

Of Books and Libraries

As anyone following the American election knows, a single word can spark vehement debate (think of the words “deplorables,” “Aleppo,” “hombres,” and “anti-vaxxer”).

I was reminded of this last week, after I told an *Examiner* reporter that Trent was going to convert the Bata Library from a “museum” for paper books into a space for digital reading and discussion.

Reactions to my comment were grounded on the truth that libraries and books are key components of every university. Some read my comment as the suggestion that books are passé, items that belong in museums rather than the hands of students.

As anyone who knows me can attest, I do not believe that books are out of date. At the same time, I do think that libraries are changing; that this will reduce the room for books; and that it is a change for the better.

Here it is worth noting that the word “museum” is derived from the name of the Alexandrian “Musaeum,” the ancient institution which housed one of the most famous libraries of all times: the ancient Alexandrian library.

A “museum” is quite literally a place one goes to be inspired (and protected) by the muses – the ancient goddesses of literature, science, music and the arts.

The Alexandrian library of the past was something more than a collection of scrolls (though this was a key component of it). It has been compared to contemporary research institutes and universities.

The library brought together thousands of scholars to a place where they could live, work, talk, lecture, experiment and study. It included not only scrolls, but gardens, a zoo, a room for studying astronomy, a walkway, a dining room, meeting rooms, gardens and lecture halls. Above all, it was a place that was alive with intellectual discussion and activity.

The evolution of the contemporary library is moving back in this direction. The move from paper to digital books is opening up space not needed for stacks of paperbound books. This multi-functional space rejects ideas that libraries should be places of absolute quiet and a decorum which prohibits interactions with other library users.

The new library houses mostly digital books, and also functions as a space for meeting others, and for interacting, intersecting, researching and collecting and analyzing data. A good example of this move is the new Alexandrian library opened in 2002 – the Bibliotheca Alexandria: “dedicated to recapture the spirit of openness and scholarship.”

Today’s Alexandrian library is consciously designed, incorporating books, publishing projects, art exhibits, a conference centre, numerous research centres, computational labs, and a television studio.

In our digital world, key library resources are expanding to include more than the printed word as digital communication makes it easier to create and transmit images, sounds and “multimodal” aspects of our

lives. This is as it should be so long as we want libraries to be a key resource in our attempt to understand the different dimensions of the world in which we live.

Like other libraries, the Bata Library is moving in this direction. Like other libraries, it will increasingly emphasize digital rather than paperbound books, the visual as well as the printed word, and intensely interactive spaces which encourage many different ways of studying the world.

This may be disappointing if one thinks that the printed word is the only legitimate way to study the past and prepare for the future. But books – primarily digital – will remain an essential part of the library, as will quiet study space for those who want to simply contemplate and reflect. As someone who loves books, I welcome a more multi-functional library.

Leo Groarke is President & Vice-Chancellor at Trent University.

Among the books currently on his nightstand are Robert Wright's *Trudeaumania*, Nelson Mandela's remarkable biography, Plato, Wittgenstein, Louise Cumming's seminal work on pragmatics, a Spanish book on argumentation, and Finis Dunaway's recent book on the use and abuse of American environmental images. Though it is hard to find the time, Dr. Groarke has a contract for a book he hopes to complete in the next two or three years.