

Against the Grain

Volume 23 | Issue 6

Article 11

December 2011

Op Ed -- The Death of the Bookless Library

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Recommended Citation

Mash, S. David Ph.D. (2011) "Op Ed -- The Death of the Bookless Library," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 23: Iss. 6, Article 11.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.6031>

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Op Ed — The Death of the Bookless Library

by S. David Mash, Ph.D. (Dean of Library Services) <dmash@lander.edu>

I recently flew through Atlanta and Dallas to visit my family in Texas. At both airports — each a teeming anthill of travelers — I had a good amount of free time between flights. I decided in advance to do a brazenly unscientific study of the reading habits of people at airport gates. Taking special care not to draw attention to myself, I adopted a data collection method I will call “observational strolling.” I took no notes, and I certainly did not gaze at anyone, lest I be taken for something other than a librarian. I “observationally strolled” past gate after gate with three research questions in mind:

- 1) of those reading to pass the time, what proportion were reading digital formats versus paper formats?
- 2) what was the general age range of those reading digital formats? and
- 3) what was the general age range of those reading paper formats?

I observed many hundreds of readers representing a phenomenally broad demographic profile. For the sake of full disclosure, I own an eBook reader, *and* I believe in the enduring value of print media. But what I saw surprised even me. First, of those reading to pass the time, the proportion of digital to paper was at best two digital readers for every ten paper readers. Second, the general age range of those reading digital formats was over thirty. In fact, *everyone* reading digital formats appeared to be over thirty. Yes, what I am saying is that *everyone* in the preschool through the twenty-something group was reading paper media. This included parents reading to very young children, grade-school children reading children’s books, and college-age adults reading novels. Just to keep myself honest, I began *looking* for young-in-appearance people reading digital media. I saw plenty of these young people with tablet devices and laptops, but all the screens that I could see were filled with entertainment and social media. There’s nothing wrong with any of this, of course, but the absolute lopsidedness of it all gave me pause.

My last observations were made on the final flight home. It happened that the person on my right (someone over fifty) was reading a paper book and the person on my left (someone nearing forty) was reading from one of the best-selling eBook readers. The person on my left read from the device, from ephemeral page to ephemeral page, in stillness and calm. The person on my right actively marked sections of text,

wrote notes in the margins, and flipped back and forth at times. Dare I suspect that she was *interacting* with the *paper* text? Dare I suggest that the format has a tangible effect on the kind of reading that is possible and the quality of retention that is achieved?

It would be irresponsible to draw grandiose conclusions from my airport observations. But the death of print, the tipping point into that transformative print-less future, has been “immanent” for decades. It has been right around the corner for my entire professional life. Let’s give it a rest. Research has begun to emerge which suggests that eBooks are far less adequate than print books for substantive reading and comprehension of long and complex texts. Incessant multitasking and ubiquitous digital immersion may have a costly dark side: habituation of the mind into a rigid bias against protracted complex thinking. The stakes are monumental. Students with this kind of bias — a sort of cultivated simplemindedness — may be able to graduate from high school or college, but they will not have the mental habits and intellectual discipline necessary for protracted attention to the complex problems that plague us.



It is encouraging to see the new **Joe and Rika Mansueto Library** at the **University of Chicago** described not as “another ‘bookless library’ for the digital age” but as “an \$81-million bet that researchers still need ready access to print.”¹ Librarians, educators, and administrators who stay on point with the script that print is second-class may not be acting in the best interest of the people we serve. It is time to apply some rigorous scrutiny to one-dimensional polemics about the inferiority of print. It is time to ask new questions about the limits of digital media. It is time for the digital prophets, pundits, and product pushers to scale back on extreme anti-print caricatures and anecdotes. In fact, I think it is time to declare the death of the bookless library. The social and cultural benefits will not be insignificant. 🐼

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Endnotes

1. Parry, Marc. 2011. “A High-Tech Library Keeps Books at Faculty Fingertips — With Robot Help.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 24. <http://chronicle.com/article/A-High-Tech-Library-Keeps/128370/>.

Rumors

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through the **Lightning Source Distribution Network**:**Ingram Book** — www.ingram-book.com/default.aspx**Amazon** — www.amazon.com/Charleston-Conference-Proceedings-Katina-Strauch/dp/0983404305/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1322491921&sr=8-1**Barnes and Noble** — <http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/charleston-conference-proceedings-2009-katina-p-strauch/1105847152?ean=9780983404309&itm=1&usri=2009+charleston+conference+proceedings>**Baker & Taylor** — btol.com**Espresso Book Machine** — ondemandbooks.com

HOORAY! HOORAY!

Moving right along, the **2010 Proceedings** are in press, and we expect that they will be available no later than the end of January 2012. We will again send a free electronic copy to all 2010 attendees, and print copies will be available for purchase at the same locations above.

Still more! The **2011 Proceedings** will be published in partnership with **Purdue University Press**, and will be available in October 2012. We hope to also be included in the **Project MUSE/University Press Content Consortium** as well. More information will be sent to 2011 attendees in the spring of 2012.

And now — on to 2012! **The 2012 Charleston Conference** theme “**Accentuate the Positive!**” will be held **November 7-10, 2012**, in historic and beautiful Charleston (voted the #1 tourist city in 2011)! <http://www.charlestoncvb.com/>

The **Conference Directors** will be having a conference call to discuss the 2012 program. In fact, we just heard from **Darcy Dapra** (Partner/Manager, **Google Scholar**) who said that **Google** was so sorry to have missed the **2011 Conference**. **Anurag Acharya**, the founder of and lead engineer on **Google Scholar**, will present a talk entitled, “Integrating Access and Discoverability in Scholarship: Successes and Failures,” which aims to touch upon some very fascinating trends in the scholarly content ecosystem that **Google** has identified over the nearly eight years since **Scholar** has been in existence. Ready to sign up? Registration will be up in March! Stay tuned!

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