

## Will Public Libraries Become Extinct?



Marc Bodnick,

As someone who has spent a fair amount of time analyzing business disruption, **I think it's pretty clear that libraries are eventually going to fade away.**

I understand that this isn't a popular view, because libraries (and librarians) are awesome.

But it's hard to avoid the obvious:

- Libraries provide many services, yes, but the most important service is lending books.
- **Tablets & eReaders are a much better way to get a book than borrowing it or buying it at a bookstore. You can get the book right away, the split second you want it!**
- More, and more, and more people are going to buy tablet devices & eReaders over the next ten years.
- Power readers are disproportionately more likely to buy tablets & eReaders. Anyone who really loves reading, buying, and borrowing books is likely going to buy an eReader.
- Once you really start enjoy reading on a Kindle or iPad, your interest in visiting a bookstore or library goes down precipitously.
- Buying a book cheaply on your Kindle or iPad is **so much better** than (1) go to a library, (2) cross-fingers hope they have the book in stock, (3) borrow the book, (4) read it, (5) remember to return it, and (6) drive back to the library to return it. That's a lot of work.

**Put another way, I really don't see how a world can exist where tons of bookstores close (a trend that we're in the midst of) while libraries generally stay open.** Yes, there are plenty of things a bookstore does besides selling and stocking books, but it turns out that when someone else (Amazon, etc.) provides that core service much better, all the ancillary services that a bookstore provides (curation, staff recommendations, a pleasant atmosphere, browsing, good coffee, comfy seats, etc.) don't provide enough value to attract customers.

**To be clear, I agree that libraries may stick around longer than the underlying consumer behavior supporting them.** Why? Because funding libraries is a political, not an economic decision. Nevertheless, I believe strongly that public libraries will turn into ghost towns in five to fifteen years, at which point it will become very difficult to justify funding them and keeping them open.

I understand that libraries lend books, which is cheaper than buying them. And yes I understand that there are other reasons to visit a library besides borrowing books. So to be clear: **I don't think that library visiting will disappear as a behavior** -- just as visiting bookstores hasn't disappeared as a behavior. However, enough demand will drop to cause industry failure. Why? Because libraries (and bookstores) have high fixed costs that need to be covered by a threshold level of demand.

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Erica Friedman, Librarian

This answer is in direct rebuttal to Marc Bodnick's answer.

Most libraries now lend e-books, music, and other media as well. But the real reason libraries will disappear is that people *\*perceive\** them as only or mostly lending books. Libraries are and have been on the front lines of technology forever, but people persist in thinking of them as old-fashioned. This has been true since the early 1900s, by the way. Henry Dana Gibson, one of the early heads of the American Library Assoc. wrote about it to the association.

The bottom line is people are very, very bad at learning new things and they haven't been in the library since school, so they *perceive* it as being the same as it was then. So when tax time comes, they bitch that libraries are old-fashioned and don't want to support them.

Forget that libraries provide e-readers to people who can't afford them, lend e-books, art, music, teach classes, do podcasts, provided database access and training, function as employment centers when the state has cut the funding for those. They provide media services for homebound, blind, disabled, safe places for children to go, collect graphic novels to get teens to read, provide classes on new technology, and spaces for community meetings. They have Twitter and Youtube and [Facebook](#) pages - and they talk to you there.

The list goes on and on. But if you don't use your library, you'll never know those things. And you'll tell yourself that libraries are exactly the way they were when you were six, then feel slightly bad when you vote them off the town budget.

Libraries will die, because they were killed by people who never used them.

Visit your local library - walk in or visit online. Ask them what they do, then be prepared to be very, very impressed.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/quora/2012/10/02/will-public-libraries-become-extinct/#546e29a5693c>