State in thick of digital revolution

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When Darlene Staffeldt embarked on her library career 35 years ago, the only search engine available was her knowledge of the Dewey Decimal System, and her determination to find what she was looking for.

Back then, Staffeldt said, tracking down an obscure article often took hours. If the library didn't have the material on hand, the patron was out of luck.

Jump forward to 2005, where information is retrieved in seconds, not hours, and where card catalogs have given way to data mining and digital files.

"When I started as a library page, they had me tracking down articles for the patrons," Staffeldt said. "Now that same patron can sit down at the computer and have that article in seconds."

Google, a popular search engine that already boasts an online index of 8 billion Web pages, announced earlier this month its plans to establish an online collection from five major libraries, including the New York Public Library.

It's this trend that prompted one Stanford librarian to reason that in 20 years, most of the world's information will be digitalized and available online. The advances have led some to suggest that the library of the future could exist in name only.

Bruce Newell, director of the Montana Library Network, can still recall the teletype tapes and the "round robin" process of splicing and sharing information. When the Apple computer hit the scene in the early 1980s, the future was at hand.

"That computer paid for itself in 11 months," Newell said. "All of a sudden, there was a technology our librarians could use."

In the past few years, Newell said, Montana has made advances in storing and distributing digital information. As many as 250 libraries now participate in the Montana Library Network, which works as an online catalog allowing patrons to brows the collection of other libraries.

Sitting at the computer, Newell demonstrated the power of the network — how a client can conduct geographical searches, view the availability of the needed item, and initiate an interlibrary loan request, all without leaving home.

"At one time, if the book wasn't in the building, the patron was out of luck," Newell said. "Now

we've got 56 million books available at the tip of our fingers. This is truly the most interesting thing in resource sharing in Montana for some time."

Resource sharing doesn't stop here. Another evolving branch of the Montana State Library traces its roots back to 1985, when state employees began digitizing documents and storing them in the Natural Resource Information System.

It wasn't until the rise of the Internet in the mid-1990s, however, that this wealth of information become widely accessible.

For Jim Hill, director of the digital division of the Montana State Library, the new system freely distributes information that only 20 years ago was nearly impossible to find.

Today, Hill grins, anyone in the world with Internet access can retrieve the system's information. That includes more than 70 state maps and thousands of information files.

"My goal was to have a collection of topographical maps from the entire state," Hill said. "Now we have that, and anyone in the world can download that data into their computer."

Hill called the system an information clearinghouse. After playing around with the Web site, it's easy to see why.

With one click, Hill entered the information system and moved to the Animal Field Guide. With the stroke of a key, he called up a list of Montana birds, clicked on the common loon, and opened the file.

The page included a general description of the loon, the bird's call, some pictures, the animal's distribution, and additional links. There are thousands of pages like this within the system.

"The work that's being done here is recognized nationwide as cutting edge," Hill said. "It's pretty exciting. The technology is getting better, and if you look at library usage, it's growing."

Sara Groves, the communications coordinator for the Montana State Library, said fears that technology could render libraries obsolete may be farfetched.

It's the librarian, Groves said, who has helped lead the technological revolution by simplifying the way information is accessed by the public.

It's the libraries, she said, that continue to provide free and unbiased information.

"Libraries are not driven by profit, and people can trust the information that's here," Groves said. "Unlike Google, which is making money from advertising, libraries are public domain, and they're impartial to information."

It wasn't too long ago, Groves said, that Montana's rural charm meant access to information was limited.

"Suddenly," Groves said, "we were connected to the world."

While digital sharing brought Montanans into the information age, it also created a mess of bad information — much of it placed online by unreliable sources. The future librarian, Groves

believes, will help patrons sort through this confusion.

Newell also points out that Seattle recently spent millions renovating its public library, which now calls itself "Seattle's living room." Helena spent $1.3 million doing the same.

To Hill and the rest of the State Library staff, such renovations only confirm that future libraries will play a role in the public's access to information. But that's not to say providing that access won't come without challenges.

"We need to assimilate electronic information, and we need to discover ways to do it well," Hill said. "At the same time, we also need to maintain a physical library. But doing both is getting harder."

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