Managing Technology (JAL, November 2011)

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The Book is Dead, Long Live the Book!

In a 1992 article in *Library Journal* titled “The End of Books,” Raymond Kurzweil predicted that computer technology would make printed books obsolete by the turn of the century, but that they would linger for a “couple of decades before reaching antiquity” given their history and what Kurzweil called their “installed base.”[[1]](#endnote-1) Two decades later, reports of the printed book’s death have been greatly exaggerated, but I think we are at, or almost at, a tipping point within the history of book production, acquisitions, and access. For centuries, an essential part of an academic library’s core mission and a huge aspect of its day-to-day operations has been the selection, acquisition, cataloging, circulation, and preservation of printed books. Only in the past two decades have we been providing large-scale access to electronic materials, first indexes, then journals, newspapers, sound recordings, data, and maps, and now books. Libraries are still buying printed books in great quantities and the number of printed books being produced each year is increasing, but so are the numbers of e-books. In July 2010 Amazon announced that it was selling more e-books than printed ones.[[2]](#endnote-2) Moreover, our users now engage with the monograph, the most important tool of scholarly and cultural communication, debate, and dissemination in an entirely new way on their personal computers, laptops, e-readers, and mobile devices. The Internet has already permanently transformed the way in which we provide access to journals and journal articles, not to mention the methods that libraries, authors, and publishers use to acquire and disseminate journal content, but until fairly recently the print monograph’s status was safe and assured. When librarians quoted Raganthan: “Every book its reader” and “Every reader his or her book,” it is unlikely they meant something that users could obtain in any other way than by coming to a library, going to a specific spot on a shelf, and picking up an object defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as “occupying several sheets of paper or other substance fastened together so as to compose a material whole.”[[3]](#endnote-3) The printed book as a physical artifact is receiving its due as an object for serious study and scholarship. It has a series of companions and handbooks like *The Oxford Companion to the Book*, national histories like the five volume *History of the Book in America*, and graduate programs in book history are offered at the Universities of Toronto, Edinburgh, and London.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Michael Hart, the founder of Project Gutenberg (http://www.gutenberg.org/), claims to have invented e-books in 1971 and a number of people contend that his typed version of the Declaration of Independence was *the* very first electronic book. [[5]](#endnote-5) Given that the Internet in 1971 did not exist as we now know it, just 313 e-books were produced between 1971 and 1997.[[6]](#endnote-6) Audio books on magnetic tape proved quite popular through the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, and by 1992 books were being made available on compact discs and CD-ROMs. It was only in the mid-1990s that e-books in a shape recognizable to us now started to populate the landscape. Bookstores like Barnes & Noble and Amazon started to sell e-books and publishers like Penguin and Random House got in on the act, as did some scholarly organizations like the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS), which launched the Humanities E-Book Project (http://www.humanitiesebook.org/) in 2002 and which now provides access to more than 3,000 books produced by a number of university and scholarly publishers. Fast forward and collection development and electronic resources librarians are spoiled for choice when it comes to e-book vendors and platforms: Coutts operates Myilibrary (http://www.myilibrary.com/) which advertises that it is adding 5,000 new titles a month; Ebrary (http://www.ebrary.com/) was founded in 1999 and purchased by ProQuest in 2011 and has a long-standing relationship with YBP; Ebsco purchased NetLibrary from OCLC and has renamed it eBooks on Ebscohost (http://www.ebscohost.com/ebooks/home), and Oxford, Springer, Elsevier, Palgrave, and Wiley have built platforms for their e-books. JSTOR is launching its own platform for e-books, “Books at JSTOR,” in 2012.[[7]](#endnote-7) E-books are also mobile and e-readers have gone from fad to trend to here to stay.[[8]](#endnote-8) Amazon launched the Kindle in 2007, the Sony Reader appeared in 2008, Barnes & Noble launched the Nook in 2009, and Apple’s 2010 iPad allows users to access e-books through its iBooks platform. In terms of free e-book content, many people are familiar with Google Books (http://books.google.com/), the Hathi Trust (http://www.hathitrust.org/), the Internet Archive (<http://www.archive.org/>), and the venerable Project Gutenberg. Of course, many of the titles in Google Books and the Hathi Trust are only available in snippets given copyright. At this point, though, given the age of the e-book medium and the ways by which librarians and users are acquiring and accessing them, I think that we crossed the e-book frontier a short while ago. Many libraries now buy e-books in large packages as well as single titles, and almost all commercial vendors supply MARC records for their e-books, meaning that libraries can provide dual access points through their OPACs and the vendor’s own platform. Moreover, given the robustness and trustworthiness of free e-book resources like the Hathi Trust and the Internet Archive (Google Books is another story), many libraries, including my own, are now cataloging free e-books from those sites and linking to them if they are deemed relevant for the collection or if they are being used to replace a worn or damaged edition of an older or out-of-print book.

Librarians who work in access services, on reference desks, and in technical services might be skeptical that the e-book’s day is nigh. Some might argue that the e-book is in a sort of holding pattern by citing the 2009 Ithaka faculty survey in which only 4% of respondents agreed with the statement “Within the next five years, the use of e-books will be so prominent among faculty and students that it will not be necessary to maintain local collections of hard-copy books.” Moreover, just “a fraction” of faculty indicated that they use e-books in their teaching and research.[[9]](#endnote-9) Anecdotally, some of us know that humanities faculty have historically been less willing to experiment with e-books than their colleagues in the sciences or even the social sciences. A 2010 article in this journal by Berg, Hoffman, and Dawson also pointed out that there is little published research on e-book usage in academic libraries and their study also indicated that some undergraduates were still “unclear about the structure and functionality of e-books.”[[10]](#endnote-10) On the other hand, a recently published article by Simon in *The Reference Librarian* concluded that business students and faculty have embraced e-books.[[11]](#endnote-11) Catalog librarians, researchers, and the casual reader are also well aware that e-book metadata can often be pretty messy. Searching for a specific edition of a text (whether free via Project Gutenberg or for sale via Amazon) can be surprisingly frustrating. Obviously, one of the predictions that came out of a 2000 ALCTS preconference on e-books (“catalogers will be relieved of creating catalog records by publishers who will shoulder the responsibility for bibliographic control by developing metadata schemes”) has only been partially fulfilled. [[12]](#endnote-12)

As a result of all this, many of us believe that e-book technology “isn’t there yet,” but, as List and Chadwell point out, technology advances to meet demand.[[13]](#endnote-13) E-book technology is much more robust than it was just a couple of years ago, and far more scholarly, trustworthy content is available now than was available last month. Over the next several years I think it is safe (or safe-enough) to predict that e-book technology will become increasingly sophisticated and increasingly attractive to academic librarians and library users. Why?

**Space**: Libraries will face increasing pressure to adapt and creatively manage their physical spaces. Space is by far most valuable resource on college and university campuses. Think of all of the academic libraries built in North America in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s. Shelf space in these buildings is not finite and many libraries are now overcapacity. Moreover, many institutions cannot afford offsite storage and even compact storage may be out of reach depending on circumstances and budgets. Libraries are also being challenged to provide more flexible spaces for teaching, studying, and socializing. That, coupled with declining circulation figures (at least at ARL libraries), may prompt librarians and administrators to wonder if they can justify buying low-use print books that will occupy valuable real estate for an indefinite amount of time. [[14]](#endnote-14) E-books still cost money (often twice as much as their print equivalents), but they sit on servers, not on shelves. In fact, the 2010 Ithaka S+R academic library directors survey notes Paul Courant’s and Matthew Nielson’s observation that maintaining an electronic book costs *less than half* of what it costs to keep the print equivalent in a high-density, offsite storage facility [[15]](#endnote-15) Many libraries now have heavily duplicated print and online reference collections. Is this simply an unavoidable inefficiency given large e-book packages, or a sign that we have reached a tipping point, even if just in the way we acquire and curate our reference resources?

**Access**: As e-books become more popular and as libraries buy more of them, access methods should also improve, as should methods of acquisition. As collection development librarians know, an electronic edition of a work may appear months after the cloth and paper editions are released. As more libraries move to acquire increasing numbers of e-books, vendors and publishers will (hopefully) twig to the fact that syncing production schedules would be a good idea. Vendors are now letting libraries experiment with e-book acquisition through e-book preferred approval plans, outright purchase, lease, or patron driven acquisitions (PDA). It is hard to avoid reading about PDA in the professional literature these days but, in short, many libraries are using it as a way to empower users to select materials. A common model involves a library batch loading e-book MARC records into its OPAC. Users find these titles through catalog searches and a purchase is only triggered after certain number of uses, page views, or amount of time within a title. These trigger parameters are established by the library or set by the vendor. A special issue of *Collection Management* (volume 35, issues 3-4) was devoted to PDA, as was a large part of the June 2011 issue of *Against the Grain*. This is not to say that PDA is exclusively about e-books, but it is a model that some libraries and consortia are successfully using to acquire them. Meanwhile, it should be pointed out that neither PDA nor the large-scale acquisition of e-book packages are without their critics.[[16]](#endnote-16)

**Use and Demand**: Given the ways in which current high school students and undergraduates interact with technology, it is very likely that we will soon reach a point where our younger users may actively prefer e-books over printed books. That is to say nothing of teaching faculty, many of whom grew up with the Internet. E-books, even single those that are single user only as opposed to multiple user, are available day and night and they are never misshelved, overdue, or lost. Thinking about reluctant or ambivalent e-book users, can libraries and librarians shape their expectations and behaviors? One possibility may be starting small by encouraging teaching faculty to go (where possible) with e-only reading and reserve lists. Could we build increased acceptance of e-books simply by offering more of them? How would our users react if we went with e-book preferred collection development policies and how can libraries exert more pressure on publishers and vendors to improve metadata, platform design and usability, and publishing schedules such that electronic editions are available for purchase at the same time as the print versions? These are intriguing and engaging issues that I hope we will collectively tackle over the coming months and years.

As always, there are questions about archiving and long-term access to any kind of digital resource and we have to think carefully about how will our work change physically and intellectually if and when e-books become as important as printed books. We also need to ensure that our users, administrators, and funders understand that moving from print to electronic does not mean that we need less staff or funding or that our work as librarians is less important. On the contrary, and as we already know, the shift to e-resources has usually meant more work, much of it more skilled and challenging than when dealing with print alone. Looking at technology more broadly, Michael Ridley, the Chief Librarian at the University of Guelph in Ontario, has been quoted as saying that librarians are often distracted by “bright shiny objects.”[[17]](#endnote-17) It is important for our profession to acknowledge that our habit of embracing the latest technological development or innovation as the great thing since the Dewey Decimal System is not necessarily the smartest or most strategic thing to do, but I believe we are looking at a landscape where the electronic book has reached a level of sophistication such that it could, over the next several years, become the preferred format for some (but not all) libraries and their users. We need to imagine what that future, shiny or otherwise, looks like. This scenario may not come to pass, but there is no doubt that e-books are changing the ways in which our users read and interact with books and how the publishing industry is reacting to new behaviors. In the end, though, the book in all its forms endures. In a recent article for Britain’s *Daily Telegraph*, author Margaret Atwood wrote about an author’s wish for his or her book once it has been published. It is a sentiment that librarians, along with students, teachers, and researchers, share as members of the wider community of scholars: “’Go, little book,’ authors used to tell their creations, in the end-of-the-book convention called the envoi. ‘Into the hands of strangers I confide you.’…May you bring wisdom or knowledge. May you bring joy.”[[18]](#endnote-18)

1. NOTES AND REFERENCES

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