University of Iowa Libraries Staff Publications

3-21-2016

Bibliotech: Why libraries matter more than ever in the age of Google [review]

Wendy C Robertson
University of Iowa

Bibliotech: Why libraries matter more than ever in the age of Google, by John Palfrey. New York, NY, Basic Books, 2015, 280 pp., ISBN: 978-0-465-04299-9, $26.99.

This book provides an overview of many of the issues currently facing libraries. The author clearly wants libraries to remain a key part of democratic society by fostering an informed and engaged citizenship and providing non-commercial spaces for people. He discusses how libraries need to adapt and calls on librarians to "pursue a new strategy that will shape, rather than merely react to, the digital revolution" (p. 217).

Palfrey discusses all libraries, but his focus is on the United States and is weighted toward public libraries. The book's non-technical language is intended for a broad audience, but this also makes his intended audience a bit unclear. The critique of libraries may not be of interest to the general public, but many librarians will already be aware of issues covered in it. The book can serve as a summary of current trends for librarians, particularly for those outside one's own area of focus, and may help librarians frame issues more broadly when talking with funders or the public.

The introduction and 10 chapters, which do not need to be read sequentially, begin with an overview of the changes brought by digital materials and new expectations, how people use libraries, and the library as a space. The next three chapters focus on library collaborations, networks of shared resources, and the difficulties and opportunities of supporting digital content, with particular focus on the Digital Public Library of America (DPLA). The author next provides a brief overview of the difficulties in preserving digital content. The education chapter discusses school libraries, which broadened my knowledge of this area of librarianship. Palfrey's chapter on law is quite strong, focusing on copyright, particularly how it affects ebook lending. He

proposes copyright reforms, especially regarding orphan works. The law chapter also includes privacy issues, but their coverage is all too brief given the many issues related to privacy in today's world.

Throughout the book, the author highlights innovative projects of various librarians and demonstrates how libraries can collaborate with their communities. The notes and references contain further information on the topics. However, there are several activities happening in academic libraries, which are only briefly mentioned, if at all. For example, the author did not discuss higher education's use of open educational resources in the education chapter nor library efforts in open access publishing when mentioning open access.

The conclusion reiterates that nostalgia for libraries will not keep them funded and open. Palfrey is concerned that librarians will not take risks, invest in R&D, and innovate. The private sector would then provide different— commercial—solutions to these problems before collective change is possible. He concludes with 10 steps to redefine and refocus libraries, with the final step being more funding. These steps did not seem to be particularly innovative; libraries are already trying to do all these things. However, this list may be useful for communicating to others what needs to happen within libraries for them to remain a vital part of society and to help focus efforts in ways that will really matter.

The author is the former head of the Harvard Law School Library and is the founding chair of the DPLA. He does not have a library degree, but this does not weaken his qualifications for writing this book. His somewhat outsider perspective may communicate more effectively to people who do not work in libraries. It is clear from the book that the author truly believes in the value of libraries and how the DPLA will transform what libraries can offer, as well as how

people can engage with library materials. This book is recommended for public libraries and for

individual librarians who want an overview of the current landscape outside their specialty.

Wendy C. Robertson

University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA