

December 16, 2004

Are Google's New Libraries a Good Thing? (4 Letters)

To the Editor:

Re "Google Is Adding Major Libraries to Its Database" (front page, Dec. 14):

While having online access to some great libraries promises to facilitate research in democratizing access to books, it is worth keeping some things in mind.

A digital version of a book - especially a rare one, printed centuries ago - is not a replacement for the hard copy.

Not only has printed paper proved a durable technology, but there is also much to be gained by visiting the libraries, examining the actual books and entering into discussions with librarians and other researchers.

Gaining access to a digital reproduction of an older text makes it easier to take a first step, but little good research will be done simply sitting alone in front of a computer screen.

Lisa Shapiro
Vancouver, British Columbia
Dec. 14, 2004

The writer is an assistant professor of philosophy at Simon Fraser University.

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To the Editor:

The statement by Michael A. Keller, Stanford University's head librarian, that in two decades most of the world's knowledge will be digitized and available is unrealistic.

While Google's inclusion of major library collections in its search engine is a small step toward digitizing the world's knowledge, a major portion of the small research libraries in the United States does not even have online catalogs, let alone digitized collections.

The world outside of the United States is full of libraries and collections where a

computer is considered a luxury item.

Mr. Keller's comment perpetuates the mistaken notion that all worthwhile information can or will soon be found on the Internet.

My library holds the personal books of the artist John Sloan, many of them annotated, inscribed, sketched and doodled in.

We can truly say the world's knowledge is being made accessible only when the small have-not library collections are digitized around the world, and not just the Harvards, the Stanfords and the Michigans.

Kraig A. Binkowski

Wilmington, Del., Dec. 14, 2004

The writer is head librarian, Helen Farr Sloan Library, Delaware Art Museum.

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To the Editor:

In a world in which so few people call the shots, it is soul-restoring to learn that we may soon have a new Alexandria library - but one that won't burn down or benefit just the lucky few. Knowledge is power.

Suzanne Cherney

Long Island City, Queens

Dec. 15, 2004

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To the Editor:

The news that Google is adding the contents of major libraries to its database reminds me of a science fiction story I read more than half a century ago. The story told of mankind's effort to put all the information available in the world into a gargantuan computer and then ask the computer a single question: "What is the meaning of life?"

The machine huffed and puffed for days and finally answered, "Life has no meaning." And the human race lived happily ever after.

Allan Eckhaus

Chapel Hill, N.C., Dec. 14, 2004