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Resistance is Not Futile: Why Print Collections Still Matter in the Digital Age

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In September 2010, the **University of Texas at San Antonio** made history when it opened its Applied Engineering and Technology Library. This new facility was, the university proudly noted in a press release, “the nation’s first completely bookless library on a college or university campus.”¹

While “bookless” or completely digital libraries very much remain the exception, a growing number of voices in recent years have called for it to become the norm. In the same month that **UTSA** unveiled its new bookless library, **Jeffrey R. Di Leo**, dean of arts and sciences at the **University of Houston** at Victoria in Texas, argued in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* that “academe must transform itself from a fundamentally print culture to one that is fundamentally digital” and openly looked forward to the day when “the myth of the book will be overcome.”² Writing in the same publication, publishing executive **Diane Wachtell** put things just as bluntly: “We do not need books.”³ Such voices can also be found within the library profession. According to **George Stachokas**, “the cumulative impact of the growth of scientific knowledge, experimentation with new technology, and millions of individual consumer choices has made the shift to the electronic library inevitable.”⁴ Of course, libraries have already adapted to the digital age by embracing a hybrid model that combines print collections with spaces and resources that facilitate access to electronic information. For **Stachokas**, however, this hybrid library is merely “a transitional stage toward a completely electronic library.”⁵ In his view, “this transition could be completed in five to ten years in most academic libraries in North America, the UK, Australia, and New Zealand.”⁶ Public libraries and libraries in other parts of the world will need a few years more to complete this transition, but are all fated to travel the same path.

There are several key concepts implicit in the idea of the inevitable transition to an all-digital library. One is that library users are increasingly no longer interested in using print, and thus libraries should no longer waste valuable resources and space by maintaining open stack print collections. A second major concept is the idea that text is interchangeable regardless of format. There is no essential difference between reading words off a screen versus off a printed page, thus no essential reason why print monograph collections should not be ultimately swapped out for eBooks. Finally, there is the notion that, regardless of what individual users or librarians might want, or whatever differences there might be between print and digital reading, print is an

outmoded format doomed to all but disappear, and libraries must keep up with the times. Only by going mostly or entirely digital can libraries remain relevant in a world that is increasingly abandoning print.

Do Users Still Want Print?

It is an article of faith for proponents of the digital library that open stack print collections are increasingly becoming anachronisms; little used, taking up valuable space that could be much better used to facilitate access to electronic information, consuming scarce material and personnel resources at a time of fiscal challenges, and generally tying libraries to an outmoded pre-digital model that is destined to be consigned to the ash heap of information history.⁷ In a 2011 piece for *Library Journal*, **Rick Anderson** of the **University of Utah** analyzed circulation rates per student at 10 ARL institutions. In his view, his findings indicate that “the trend away from print books is even more pronounced than we’ve often understood or assumed.”⁸ In addition, both survey data and sales figures show that eBooks have grown in popularity in the last few years, at least in part at the expense of print.⁹

However, there is plenty of additional data showing that print still retains substantial popularity among readers. In December 2013, **Ricoh Americas Corporation** released a report showing that “most consumers do not see themselves giving up printed books, due to the benefits the physical form offers.” Among the study’s findings were that 60% of eBooks downloaded are never actually read; that nearly 70% of readers were unlikely to abandon print by 2016; and that “College students prefer printed textbooks to eBooks as they help students to concentrate on the subject matter at hand; electronic display devices such as tablet PCs tempt students to distraction.”¹⁰

While an office document reproduction company like **Ricoh** might be suspected of having a vested interest in preserving print, their findings are in line with numerous other studies. A number of surveys of academic library users have shown a distinct, consistent preference for print books when engaging in extended, in-depth, or immersive reading.¹¹ Contrary to what advocates of the digital library suggest, these studies show that even undergraduates prefer print when engaged in intensive linear reading. A recent *Washington Post* article noted that “Textbook makers, bookstore owners, and college student surveys all say millennials still strongly prefer print for pleasure and learning, a bias that surprises reading experts given the

same group’s proclivity to consume most other content digitally.”¹²

These frequently expressed user preferences are supported by recent sales data showing that the growth of eBooks has substantially slowed in the last several years. According to an August 2013 study by the **Book Industry Study Group**, sales of new eBooks have levelled off at 30% of overall book unit sales and about 15% of dollar sales. The same study showed that the percentage of book buyers who have bought an eBook has stagnated at around 25%. As **Jeremy Greenfield** noted at **Digital Book World**, “eBooks have stalled out on their way up to higher altitude.”¹³

In short, it would appear that forecasts of the death of print have been greatly exaggerated.

Are Print and Digital Texts Interchangeable?

Many digital library advocates seem to regard this continued preference for print for extended, in-depth reading as little more than misplaced nostalgia for dead tree pulp. It is much more likely, however, that it reflects an essential difference between reading in print versus reading off a digital screen. There is, in fact, substantial scientific and anecdotal evidence showing that the print codex enables deep immersive reading in ways that digital reading technologies do not.¹⁴ The frequently expressed sentiment among surveyed undergraduates that reading print books allows them to better concentrate and avoid the distractions inherent to most digital devices adds further weight to these findings.

As observers such as technology writer **Nicholas Carr** have noted, not only do most digital devices encourage reading short bits of text as opposed to longer passages, continued use of such devices actually hinders the ability to go back and engage in deep, linear reading. Screen-based technology, in **Carr’s** memorable phrase, “seizes our attention only to scatter it.”¹⁵

As the evidence regarding the distracting nature of digital devices has mounted, even some who have previously championed the superiority of the digital information environment have begun to rethink their positions. For example, technology writer **Nick Bilton**, author of the 2010 book *I Live in the Future and Here’s How it Works*,¹⁶ returned to reading books in print in 2013, citing as his reasons the lack of distractions as well as the tactile qualities of reading a physical book, which studies show help with comprehension.¹⁷ Similarly, **Clay Shirky**, a pro-digital technology scholar at **New York University** who famously insisted in 2008 that it would be no big loss if people stopped reading **Tolstoy**,¹⁸ now refuses to

continued on page 28



Resistance is Not Futile ... from page 26

allow his students to use digital technology in the classroom without permission due to its distracting effects. In his words, “The industry has committed itself to an arms race for my students’ attention, and if it’s me against **Facebook** and **Apple**, I lose.”¹⁹ Even **Facebook** founder **Mark Zuckerberg** has recently extolled the virtues of reading books.²⁰

Far from being interchangeable, then, print and digital should be seen as complementary formats for text. Print facilitates deep, linear reading, requiring sustained, extended focus, and fostering analysis, reflection, and the ability to absorb information and integrate it into conceptual knowledge frameworks. Electronic devices, on the other hand, tend to enable what has been called tabular reading, a form of power browsing focused on absorbing small bits of text or finding specific pieces of information. Both forms of reading are necessary, and both need to be supported by libraries. For the foreseeable future, supporting the full spectrum of reading requires both offering access to digital resources and retaining open-stack print collections.

Are Digital Libraries Inevitable?

The final implicit concept underlying the case for the all-digital library is that it is inevitable. Technology marches on, and it has decreed that the print codex should disappear, regardless of the desires of individual users, or the actual merits of print vs. digital as formats for textual reading. One can no more halt this process than buggy owners could have prevented the ascendance of the automobile. Resistance is futile; you will be assimilated.

This sort of crude reductionist determinism frequently appears in debates regarding the adoption of new technologies. Technology writer **Michael Sacasas** has aptly described it as the “Borg Complex:” a phenomenon “exhibited by writers and pundits who explicitly assert or implicitly assume that resistance to technology is futile.”²¹ Except, of course, that resistance is not futile. There is nothing inevitable about the possibility that libraries might choose to completely divest themselves of open

stack areas, and relegate print to either special collections or remote storage facilities. It would be a conscious choice. One that, in light of what we know about the nature of reading and the differences between print and digital as reading formats, would be a fundamentally misguided one. In the words of librarian **Jeff Staiger**, “as librarians en masse adopt the view that digital versions of books are destined to replace physical ones, the phasing out of print books will indeed be inevitable because it will be self-fulfilling.”²²

One offshoot of the inevitability argument is the question of relevance: that as society abandons print, libraries will be forced to do the same to remain relevant. As we have seen, society isn’t nearly as ready to abandon print as some believe. It is, of course, true that as digital devices become ever more ubiquitous in the lives of our users, libraries will need to continue to adapt accordingly. Yet will libraries really be “relevant” by offering users the exact same environment they can find in any coffee house or campus computer commons? Or, rather, are libraries most “relevant” when they offer their users an experience different from what is available elsewhere in the broader society? An experience, for example, that facilitates access to the wealth of information in digital format, while also offering the opportunity to escape the non-stop distractions of contemporary life and engage in a deeper, more reflective form of reading and research. Providing access to the world of literacy and learning has been a core mission of American libraries since the 19th century. Sociologist **Wendy Griswold** has speculated that the digital information environment will result in linear, immersive print reading becoming the exclusive property of “a self-perpetuating minority that I have called the reading class.”²³ If libraries don’t continue to offer a gateway into this reading class, then who will?

Resistance is Not Futile

The advocates of the all-digital library present a stark choice: either libraries relegate their print materials to remote storage facilities, or to special collections used only by a select handful of researchers; or they become institutional dinosaurs. This is a false choice. For one thing, while print reading has declined

in popularity, it is not going away anytime soon. Many library users, including so-called “digital natives,” continue to prefer the print codex for deep, immersive, linear reading. At the same time, the popularity of eBooks seems to have levelled off, at least for now.

Second, the print book fosters the ability to read in-depth and at-length in a way that most digital devices do not. If we marginalize print, we risk marginalizing an entire way of reading, writing, and thinking that has proved heretofore indispensable to our society, with potentially serious consequences. Finally, in light of the above, arguing that print’s disappearance in “inevitable” not only flies in the face of much of the evidence, but constitutes nothing more than a reductionist, self-fulfilling prophecy. Inevitability is a choice, one most libraries would be well-advised not to make.

Preserving open-stack print collections does not preclude libraries from adapting to the demands of the digital age, far from it. There is no reason that print collections should remain as large as they are currently, and nothing to prevent libraries from moving many of their print monographs into remote storage. It is entirely appropriate to resize print collections to meet the needs of the electronic information environment. The key is to do so in a way that meets the need of your specific user community, and to understand that retaining an appropriately sized open print collection is essential to meeting the full spectrum of user information needs. For example, general purpose academic libraries need to be aware of the differing reading and research needs of faculty and students in the humanities and social sciences vs. those in STEM fields. Scholars in disciplines such as English, History, and Philosophy remain heavily reliant on print monographs read in deep, immersive fashion to communicate research findings. For their part, public libraries will need to support the continued desire of some of their patrons to engage in what has been termed slow reading, something that for many is most easily done using print. We need to move beyond the simple dichotomy of print vs. digital, and understand that both formats are indispensable going forward. 🐼

endnotes on page 30

Rumors from page 10

Got a copy of *Pagans: The End of Traditional Religion* (Ecco/HaperCollins, 2015) by **James J. O’Donnell** in the mail a few days ago. This is quite a look at the how “the new Christian cult staked its claim to exceptionalism.” AND — speaking of **Jim**, he is one of our keynote speakers at 2015 Charleston. As the newly minted **Dean of Libraries** at **Arizona State University** with a Provost’s ten year experience in dealing with libraries, **Jim** should have plenty of insights to share with us! And don’t forget **Jim’s** experience with

the **Provosts’ Panels** at **Charleston** over the last three years! We are giving the Provosts a rest this year because we have **Jim** himself to speak!

Heard from the indefatigable **Rick Anderson** the other day. **ALA Editions** is going to be publishing (as a book) a collection of **Rick’s** columns and essays. Some of them will be items originally published in *Against the Grain*. Each of the pieces that originally appeared in *ATG* will be clearly identified. Like wow!

Speaking of indefatigable, **Matthew Ismail** and his marketing teams have won prizes for marketing videos! **Matthew** says they worked

hard on those videos and it’s nice to get a bit of recognition! The videos won **BEST IN SHOW** from the **2015 LLAMA PR Xchange!** They also won **Best in Show** in two different categories for the **YouTube Channel Trailer** and the **Fire Up Your Mind Video** short featuring **Kamaria Taylor** for a total of three awards this year! The electronic library promotional materials were submitted at the **2015 PR Xchange Awards Competition** at the **PR Xchange**. The **Charles V. Park Library** won awards — **CMU Libraries - Marketing 2 Video Series**: - Changing Perceptions of the Library - Connect-Collaborate-Succeed - **CMU Libraries**, **Learn-Connect-Creat** - **CMU Libraries**,

continued on page 72