



Today's public libraries are vibrant hubs of community activity. A place where, on any given day, you might learn beekeeping, code the workings of a robot, or enjoy an evening of wine tasting. And at the heart of the community hub lies the library collection, says MELINDA ALLAN.

The public library is defined by its collection. The *Oxford Dictionary* contains several definitions of a library, each one describing a place where books and periodicals are housed. Are we more than that simple definition? Most definitely. But, without the collection, the library ceases to be a library.

When ebooks began their ascent, there were fearful whispers that the physical library collection would disappear and lead to completely digitised collections. We feared that it was only a matter of time until customers, with 24-hour access ebooks and eresources from home, would leave our bricks and mortar buildings empty and redundant. A death knell for public libraries as we knew them. But this was a long time ago, and the booming state of libraries today tells of a very different narrative.

When the fear of diminishing physical collections was at its peak, a new public library focus emerged; libraries as community hubs. Books and information might move online, but we needed a strategy to keep our physical spaces active. More focus on programs and events, book-related or otherwise, accelerated the public library's move from silent study space to warm and energetic hubs of activity. The public library cemented its new reputation; a third space for people of all ages to spend time and choose from an array of activities and events.

Then something unexpected happened: ebook usage, while rising in some areas, plateaued in others. Books were not dead. The physical collection not only survived but thrived. While ebook downloads are increasingly popular in some areas, paperbacks for example, there are other areas of the collection where strength is in the physical; picture books, an area of the collection that enjoys a regular increase in usage.

Perhaps parents are still looking for alternatives to screen time for their children, or perhaps the art of the picture book can only truly be enjoyed in a physical form. Whatever the reason, physical books across the collection are still alive and well, filling our shelves and drawing our customers into our wonderful physical spaces where they can both enjoy programs and events, and borrow from a vast collection of physical and online resources.

Library and information professionals and our customers now enjoy public libraries that are buzzing and exciting community hubs, with collections that are stronger than ever. The library collection – both the digital and physical – and the ongoing, unfettered access to this collection is at the very heart of what defines a library.

This is the state of libraries today – busy, thriving community hubs bursting with books, eresources and access to information for all. 🌟

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