

Canadian libraries thriving in ebook era

By Benjamin Shingler , *The Canadian Press*

MONTREAL —

It's a sunny fall afternoon — likely one of the last warm days this year — yet Montreal's largest library is buzzing.

The Grande Bibliothèque's rows of sofa chairs and sleek desks are packed with people tapping on laptops, flipping through magazines, and yes, even reading books.

Despite the rise of smartphones and ebook readers, many Canadian libraries are busier than ever.

And the renaissance may be due in part to the very technology that was expected to threaten their existence.

Across the country, library usage is up 45 per cent over the past decade, to 24.1 from 16.6 transactions on average per capita, according to a recent report prepared by Lumos Research for the Canadian Urban Libraries Council.

Much of that growth has been driven by digital information.

The use of electronic databases more than doubled, and internet visits to library websites and catalogues grew fivefold in the period, according to the report.

At many libraries, there are now e-books and electronic audiobooks available for download to compatible e-readers, computers, MP3 players and smartphones, as well as music and movies.

The key to a library's success, said Guy Berthiaume, director of the Grande Bibliothèque, is to adapt with the times.

The Montreal library now has 200,000 ebook titles available with plans for more on the way.

The big bonus? They're automatically returned so there are no late fees. And the digital version of tomes like, say, *War and Peace* are a whole lot lighter.

They can also be downloaded from home with the click of a mouse, though many choose to visit the



Library renaissance: A man reads newspapers inside the Parliamentary library in Ottawa. Across the country, library usage is up 45 per cent over the past decade.

Canadian Press file photo

library for the atmosphere, Berthiaume said in an interview.

“We’re more than stacks of books,” he said. “Of course we have books but we have much more. We have cultural programming, electronics.”

The Grande Bibliothèque, like many new mega-libraries across the globe, was designed to serve as a central meeting place.

Not just to read, but to hold study groups, exhibitions and lectures. Berthiaume calls libraries one of those rare “third places” that are free to the public and away from work and home.

At the Grande Bibliothèque, membership has grown 17 per cent over five years. The \$142-million library, which opened in 2005, now has 286,000 active members and three million visits annually.

It’s now the busiest library in the French-speaking world, he said.

Other Canadian cities, including Halifax and Calgary, have committed to building similarly large, central libraries.

Despite their popularity, though, libraries have been on the chopping block in several communities struggling to balance the budget.

The issue reached a boiling point in Toronto this summer — though Mayor Rob Ford retreated following widespread opposition and a very public feud with author Margaret Atwood.

In the end, though, the controversy in Toronto may have been a good thing for defenders of libraries everywhere, uniting them like never before.

“Libraries are one of those places that you use by yourself,” said Karen Adams, president of the Canadian Library Association.

“I think it was very good for libraries. You saw people supporting libraries as they have never done in the past.”

Earlier this month, a Montreal borough threatened to close a community library in an effort to balance its budget.

But it quickly backtracked after residents in the southwest neighbourhood protested the move.

Jefferson Gilbert of the Canadian Urban Libraries Council doesn’t believe the threatened cuts are a targeted move — if anything, politicians in many jurisdictions are reluctant to target what has become something of a sacred cow.

As long as libraries continue to adapt to new technology and offer to provide a space for meeting, Berthiaume said, they will continue to play an important role in communities.

“If we defined ourselves as stacks of books, maybe the future would be menacing,” he said.

“Since we’re much more than that and we offer services, I think we’ll continue to play an important role.”