquest of territories and their populations is accompanied by the destruction of libraries and other cultural institutions supporting memory or legitimizing past identities.” One example she offers, with perhaps only a bit of hyperbole, is that during Japan’s push in the 1940s to build its empire it “destroyed every library in the Philippines” (Knuth, 2003, pp. 52, 60).

Memory, then, is the one-word answer for the library's unique mission. By tending to the daily needs of its patrons, every library embodies the tracings of its local history. Libraries make their mark not through the accretion of facts and data, but from the aggregated materials thought important to the community served. If, as Barbara Tuchman has written, "Books are humanity in print," then the loss of a library is a literal tragedy. We mourn its destruction without any regard about what "information" may have been lost. It is the relationship of that information to its people that has been annihilated, and which is irreplaceable no matter if the data themselves can be acquired online.

Some may feel that the role of institutional memory is reserved only for national libraries or similarly special collections. But while this aspect may be easiest to see on the grand scale, it holds true for all libraries, of every size and purpose. Each library preserves a permanent record of the intellectual endeavors of its own users. Were it not true that libraries offer a privileged window upon the lives they serve, several ongoing projects would make little sense. Not only is the Library of Congress reassembling the original Jefferson books, but the free online catalog LibraryThing works to reconstruct the Legacy Libraries of significant historical figures like Susan B. Anthony and David Bowie.

In each case it is not the naked information that provokes interest, or even the individual books, but rather their associations with one another, and with their users. People are rightly interested in not only the titles from the New York Society Library read by Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr, but the actual volumes held in their hands.

Libraries reflect the stories of the people who chose and read the books. That is why libraries deserve our protection against any, including even librarians, who would dismiss them as mere assemblages that are now threatened with replacement by true information tools like Google. If libraries are dismissed as old-fashioned institutions, it will not be because they have been displaced by new information-heavy digital pseudo-analogues, but because we no longer deem important the irreducible, *sui generis* values that libraries embody and are thus willing to make do with something less.

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