

Needle in a haystack

While digitalisation of libraries has its advantages, unlimited access could mean aimless searching, and limited learning

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In an era in which information can be yours at the click of a button, digitalisation of libraries and reading content is no big surprise. Paul Otlet, a Belgian librarian and developer of the Universal Decimal Classification, was motivated by the notion that the world's information could one day be widely available through technological innovation. His vision of technology generating access is being realised today, as many libraries and archives are in the process of digitising their collections on massive scales.

Ancient archives and libraries which contain books centuries old, are being revived. Access to them is being provided to people across several nations.

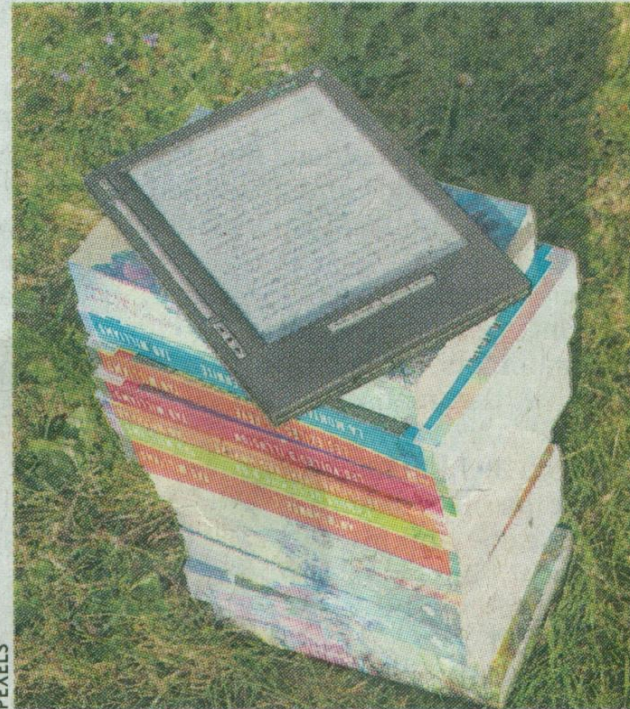
Privacy

However, this digitalisation is affecting the relevance of libraries and has severe drawbacks that are often neglected. A user's right to privacy is infringed on in multiple ways when they access online libraries. "Earlier, a user could go to any library, read the material they wanted, and this usage of the content accessed was a private affair. However, with digitalised libraries, a lot of personal data is leaked as a user signs in. The content accessed by the user gets into the public domain," says Vikas Gupta, Managing Director, Wiley India.

"The content available in libraries depended on the universities and their ideologies. However, digital libraries make the reading material more objective and give users a wider perspective, uprooting the bias of the library," he adds.

Ethics

Emphasising the ethics of new online research, he explained that the digitalised platforms give users certain freedom, but not adhering to copyrights harms the authors and content creators, whose content could reach the public through piracy. Moreover, the content could be



used out of context. Respecting thought, content and copyright is extremely important for the production of good content.

Identifying another problem with digitalised access of material, Gupta comments, "Google and other search engines are changing the algorithm of research. But due to unlimited access, more time is spent on searching rather than learning. Contextual layering – the context in which you are researching – is not present, which transforms access to everything into access to nothing."

According to Gupta, the new age of online research is changing the content that is being provided to learners.

New online courses and programmes are being introduced which are cheaper and more comprehensive compared to printed texts and tuitions in various countries. "The personal guidance of librarians and teachers who are experts in their fields and know the relevant material is diminishing. So, this monitoring should be extended online," Gupta advises.