

Minds Alive: Libraries and Archives Now by Patricia Demers and Toni Samek (Eds.). Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2020. 268pp. ISBN: 978-1-4875-0527-1

Joel Salt

Volume 8, Number 4, Fall 2022

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1099637ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15402/esj.v8i4.70782>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

University of Saskatchewan

ISSN

2369-1190 (print)

2368-416X (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Salt, J. (2022). Review of [Minds Alive: Libraries and Archives Now by Patricia Demers and Toni Samek (Eds.). Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2020. 268pp. ISBN: 978-1-4875-0527-1]. *Engaged Scholar Journal*, 8(4), 85–87. <https://doi.org/10.15402/esj.v8i4.70782>

© Joel Salt, 2023



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

Minds Alive: Libraries and Archives Now by Patricia Demers and Toni Samek (Eds.). Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2020. 268pp. ISBN: 978-1-4875-0527-1.

Minds Alive comes at an important time for libraries and archives, which reside in both the world of books and kilometers of fonds and yet also need to adapt to the massive amounts of born-digital content that too require collection. This monograph, which features thirteen chapters split into five sections, also comes at an important time for memory institutions struggling to adjust to the Googlization of information. The editors note that “endless possibilities and robust importance of libraries and archives in the digital age are at the heart of this collection,” while also suggesting that “libraries and archives embody the expanding scope of the public, and the emancipatory potential of public liberations” (p. 3).

These endless possibilities for libraries and archives are a result of seemingly endless difficulties when it comes to adapting to the monumental task of operating so many different functions for diverse users. As Tami Oliphant and Ali Shiri affirm in the foreword, “libraries and archives are vital to public life in the digital age” (p. xi). However, a book itself is finite, and while the editors have captured a wide array of specialists (archivists, librarians, editors, professors) in diverse disciplines delivering a broad number of topics, they arrange these categorically into five sections to help navigate a disparate and somewhat heterogenous collection.

Part I, “Enduring Values,” seeks to “articulate, materialize, and defend the common ground of libraries” (p. 9). The authors in this section all begin with the premise that libraries are an emotional benefit to society: “we all love libraries” (p. 23) are the opening words to Guylaine Beaudry’s contribution, “Academic Library Spaces, Digital Culture, and Communities.” The opening sentence of Alice Crawford’s “Libraries – Why Bother?” is “it’s important not to be sentimental about libraries” (p. 11) but, tellingly, she wraps up the paper with appeal to their emotional and psychological necessity. Marc Kosciejew also affirms that the value of the public library is to offer not just access to things, but better lives. These papers are all concerned with justifying the library as a site of inclusivity, possibility, and as an ever-receding public space. They offer some arguments as to why these libraries are necessary in the age of “*can’t we just google it?*” and lay the groundwork to remind the reader of the library’s importance and the precariousness of the long-established social cornerstones in the new post-digital age. These papers remind us why a book like this is necessary.

Part II, “Public Literacy and Private Oasis,” marks a shift in tone from the first. It is no longer that libraries *should* exist. They *need* to exist. Mario Hibert positions the library not just an example of social space, but as counterculture, a place to “question the dominant narratives of our times” (p. 52), and he positions the library’s role in society in juxtaposition to the dangers of capitalism (represented writ large by the great bugbear for all librarians: Google). He argues that the role of the librarian, far from the re-shelving and (re-)shushing conservative sweater-wearing stereotype of the past, is as a chameleon who does not merely adjust to the changing times but to provide new systems and models for knowledge dissemination. Konstantina Martzoukou’s

contribution also sees the library as liminal, but positions it between the analogue and the digital. She borrows the term *apomediary* from Gunther Eysenbach, suggesting librarians need no longer steward information but act as a facilitator or advisor to a public in need of improved digital literacy. The path toward this apomediation is through continued professionalization and training, a theme that continues throughout the rest of the book.

Part III, “Transformations and Resistance,” is focused on practicality. Michael Carrol wants a library 2.0, transitioning the model of the physical library into a kind of network node. This would allow libraries to exist as traditional spaces in their own communities, yet also allow the ubiquitous collection access made possible via the digital world. Rockwell and his team walk us through the shift from early web project to web 2.0 via *The Perseus Digital Library*, and Carolyn Guertin offers a history of travelling libraries, or *Wanderbibliotheken*, that she argues can be seen as prologues to modern phenomena like torrent sites and makers spaces. The social role of libraries and their democratic function are paramount for her as she wraps up this section, thoughtfully displaying libraries—traditionally considered conservative establishments—as subversive sites “for resistance to repressive political positions” (p. 131).

Part IV, “Disciplinary and Institutional Partnerships,” begins with Richard Cox, ever the archivist, digging up an old article of his from 1986. He notes, “as digital information technologies took hold . . . [archivists] wondered if the basis of their knowledge . . . was being undermined or even obliterated” (pp. 137-138). He argues, like Martzoukou, for a new form of professionalism, suggesting that a new professionalism would lead to a sense of the discipline. The next chapter, by Nigal Raab, asserts a need for both physical and digital labyrinth, noting that convergence between the analogue and digital is necessary. Brendan Edwards adds another labyrinthal layer in the museum and calls for further convergence between traditional and new approaches, arguing that continuing 19th century distinctions between different institutions are holding them back. This section discusses thoughtfully the shifting needs of the archivists/librarians themselves, an issue that permeates the collection: being caught between the past and the future.

The final section, Part V “Curation and Commons,” sees Seamus Ross discuss the impossibility of handling the deluge of digital data and note that current digital curation research is inadequate (p. 175). Instead, we need automation to account for an unsustainable model. Ross argues for a new model of going beyond the traditional confines of the archive, where everything and everywhere is an archive. The final paper, by Frank J. Tough, challenges the *Library and Archives of Canada Act’s* claim of universal accessibility, especially in regard to First Nations research, and it notes that “no more cogent proof of the importance of archival records as a source of truth about Crown-Aboriginal relations . . . can be found than the state’s unwillingness to reveal the contents of crucial archival holdings” (p. 222). Both of these papers address the limitations of the archives and opacity of access.

Gone are the days where the librarian or archivist, comfortably alone, guarded the dusty truth. This collection confronts head-on these institutions in a modern context: the creep of capitalism on data management (i.e., Google), the ever-changing role of the library and librarian/archivist, the rapidly shifting user and their new expectations, and the complexities

of political pressures on heritage institutions. A lot is required of libraries these days and so too of any volume discussing them. Both the strength and weakness of the volume is the sheer diversity of the topics covered. But that is, in fact, the number one issue with libraries and archives these days: they need to do everything. The editors did a fine job bringing together disparate papers concerning wide-ranging topics into a somewhat cohesive unit, with some themes and motifs developed throughout. If your research area is in the challenges that archives and libraries of the twenty-first century face, there will be something in this volume for you.

Joel Salt

PhD Candidate (English), University of Saskatchewan

Digital Scholarship Coordinator, University Library, University of Saskatchewan

Email: joel.salt@usask.ca