Libraries of the future are going to change in some unexpected ways

Chris Weller, Business Insider US
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Your idea of a library might be a musty, carpeted room with outdated technology, but don’t ditch your library card just yet.

According to David Pescovitz, co-editor at Boing Boing and research director at the Institute for the Future, a Palo Alto-based collective that makes forecasts about our world, it’s likely in the coming decades that society’s traditional understanding of a library will get completely upended.

In 50 years’ time, Pescovitz tells Business Insider, libraries are poised to become all-in-one spaces for learning, consuming, sharing, creating, and experiencing – to the extent
that enormous banks of data will allow people to “check out” brand-new realities, whether that’s scaling Mt. Everest or living out an afternoon as a dog.

To understand how libraries will change by the mid-21st century, Pescovitz says people need to understand what function they currently serve. At their core, libraries in the information age provide a public means of accessing knowledge, he says. That’s what people crave.

The hallmark of future libraries, meanwhile, will be hyper-connectivity. They’ll reflect our increasing reliance on social media, streaming content, and open-source data.
The definition of a library is already changing.

Some libraries have 3D printers and other cutting-edge tools that makes them not just places of learning, but creation. “I think the library as a place of access to materials, physical and virtual, becomes increasingly important,” Pescovitz says. People will come to see libraries as places to create the future, not just learn about the present.

Pescovitz offers the example of genetic engineering, carried out through “an open-source library of genetic parts that can be recombined in various way to make new organisms that don’t exist in nature.”

For instance, people could create their own microbes that are engineered to detect toxins in the water, he says, similar to how people are already meeting up in biology-centered hacker spaces.

Several decades from now, libraries will morph even further.

Pescovitz speculates that humans will have collected so much data that society will move into the realm of downloading sensory data. What we experience could be made available for sharing.
“Right now the world is becoming instrumented with sensors everywhere – sensors in our bodies, sensors in our roads, sensors in our mobile phones, sensors in our buildings – all of which all collecting high-resolution data about the physical world,” he says. “Meanwhile, we’re making leaps in understanding how the brain processes experiences and translates that into what we call reality.”

That could lead to a “library of experiences.”

In such a library, Pescovitz imagines that you could “check out” the experience of going to another planet or inhabiting the mind of the family dog.

What probably won’t change that much are librarians and the physical spaces they watch over. Pescovitz suspects that humans will always need some sort of guide to make a foreign landscape more familiar. Whether humanity turns that job into one for artificial intelligence is another matter, he says.

“We talk a lot about information and the information age, but really what I think people are looking for is wisdom and knowledge,” Pescovitz says.

That has been true for thousands of years and will continue to be true for thousands more, no matter how weird the future might get.
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