

The Librarian's Desk . . .

Three recent headlines intrigued me. In June, Apple's Steve Jobs announced he was moving the company's software into "The Cloud," eliminating the need for PCs, CDs, and USBs that fit into those neat little pockets and sleeves designers built into our wardrobes and dashboards for iPods, Blackberries, Tablets and other paraphernalia we tote every time we leave the house.

In March, Google's settlement was rejected by a federal court in favor of the many authors and publishers who charged Google with copyright infringement in their mission to upload every book into their Virtual Google Library.

Which leads me to the third headline: on May 23, the New York Public Library celebrated 100 years. In my mind, these three news pieces are related. The Cloud, the Googlization of Books, and the Centennial of the New York Public Library all have implications for the future of public access to information.

"The Cloud" is the information technology phrase du jour that describes the source above and beyond our computer and its connections to the internet's vast realm of storage. The Cloud obviates the more nebulous aspects of technology from users' devices. Cloud Computing covers the haywire that still comes with the turf: data is lost, hacked, or hi-jacked, servers crash, spam storms, packets are dropped, and dead zones and blackouts abound. But the good news is it will no longer be in our faces causing us a meltdown. Recovery applications that shunt technical frailty will run in the Cloud without our intervention.

Google's head is in the Cloud, too, as it reconsiders its commercial interests in the dogged pursuit of digitizing all books. In his New York Times editorial, Harvard University Librarian Robert Darnton writes of the ruling: "This decision is a victory for the public good, preventing one company from monopolizing access to our common cultural heritage. Nonetheless, we should not abandon Google's dream of making all the books in the world available to everyone. Instead, we should build a digital public library, which would provide these digital copies free of charge to readers."

On the New York Public Library's Centennial, New Yorker writer Adam Gopnik, a 25 year patron comments, "I was stunned the first day I ever walked in here, because you just walk in here . . . I don't think we brood sufficiently on what a miraculous institution this is," he says. "It's not democratic in spirit: It's democratic. The credential you present is your existence. And the resume you show is your curiosity."

Yet the Cloud is fast becoming the technology go-to place for e-books, music, software, email, and the digest of information we pluck out of the internet. Some cry the Cloud is posing a threat to industries that build technical components and develop access software, eliminating many jobs. Book and music retailers claim the Cloud is causing their bankruptcy. The Cloud is also becoming the storage place for our digital personal property: our photographs, our music, our writing, our emails, blogs and websites in the Cloud enable the storage devices to grow lighter, more portable. Then one day I tried to access my free Google blog and found Google had taken ownership of it. And why shouldn't they? It is their software on the Cloud, no terra firma. The blog had my photographs and writing. To release it to me, they wanted my personal contact information but I carefully guard my privacy from the cybersphere.

Is the Cloud hanging over libraries? For the past year in Sherborn, in working with the Library Trustees, Friends, and committees to meet the prerequisites of a state grant application that would potentially award the Library \$3 million toward the necessary

upgrades and expansion of the building, several people have asked me if the internet and ebooks will mean the end of libraries.

The question of the end of libraries is usually posed to me in a few ways but it is always asked in the context of the Library renovation and expansion. The question arises because some citizens want to know if they should spend money on maintaining the Library if it will be soon be closing its doors, or serving only a few retrogrades. At times the question is expressed in such a way that I understand the askers hope I have the answer or a convincing enough response to the question to help them make up their minds or win the debate on the side of libraries. Others ask the question using a tone that suggests they think they already know the answer, and only ask me the question so that I will ask myself the question. Still some ask this question in a manner that tells me they do not want any answer, but only ask to raise doubt. Finally, some ask because they want to see if they can get a rise out of me. They don't.

No matter how the question is posed, my answer is always No. Libraries and books are not facing obsolescence. In fact, libraries are daily destinations in communities and, in Sherborn, will remain as vital as ever, or more vital, as Baby Boomers approach retirement and look forward to enjoying daylight in their community. Further, nearly half of all Sherborn households have children younger than 18. The average Sherborn parents have more than 2 children and are making excellent readers out of them.

I have read articles on both sides of the argument but the anti-library postures just don't click with what I observe on a daily basis in Sherborn. Trends in use of the Library by residents resemble what Thomas Frey, Senior Futurist of the DaVinci Institute anticipates for the library of the future: "an emerging new trend is towards creating what's known as co-working spaces, which serve as social work environments for independent workers. Co-working spaces offer enough privacy so productive work can be accomplished, but also social spaces that allow sidebar conversations to spring to life . . . people today have grown to resent the one-way flow of information. They want to participate, make comments, interact with other readers, and somehow take ownership of the content."

State-wide, statistics on the use of public libraries are soaring. Public libraries recorded 34 million visits in 2008, enough to fill Fenway Park 917 times. Apparently, libraries are one of America's favorite pastimes. For the cost of attending one game, you can make unlimited use of the Library for a year to enjoy books, movies, music, downloads, email, lectures and children's programs, research, WIFI, computers, training, professional assistance, and more, in an inspiring setting. You can even play ball on the Green if you want. No Massachusetts libraries have closed.

Unlike Apple or Google, this Library is owned by Sherborn. It is not a ghostly cloud but a solid landmark. In these musings on clouds and endings in our sluggish economy, it is no wonder we are in a funk.

My antidote is to visit to the Library and chat with a neighbor, grasp inspiration from our displays and roam our new books shelves that don't limit you to downloading from only one bookstore. Visit the Librarian's desk, or ask the Beech Tree what it thinks about the Cloud. I bet it would say the sky is the limit.

Your Librarian,

Elizabeth Johnston