



THE RUNDOWN

NATION

Turns out most engaged library users are also biggest tech users

BY BRIDGET SHIRVELL March 13, 2014 at 1:10 PM EDT



*Americans still value the role of libraries in their communities, according to a new Pew Research Center study.
Photo illustration by Getty Images*

It wouldn't be a leap to theorize that the expanding role technology plays in American lives would lead to the demise of public libraries. After all, so many other industries, including the one that's bringing you this article, continue to struggle in the digital age.

When it comes to libraries, though, that theory would be wrong. A new study from the Pew Research Center found that more than two-thirds of Americans [are actively engaged with public libraries](#). The report examines the relationship Americans have with their libraries and technology. Dusty, worn books versus sleek new computers, tablets or smartphones may seem like unlikely companions, but it's really all about information.

"A key theme in these survey findings is that many people see acquiring information as a highly social process in which trusted helpers matter," Lee Rainie, director of the Pew Research Center's Internet Project and a main author of the report said. "One of the main resources that people tap when they have questions is the networks of expertise. Even some of the most self-sufficient information consumers in our sample find that libraries and librarians can be part of their networks when they have problems to solve or decisions to make."

The study also found that Americans who are more engaged in their communities are also more engaged at

their libraries. But what was surprising, according to the researchers, is that the most highly engaged library users tended to be the biggest technology users.

Here are some of the more surprising findings of the report:

- **Technology users are generally library users:** A common narrative is that Americans are turning away from libraries because of newer technology, but the data shows that most highly-engaged library users are also big technology users. There are some indications that the most plugged-in and highest-income respondents, called "Information Omnivores," are not as reliant on libraries as the most engaged group, or "Library Lovers." Still, both groups are highly engaged with public libraries and are the most avid supporters of the idea that libraries make communities better.
- **There are people who have never visited a library who still value libraries' roles in their communities — and even in their own lives:** Members of the group identified as "Distant Admirers" have never personally used a library, but nevertheless tend to have strongly positive opinions about how valuable libraries are to communities — particularly for libraries' role in encouraging literacy and for providing resources that might otherwise be hard to obtain. Many Distant Admirers say that someone else in their household does use the library, and therefore may use library resources indirectly.
- **Most Americans do not feel overwhelmed by information today, and the people who feel "information overload" the most are actually less likely to use newer technologies — and less likely to use libraries:** Some 18 percent of Americans say they feel overloaded by information — a drop in those feeling this way from 27 percent who said information overload was a problem to them in 2006. Those who feel overloaded are actually less likely to use the Internet or smartphones and are most represented in groups with lower levels of library engagement.

Pew Research spent three years studying the role of public libraries and surveyed 6,224 Americans ages 16 and older. The report is different from other [Pew reports on libraries](#) in both the number of people surveyed and the way respondents were sorted into groups based on their engagement with public libraries.

The Pew Research Center hopes the study will spark discussions about what the future of public libraries should look like. View the full report at the [Pew Research Center website](#).

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