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"Freedom of the Press belongs to those who own one."

A. J. Liebling of the New Yorker

August 29, 2001



E-Books and Libraries

Commentary

No article I ever published in the San Diego Union ever brought the amount of criticism that descended when I wrote an article that said public libraries were going to have to change over the next 50 years.

There are still Friends of the Library who are plucking feathers and heating tar while looking for my body, but the 1998 article was right on the money and libraries are indeed changing, slowly.

We still have far too many public libraries. When I wrote the article in 1998 there were more than 700 publicly-supported libraries in San Diego County. The public has access to only about 70 in the Sierra system, while they pay for libraries in every public school and college without being permitted to use them.

As I predicted, way back then, public libraries are starting to purchase e-book titles by the tens of thousands, which begs the question, "Why are we building more and larger public libraries? Electronics require fewer brick and mortar edifices, not more." new eight-story public library! It is the same philosophy that caused towns in the late 1800's to build Opera Houses. Everyone knew that to be a respectable town you had to have an Opera House. Now, you must have a professional baseball team, football team, and a BIG public library.



Cow towns in the West had dirt streets and wood sidewalks, but they had an Opera House that provided music that no one liked! Modern cities have libraries that no one uses, but raw sewage flows onto the beaches and into the bays.

Of course, most people do not attend baseball games, football games or public libraries. Most people, starting in Junior High School, do most of their research at home, using the Internet. Yes, some people still go to the public library for their recreational reading, but that has a short shelf life as technology catches up there also. Some people treat public libraries as private social clubs where they can meet their friends over a copy of the New York Times.

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Technology changes rapidly, people change slowly. The Friends of the Library change more slowly than most people. They enjoy a tax-supported recreational lifestyle, much like football and baseball fans.

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"Ain't no man can avoid being born average, but there ain't no man got to be common." — Leroy "Satchel" Paige

