

Cites & Insights

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Bibs & Blather

Does Your Library Use Twitter or Facebook?

If so, and if it's a public library or library system, I could use your help.

I'm working on a book on public library use of social networks (to be published by ALA Editions in 2012. If you've already responded to [my post](#) on *Walt at Random*, feel free to ignore this section. Otherwise, I could use responses to the following—sent to waltcrawford@gmail.com by September 14, 2011 if possible.

Basic Information

Library/district official name; State, province or country; Service area population; Your name, title and email address; Whether you're willing to have your comments used as direct quotations or only as background.

Comments on Twitter or Facebook (or both—indicate which):

Whatever you feel is worth saying about how your library uses the social network, how much time is spent preparing items and responding to items (if you do that), whether one person or many post, the feedback you've gotten from your patrons, whether it seems worthwhile—and whatever else you think is worth mentioning.

Comments on the relationship between the two (if you use both):

Do you use them for different purposes, or are Facebook statuses basically longer versions of tweets (or maybe the same)? Other comments on the differences and similarities as your library has used them?

Thanks!

I can't guarantee your comments will be used—I'd expect that no more than 2,000-3,000 words of the book will be comments from these emails. I *will* list you in the acknowledgments (unless you ask me *not*

to do so) and your comments will definitely help as I prepare the subjective portions of the book.

I'll look up your library's home page and go to your Twitter and Facebook pages, to pick up basic numbers (followers, following, tweets, likes, visits) and five recent items from each service as examples of trends and practices—unless you're in one of the states for which I'm doing full sweeps, in which case I'd do that anyway.

(The original post said "six or eleven states." That's now at least 16 and quite possibly as many as 24 states.)

And If You've *Stopped* Using Twitter or Facebook...

There may not be any such libraries, but just in case:

If your public library/library district *has* used Facebook, Twitter or both, and has *stopped* using one or both, I'd love to get some feedback, to help me prepare that book.

Same basic info, plus why you stopped using the social network and any other comments.

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I'm not assuming that there *are* any "failure stories." It won't surprise me at all if I don't get any responses to this negative query. On the other hand, while I can see the Facebook and Twitter accounts in the states I'm studying in depth, I have no way of knowing about former accounts that have closed—unless people tell me.

More Tweaks

Another tweak to *Cites & Insights* in PDF form begins with this issue. It may be more visible than the tweak introduced some time back—a tweak nobody has yet identified. It could be thought of as a reversion, but that's not quite true. No prize for guessing either or both tweaks, but I'd love to hear from you if you believe you know what they are.

Meanwhile, this is another single-month (but also single-essay) issue, so I do expect to be back within the next four to six weeks.

Writing About Reading

A Future of Books and Publishing

What do I believe is going to happen with books (of various stripes) and publishing in the future? Since I'm not an industry pundit, a publishing guru or a futurist, I don't have a reasonable answer to that question. Neither, I think, does anyone else, unless that answer is "it will be complicated, probably more complicated than it is now."

That's not the answer you get from most pundits and gurus, to be sure, because simplicity sells—a dramatic single-path future always gets more publicity, even though it's the least likely scenario in the real world.

In the [April 2011 installment](#) of WRITING ABOUT READING I offered some of my beliefs and biases about the present and future of reading and writing. Those beliefs and biases didn't add up to a coherent vision. While I don't pretend to know what's likely and don't believe in a single predictable future, this might not be a bad time to set forth what I'd *like* to see happen. This isn't *the* future of books and publishing, it's *a* future of books and publishing. I believe parts of it are probable. I suspect at least one part is improbable. The bulk of this PERSPECTIVE is another set of notes and comments on the changing state of the publishing industry, this time focusing on contrasts and comparisons between print books and ebooks. My flawed vision of one possible future is a preface of sorts.

What Could Happen

Let's project ten years out with some notes on "while I'm still alive"—say 35 years out. (Hey, I'd only be 101 at that point.) Here's one set of possibilities I might find attractive.

Ebooks and Print Books

Both forms of long-form textual narrative will thrive, both having U.S. annual sales in the billions of dollars and probably, at least within 35 years, worldwide sales in tens of billions of dollars. (This would be a *huge* increase for ebooks, unless you define that market extremely broadly.)

People will read in the formats they prefer for various uses, and for most people the plural "formats" will be the right term. I'd like to think some digiphiles will get over their proclamations that they'll never, ever read another print book, but that probably won't happen. I doubt many people will be making such pointless proclamations in another decade, just as I doubt that Amazon will still be running TV ads that belittle print books. Similarly, I'd like to assume that few print-oriented readers a decade from now will assert that *no* screen-based text, or no long-form screen-based text, can ever be worthwhile—and I suspect there aren't many readers who never read text from the screen.

I'd be surprised, looking ten years out, if most people who travel a lot don't own *some* device reasonably well suited for ebook reading (not necessarily a dedicated ereader)—and I'm enough of a Luddite to exclude smart phones and other devices with screens smaller than about five inches from that category. I'd be astonished if a majority of first-world citizens *uses* dedicated ereaders regularly for book-length texts a decade from now, but I've been astonished before. I'm guessing most book readers—who may or may not be a majority of the population, now or ten years or 35 years from now—will use both ebooks and print books.

I would love to see ereaders within a decade that match print for resolution, which means at least 300 dpi/ppi—but that resolution doesn't seem to matter for lots of people, so I won't be surprised if that doesn't happen. (Apple's iPhone 4 achieves that resolution, at 326 ppi, but I question the suitability of screens that small for reading books. Again, that's me. By comparison, Apple's iPad is a mere 132 ppi, the Kindle runs 167 ppi and the Nook Color displays at 170 ppi.)

The balance? Who knows? It will be different in each aspect of book publishing (and there are quite a few aspects). For example:

- I've long expressed a hope that most textbooks, *especially* those for K12 students, would move to ebook form—but that's turning out to be a tricky road, not only because publishers love the assured profits of frequent edition changes but also because, so far, students seem not to be thrilled with etextbooks. This might change, but given the dynamics of the market, I'd be surprised if half of the multibillion-dollar textbook market was ebooks a decade from now. I'd *like* to see that happen, especially to get those loads off of

schoolkids' backs, but I wouldn't bet on it. Will print textbooks disappear within 35 years? Probably not entirely.

- People looking for quick screen-turners (like page-turners but on ereaders) seem to be doing nicely with \$0.99 quickies that might never be published in traditional form; I wonder how long that infatuation with “mediocre but really cheap” will last—but given most network and cable TV, I know better than to underestimate the staying power of facile mediocrity.
- I'm *guessing* nonfiction books, outside of how-to books and technology-related books, will continue to be mostly print. Purely a guess.
- I'm *guessing* “deep fiction”—books you read slowly, savoring each page—will continue to be mostly print. Also purely a guess.
- I wouldn't be surprised if *most* mass-market paperbacks (the ones printed on cheap paper, typically around 4.5x6.8” in the U.S.) are replaced by ebooks within a decade, and that seems probable within 35 years. I would be *very* surprised if mass-market paperbacks disappear entirely within a decade (and wouldn't venture a guess for 35 years out). Indeed, I'd be surprised if they aren't still a substantial market.
- The book-publishing field is complex, and adult trade books represent about a quarter of total print book revenues. (Textbooks are a larger market; children's books and professional, technical and scholarly books combined roughly equaled adult trade books in 2008 revenue, according to the Census Bureau.) I'd bet that children's books will still be predominantly print books in a decade; I'd guess the same will be true for professional, technical and scholarly books.
- I would guess that most “traditional” titles a decade from now will be published in both print and ebook form, quite possibly with many books only produced in physical form as hardbacks for libraries and collectors—possibly using print-on-demand.
- There will continue to be a healthy market for fine printing, books that are as much objects d'art as they are reading material, but that market probably isn't a multi-billion-dollar business now, and it probably won't be a decade from now. But, as with vinyl LPs, it's likely to be a market that supports a number of small presses that know what they're doing.

- I believe there will be a growing “market” for extremely short-run print books, micropublications if you will, most of which won't enter the traditional book marketplace. More on that later.

Number and Source of Titles

If you haven't heard, there's been an absurd explosion of “new” book titles as counted by Bowker...and most of that explosion is outside traditional publishing. These are books *with* ISBNs, so it's still an undercount, and “new” is a tricky term. Every new edition of a book has a new ISBN; an ebook has a different ISBN from a paperback has a different ISBN from a hardback has a... and so on. Bowker's [summary of new titles and editions](#), 2002 through 2010 (2010 being estimates), is startling throughout—but especially for 2007 and beyond. (I've rounded all numbers *down* to the nearest thousand.)

How startling? Even in 2002, there were 215,000 “traditional” new titles and editions (including 30,000 juveniles, for those non-reading kids)—and 32,000 “non-traditional” which, according to a footnote, “consists largely of reprints, often public domain, and other titles printed on-demand.” In 2006, the traditional count had increased to 274,000 and non-traditional was down to some 22,000. Ah, but look at the last four years:

- 2007: 284,000 traditional; 123,000 non-traditional.
- 2008: 289,000 traditional; 271,000 non-traditional.
- 2009: 302,000 traditional; 1,033,000 non-traditional.
- 2010 projected: 316,000 traditional; 2,776,000 non-traditional.

By the way, those non-reading juveniles will have more than 32,000 new titles and editions this year not to read, excluding non-traditional titles.

To the extent that the explosion in non-traditional titles represents public domain reprints, I suspect it will level off. (I could be wrong.) To the extent that it represents print-on-demand titles, I suspect it will continue to grow—except that a *lot* of those titles won't have ISBNs and won't show up in Bowker's counts. (That's also the case now, I believe.)

I anticipate continued growth in micropublishing, which I define as books expected to yield from one to 500 copies total distribution (not necessarily sold, as lots of these won't be sold at all)—including family histories and other items of interest to one very small group of people. Indeed, I'm doing what I

can to encourage that growth: my next book will be *The Librarian's Guide to Micropublishing*, showing how libraries can help their patrons to produce micropublications that look as good as mainstream books. Most of these *will* be print books...but in total they'll make up a small percentage of all book copies printed. (Even one million titles, with an average of ten copies per title, is less than one percent of U.S. book production.)

For traditional publishing? I wouldn't be surprised to see the total number of titles decline, although as more of these become cheap ebooks that might not happen. It is worth noting that, for all the "death of books" nonsense, there's only been one year in the past decade in which traditional titles declined (from 2004 to 2005, and then only by about 9%—to a number still comfortably higher than 2003).

The Nature of the Beast

Here we get to what I'd *like* to see happen—but I'm being optimistic.

I've said mean things about the Big Six, that handful of publishers that includes more than a hundred imprints and, to my mind, is the "Big Media version" of book publishing. To me, Big Media publishing is bad for books and readers and unsustainable—with its dependence on blockbuster best-sellers, huge advances for a few authors and "authors" while dropping respectable writers because they don't produce blockbusters, and what I see as a focus on selling product rather than producing first-rate books. That includes an apparent trend toward editing on the cheap and not bothering with page-by-page typographical layout, at least based on the sampling I've done. I should say here that lumping all Big Six imprints together in this negative commentary is almost certainly unfair to one or more of them, to several of their imprints and to quite a few of their editors and typographers.

Who are the Big Six?

- Hachette Book Group is owned by Hachette Livre, a French company that's the world's second largest publisher. It includes Time Warner books, Little, Brown and some 18 imprints.
- HarperCollins is part of Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation and includes more than two dozen imprints.
- Macmillan is part of German publisher Holtzbrinck and has quite a few imprints.
- Penguin Group (USA) is part of Penguin Group, currently the world's largest trade

book publisher and itself part of the British firm Pearson PLC. It includes a huge number of imprints.

- Random House, U.S.A. is owned by German media corporation Bertelsmann and includes the many imprints of Crown and Knopf Doubleday as well as those of Random House itself.
- Simon & Schuster, with its 35 imprints, is part of Sumner Redstone's CBS Corporation—the one and only American-owned megapublisher.

I've seen estimates that these six companies control more than 80% of the U.S. trade book market, and they're known for publishing the "biggest author brands" (as one publishing consultant calls them).

I would *like* to see the Big Six *model* of publishing—or at least the worst of it—decline, in share of market if not in overall size. I would *love* to see the tens of thousands of small or independent publishers come to dominate U.S. publishing. I believe that would result in better-quality books (both in terms of the text within the books and the care taken with book layout and typography). "Small publishers" aren't necessarily all that small, to be sure: Chronicle Books, for example, is a good-sized business.

"Tens of thousands" may be an understatement. I'm including only publishers that operate as full-time businesses and publish more than one author. When you add self-publishers, especially those who use Lulu or CreateSpace as fulfillment agencies, that total could reach six or seven figures—and today's self-publisher can become tomorrow's small publisher simply by taking on a second author.

I would *hate* to see Amazon serve as a chokepoint through which almost all ebooks and a large percentage of print books must pass. I believe that, in the long run, that will almost necessarily lead to problems. I would *love* to see more competition both there and with big book distributors—but I have no idea whether that will or could happen.

There are some things of which I have no doubt whatsoever:

- Ten years from now, people will read book-length texts, probably in the billions just within the U.S. That will also be true 35 years from now. Long-form reading isn't going away.
- Ten years from now, collector-quality print books will do healthy business, and that's *likely* to be true 35 years from now. In neither case will that business represent a substantial portion of publishing.

- Ten years from now, U.S. public libraries will circulate more than a billion print books each year, and I'm reasonably certain that will also be true 35 years from now. Will those books represent a majority of library circulation? I have no idea. Will ebooks come to represent a majority of library circulation—and will libraries gain control of that circulation? Again, I have no idea.
- Ten years from now, some gurus and pundits will make sweeping predictions involving the death of X or end of Y and assuming a future that's simpler than the past. And the future will continue to get more complex.

There's a future for books and publishing—one I believe would be healthy for writers and readers. I believe a multiplicity of relatively small businesses run by people who really care about books would be better for literature and readers than "stuff pushers," my oversimplified model of the Big Six approach to publishing.

I almost forgot one thing that may be essential for that future—but this one seems improbable, specifically the second half: There need to be lots of physical bookstores—and, sooner or later, those bookstores need to abandon the right to return unsold books for full credit. That right, which is nearly unique among retail businesses, makes it *far* more difficult for independent publishers to succeed, since a short-term best-seller can become a medium-term disaster for a publisher. Right of return for full credit, especially as it's misapplied to mass-market paperbacks (where stores send back the covers and trash the actual books), is bad for small publishers and ecologically unsound. Will it change? One can only hope.

Enough of that. Let's look at some commentaries on ebooks vs. pbooks—a discussion that may seem quaint a decade from now. Or maybe not.

Ebooks Are The Future!

Some items in this group represent the "ebooks / ereaders as the only or dominant future" extreme. Others don't go that far but do tout the wonders of ebooks, with or without dedicated ereaders.

What If the Kindle Succeeds?

Hugh D'Andrade wrote [this commentary](#) on August 18, 2008 at Electronic Frontier Foundation's *Deep Links*. (That hyperlink may not work even in the HTML version—*Deep Links* URLs seem to yield blog frameworks with no posts. The date should get you

there.) It's three years old, back when Amazon was promoting the Kindle all the time, with it dominating the front page...oh, wait, that's still happening, isn't it? This is a commentary from an odd position—a reader who generalizes the attitudes of other readers:

Steve Jobs said recently that the whole idea of e-book readers was flawed since "[people don't read any-more](#)". But for those of us who do read, the e-book elicits skepticism for different reasons. For us, the look and feel, even the smell, of a physical book is part of the joy of reading. Will anyone actually want to curl up with an electronic device for an evening of literary comfort?

How does D'Andrade's commentary wind up in this section? Because of paragraphs in which he seems to say that, since the trend toward MP3s has been "steady and unstoppable," that's also likely to be true for books. Indeed, he's apparently all for ebooks, given his list of advantages:

Ease of access: We have become accustomed to the fact that we can access millions of songs and albums instantaneously online, with a single click. The same is now increasingly possible with books.

Ease of sharing: Everyone loves to share a good book with friends. Digital books can be shared as easily as sending an email—and you don't need to give up your copy in order to do so! (Publishers may try to restrict copying with DRM copy protection, but as we saw with MP3 files, this strategy will fail.)

Ease of carrying: A single Kindle device can carry at least 200 books. As the technology improves, you will soon be able to carry a copy of your entire library in your bag (and have a back-up at home), just as you now carry your music collection in your pocket.

Price: As more people use digital books and as competition increases, the price of digital books will come down, reflecting the real costs of production — no expensive printing, no shipping across country or storing in warehouses.

As is usually the case when price is discussed, D'Andrade either doesn't know or doesn't care about the 1/7th rule—that is, the "real costs of production" are unlikely to be more than one-seventh of a physical book's price.

Sigh. There's more to the post—but clicking on "Read the entire post" yields the same empty blog frame as the URL itself, so I can't comment on it. A shame, given that the rest of the post includes his questions for publishers. (I'm not sure what's wrong at *Deep Links*, but something has gone awry, largely removing that blog from my source list. It's a shame, really: the EFF has useful things to say.)

The once and future e-book: on reading in the digital age

John Siracusa [posted this article](#) at *ars technica* on February 2, 2009. Siracusa goes way back with ebooks:

I was pitched headfirst into the world of e-books in 2002 when I took a job with Palm Digital Media. The company, originally called Peanut Press, was founded in 1998 with a simple plan: publish books in electronic form. As it turns out, that simple plan leads directly into a technological, economic, and political hornet's nest. But thanks to some good initial decisions (more on those later), little Peanut Press did pretty well for itself in those first few years, eventually having a legitimate claim to its self-declared title of "the world's largest e-book store."

Unfortunately, despite starting the company near the peak of the original dot-com bubble, the founders of Peanut Press lost control of the company very early on. In retrospect, this signaled an important truth that persists to this day: people don't get e-books.

Peanut Press became Palm Digital Media and is now apparently part of Fictionwise. Siracusa's problem: ebooks didn't—and as of February 2009 still hadn't—taken off the way he felt they needed to.

The pace of the e-book market over the past decade has been excruciatingly—and yes, you guessed it, unjustly—slow. My frustration is much like that of the Mac users of old. Here's an awesome, obvious, *inevitable* idea, seemingly thwarted at every turn by widespread consumer misunderstanding and an endemic lack of will among the big players.

Oh, look, there's the *i*-word, in italics even. Let that pass; maybe Siracusa has something worthwhile to say, even if he has fallen back on inevitability early in the article. Where does he go from there? First, he objects to the *term* e-book. Then he leads us through a set of "paper tigers"—objections to ebooks that he sets up to knock down. Technical issues? "They don't matter" because people read stuff off screens anyway.

I'll say it again: **people will read text off screens.** The optical superiority of paper is still very real, but also *irrelevant*. The minimum quality threshold for extended reading was passed a long, long time ago...

I'm not going to tell you that you really do want to read a novel off a screen. I *am* going to tell you that your reluctance to do so has absolutely nothing to do with the state of screen technology, despite your fervent protestations to the contrary. (...where "you" is a statistically average fuzz of an individual, obviously. Some people have legitimate physical issues with pro-

longed reading from emissive screens—and paper, for that matter. They are in the statistical noise, however.)

In other words, if you believe you find books easier to read in print than on the screen, you're either wrong or part of a minority so small it's "statistical noise." Proof of this? Hey, it's a screed: proof is irrelevant, just like optical superiority. The next straw man up for the burning: Complaints about ereaders. Siracusa seems to object to limitations in *current* readers being a reason ebooks didn't take off as rapidly as he wanted. That's not the way the world works: Most people don't buy something that's seriously flawed because a later generation *might* be terrific.

Or maybe his real point is that ereaders are irrelevant. In any case, now (on page 3 of the story) we get to Siracusa's *real* case, and, sigh, it's a classic expansion of "it's inevitable."

I have some bad news for the bibliophiles. The beloved, less technically sophisticated information conveyance with the pedigreed history doesn't win.

He goes on at some length. There's the Next Generation case, and also the "the new always replaces the old" theme, erroneous though that usually is. The merits? Convenience, "power" (searching, etc.) and "potential." And back to a historically flawed "it always works this way" argument: CDs entirely replaced LPs because they were more convenient; MP3s entirely replaced CDs because they're more convenient. What more do you need to know? Not only that ebooks *inevitably* replace print books—but that *you should go out there and switch*, regardless of your preference.

If it seems like I've spent an inordinate number of words vainly chastising the book-reading public for its stubbornly illogical tastes, rest assured that I believe the bulk of the blame lies elsewhere. It's just that the guilty party's actions follow a formula that is familiar to the point of cliché.

Yes, in fact, you *have* spent an inordinate number of words telling readers that *we're wrong*. That Siracusa's logic is the only logic that counts. He goes on for an even larger number of words about how Big Media gets it wrong, makes it pretty clear that he's an Apple fanboy and more. Siracusa says he's pretty much given up on print books; I'm guessing he's also not a big library user. I won't comment on the rest of the article. It's interesting that there are *no* user comments on the story; maybe people stopped reading before they got to the end? In any case, it turns out that Siracusa's principle reason that ebooks will *replace* print books really does boil

down to “it’s inevitable”—the digital always, *always* wins and wipes out the analog. Oh, and it’s up to us—those of us who like print books—to go out and *buy* ebooks. “All I ask is that you give it an honest try.” Why? I guess because it’s inevitable. Sorry, but that’s not good enough.

Don’t Believe the E-book Skeptics

That’s “Nathan Bransford, author” (formerly a literary agent, now a tech worker) [on his own blog](#) as of March 8, 2010. After discussing a Farhad Manjoo piece on predictions, he moves on to his real topic:

When people make predictions about our e-book future, I find myself mystified that some people are so dismissive of their inevitability. I see blog posts and comments around the Internet from people who look at the nascent e-book landscape and think, “Blech. Expensive grayscale Kindles in a white piece of plastic? No way e-books are going to catch on!” Some people admit that they’re going to be a part of our lives, but do so grudgingly and see them as yet another signpost that we’re all going to hell in a handbasket.

Here’s the thing they ignore: e-books are only going to get better.

Hmm. There’s that i-word again. Oddly enough, I’m partly in agreement with Bransford: *Of course* ebooks are catching on. He has five main points. (His topic sentence, but with my preferred no-hyphen “ebook”; my commentary.)

- **The ebook reading experience is only going to improve.** Probably true, although when he talks about “creative design,” I suspect it’s more of a mixed bag: Current ebook standards tend to *limit* design possibilities, not enhance them. Bransford even believes “fancy illustrated books” will be better as ebooks. Maybe, but maybe not. I would note that interactivity seems to be a big deal for Bransford; I wonder whether it is for most readers and most books.
- **Ereaders and ebooks are only going to get cheaper.** Probably true.
- **Finding the books you want to read will only get easier.** He refers to things like Good Reads and Shelfari. I’m a bit less sanguine, but I hope he’s right.
- **People are ignoring the digital trend.** And here we run into the classic Inevitability:

Everything that can be digitized is being digitized because it’s cheaper and easier to send pixels around the world than physical objects. First it was music, then newspapers, then movies. Books are next in line.

➤ **Habits change.**

Yes, yes. The smell of books, reading in the bathtub, writing in the margins, a bookshelf full of books, etc. etc.

People will still have that choice and there are some books that simply can’t be replicated digitally. But when faced with a better option, consumers shift extremely quickly. Right now the benefits of e-books are a little murky except for early adopters and those that can afford the devices. But that’s just right now. Pretty soon they’re going to be better (color! design! portable! interactivity! instantaneous!) and cheaper. Readers won’t pay a premium for an inferior print product out of habit and nostalgia in great numbers.

The e-book era is going to be one of incredible innovation and unlimited opportunity, and people who don’t see e-books dominating the future of the book world are ignoring the coming innovation and creativity and affordability. I refuse to believe the skeptics and pessimists. Books are about to get better.

Now, in fact, if ebooks *truly* dominate the future of the book world, then “People will still have that choice” is *not true*. You can’t have both Digital Inevitability and meaningful continued choice. You can—and I think you will—have a complex marketplace.

Maybe the key sentence is this one: “Readers won’t pay a premium for an inferior print product out of habit and nostalgia in great numbers.” That might be true—but readers get to define “inferior” based on our own preferences, not Bransford’s.

This post *does* have comments—lots of them (121 at this writing). I won’t comment on them, but if you’re reading, be sure to scroll down past all the usual “wonderful post! couldn’t agree more” comments to get to more nuanced discussions. I’d like Bransford’s commentary more if he wasn’t so wedded to inevitability, as becomes even clearer in his responses within comments. Incidentally, libraries *do* show up—near the very end of the comments—but only as sources of ebooks.

How I Got Over My Issues and Learned to Love eBooks

Speaking of libraries, here’s one *from* a librarian: Bobbi L. Newman, [posting on June 14, 2010](#) at *Librarian by Day*.

The idea of an ebook reader has intrigued me for a while. I wanted one to read my nonfiction on. I highlight my books, write in the margins and flag pages (gasp!) so the appeal for me was being able to search books and my notes fast and easy. I also read a lot of pdf reports and I wanted to be able to read them on

the device and highlight and make notes in them too. But like many librarians (and others) I had a problem with being tied to one device, issues with DRM, pricing, ownership, compatibility and libraries so I kept putting off committing to a device and reading ebooks. Three things happened in pretty rapid succession to change my mind.

The three things? The iPad was announced; she discussed the situation with a friend who's a Nook owner; and she read [a post](#) about reading on an iPhone. A portion of the "conversation with a Nook owner":

I expressed a couple of concerns to her. The first was about DRM and the limitations of ebooks. She told me I needed to stop thinking about ebooks as if they were just like books. She compared it to dining out, you pay more for something you could have prepared yourself at home, you pay for the atmosphere and the experience and the convenience. This "clicked" with me. **Sure I'm not getting the same things I would I were purchasing a paper book, I'm getting other things and it's a trade-off.**

Newman concluded that she already had "the perfect ebook reader"—a netbook. She also tries to follow her friend's strategy to avoid overbuying: Never buy a book until you've read the first free chapter. Interesting comments—including one person who says reading on a computer-like device is "preposterous," which I don't get at all.

I have little to say about this post...but the first followup bothers me a bit more. That post is "Why I Love Kindle Desktop for eBooks," [posted the next day](#). Here's the first paragraph:

I really love using Kindle Desktop for reading ebooks on my netbook. The great thing is there are so many free books, and I don't just mean old ones, that I think everyone should use it even if they never plan to buy a book, just to take advantage of the freebies.

"I think everyone should use it" is offputting—but maybe that's just me. Otherwise, a good and useful post with this close (which really means Newman doesn't belong in this section, but never mind):

I'll never stop buying paper books, I prefer them for fiction and some nonfiction like travel essays. But for how I use many nonfiction titles ebooks actually work much better for me.

Oh, by the way, Newman *did* buy a dedicated ereader, sometime between June 2010 and January 2011. That's another story, one not covered here.

Why Dedicated E-Readers, Like Kindle, Will Thrive [This one](#)—which definitely is an "ebooks are *better* than print books" perspective—comes from an unusual source: *Tangled WEB*, Luke Allnutt's blog as

part of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. It appeared September 14, 2010. The direct topic is whether dedicated ereaders can survive the onslaught of the iPad and competitors—but consider the second through fourth paragraphs:

Why would I want a device where I can only read books, people asked, when I might want to watch movies as well? Why would we want to e-read when we can read in high-definition? Or: Why would we want to read digitally at all, when print has served us so well for hundreds of years?

I had to read a "real" book the other day. It arrived in a package in the mail, a big chunky carbon footprint of a relic. When I read it, I struggled to hold its weight in my hands. I shifted position in bed, trying to find a comfortable position to balance its bulk, my finger wedged in the fold, while its hard edges dug into my stomach. When I placed it down on the table -- my other hand absorbed with eating toast -- the pages kept springing shut. I wanted to break its rotten little spine.

I longed for my Kindle, its lightness in weight and touch, its ergonomic complicity, the softness of e-ink easier on the eye than the eye-swimming harshness of ink upon paper. I had become a convert.

"Eye-swimming harshness of ink upon paper"? "I wanted to break its rotten little spine"? Wow. His *real* reason for preferring a Kindle is trickier, given the evolutionary path of most "dedicated" readers: namely, that you're forced to get off the grid.

The beauty of the Kindle is that you're locked into the book. There is no email or Facebook to distract me. I can not multitask. The medium is designed to focus me on the text and (almost) nothing else.

Personally, I've never needed to buy a new device in order to focus on one task, but whatever works...except that most ereaders aren't *that* dedicated these days. There's more (quoting Carr and Birkerts) and an ending I regard as odd and unfortunate (as you might guess, this is another one who's apparently never heard of public libraries), after his hope that competition drives the price of ereaders down to a "buy 10 books a year and get a free Nook" level:

That might kill independent book stores, as we know them now. Well, while I would never want to see someone lose their livelihood, I always had a hard time with independent book stores: the snooty staff, the idea of reading to be seen, the cappuccino and conversations. Reading, for me, has always been a solitary unencumbered pleasure. E-readers -- with their vast digital libraries accessible instantly from the comfort of my windowless room -- help it stay that way.

Kindle 3: e-book readers come of age

Sounds like a product review, doesn't it? This *ars technica* article by Nate Anderson, [published in November 2010](#), may include an actual review, but it doesn't start that way. Instead we get a little essay about booksmellers, based on a supposed "ramshackle San Diego bookstore" owned by an "aging hippie" who pushes booksmelling. If this is true, the clown even had a business card saying "We don't sell books, we *smell* books." Which leads up to this:

The Kindle and its cousins strip a book to its words. Gone are most formatting choices, typesetting preferences, font choices, paper thicknesses, cover stock decisions. Books are no longer artifacts.

The nature of the digital world, you say? Not quite. When people ditched their CDs, they lost album art and liner notes, but those were never a part of the actual listening experience. The music bursting from headphone and speakers was still music, was the same whether it came from a disc or a download. When the liner notes vanished, the songs remained the same.

But with books, one handles the artifact constantly during the reading experience. Losing the feel of that wonderful paper in the old Oxford blue-backed hardcovers means losing a part of the reading experience. My booksmeller would be (and, somewhere in California, probably is) aghast at the sterilized world of the e-books, every word stripped of its tangible context.

Right after that, we learn that Anderson hasn't read a print newspaper in years and doesn't miss them—and that digital downloads "have won" and movies are "halfway there."

Then we get an essay on the recent history of ereaders, issues with the Kindle interface, the "iPadification of the Kindle" (so much for Allnutt's splendid isolation!)—and a section in which Anderson admits that he's inclined to do other stuff more readily when he reads on an actual computer than when he reads a print book. He thinks the Kindle, despite apps, is still better in this regard. But I find myself on the other side of this paragraph:

The counter-argument has some merit: if the books were better written, they could engage our attention on their own. Yet how many of us can cite some experience in which we preferred a series of quick-fixes over something longer-lasting? For those who subscribe to St. Paul's dictum—"the good which I want to do, I fail to do"—single-purpose devices may have much to offer. Think of them as devices even Nick Carr could love.

I believe—I *hope*—that if I had a netbook and started reading ebooks, *good* ebooks would keep me

monotasking. I know good online articles do that now—they engage me. I still question the need to buy a device *primarily* to avoid temptation.

There's a lot more—it's a typically long *ars technica* essay—with the payoff at the end, where it becomes clear that Anderson's bought into Digital Inevitability as the Only Solution:

Whatever e-books are and however useful they may be, they aren't "books." Instead, we get the content with little to no attention to form and to design. Everything about a book is distilled into odorless words; all else is waste to be thrown away.

The Kindle has become an attractive, easy-to-use text reader. That's not a slight; devices like the Kindle have now become so attractive and functional that it's hard to imagine going without a reader in the future. With this newest unit, I'm a convert to idea of e-readers. I anticipate that one will always sit on the living room coffee table, ready to present me with several hundred years of terrific public domain content, DRMed e-books I'm quite sure I won't need life-long access to, the occasional PDF, technical documents, and (perhaps) the best of the Web through something like an Instapaper app. If vendor lock-in disappears and prices drop another buck or two, then current titles will join the list.

Perhaps the reader of the future won't look like a Kindle, but more like a multifunction tablet (think iPad or even the new Barnes & Noble Nook). In either case, both classes of devices are now good enough, and the content is finally varied enough, that it's possible to envision the wholesale shift to digital texts. Plenty will be lost—including the smell—but so much will be gained once the inanities of non-interoperable DRM can be overcome and lending rules approached rationality. Book lovers will mourn the change and carp endlessly about typography, design, cover art, and the facing page format, but music and movies have already showed us that people will make the switch to digital convenience even at the expense of quality.

Another story with no comments. I wonder what it is about very long *ars technica* stories? In any case, I'm a lot less ready than Anderson is to dismiss the "carping" of book lovers—or to believe that we'll be *forced* to abandon print books. As to his other examples, CDs still sell in the billions of dollars—and Blu-ray, where you pay *more* for quality, is doing just fine. I expect *ars technica* writers to understand complex futures more than, say, *Wired's* "ooh, shiny" writers; maybe that's naïve.

Buying books and/or experiences: a consumer view

This final post for this group, by Lorcan Dempsey [on February 27, 2011](#) at his eponymous weblog, is—as you might expect—squarely outside the “ebooks are taking over!” extreme. It’s a personal reflection that makes a fine case for dedicated ereaders—not as *the future* but as part of the future. Here’s the start:

A while ago I was interested to observe that I had begun to resist buying paperback novels. Before that, I would often come away with one from a trip to our local Border’s (sadly now closing) or sometimes buy a mystery novel in the airport (especially on the return trip when good intentions about working on the plane were likely to dissolve).

In thinking about it, I realised that I only wanted to buy the experience not the physical item. My bag and our house is already cluttered enough. I wanted the few hours entertainment the book provided, not the small burden of owning a bundle of paper to be shelved.

I might be inclined to say “Psst. Public libraries for books you don’t want to keep” but those do require a bit of advance planning. And clearly it’s not an either-or situation with Dempsey: he follows that second paragraph with “Now, of course there are also books that I do want to own.” But in other cases, well:

I have owned a Kindle for a little while now. If I want to buy the experience but not the object, then it is a Kindle purchase.

If it’s actually the same experience for your current purposes (probably true for mystery novels; possibly less true for certain design-rich books, but those are a minority), then it’s hard to fault that. He continues with an interesting discussion: He likes being able to highlight passages on the Kindle and retrieve them later—and would like to see a hybrid of some sort: that is, a discounted combination of print and ebook for those who want both. Referring to one book he purchased in print form:

There appears to be no discount for the customer who would like to buy both Kindle and one of the two paper versions. Now, I am unlikely to want to do this for very many books but there are cases where it would be a worthwhile option. I assume we will see it offered more widely in due course.

ALA Editions does this already, and I believe some other publishers are doing so—but Amazon doesn’t make it easy (or possible?).

I see what Dempsey’s saying about cases where you want the reading experience and have no interest in keeping the book—and I’m inclined to believe

that, where traveling is concerned, today’s ebooks and ereaders may already be superior to *some* print alternatives. I do most of my “experience only” reading from hardback print books, borrowed from the library. Dropping back to a mass-market paperback, usually with smaller print, crowded margins, inferior paper and the whole shebang, is an inferior experience, and those library books are a bit heavy if you’re traveling and reading a lot. Either a dedicated ereader or a good multipurpose device (e.g., a netbook or pad) might be a better solution—if you have the need.

Ebooks/Ereaders Stink!

That heading’s also an overstatement, but the items noted here are negative about ebooks, ereaders or both—or commentaries *about* negative items. (In one case, at least, the writer’s more positive about The Digital Future than I’d expect—but notes that people aren’t there yet.)

Nicholson Baker vs./on the Kindle

Two responses to Nicholson Baker’s “[A New Page](#)” in the *New Yorker*, which I discussed in the [May 2011 Cites & Insights](#). The first (“vs.”) is by Harry McCracken and [appeared July 27, 2009](#) on *Technologizer*. The second (“on”) is by Marcus Banks and [appeared July 30, 2009](#) on *Marcus’ World*.

McCracken’s more sympathetic to Baker’s takedown of the Kindle than I’d expect: “Even if you find much more value in the Kindle than Baker does, as I do, you may find yourself nodding as he makes the case for print and ticks off all of the Kindle’s downsides.” But McCracken’s one of those who don’t buy the “reads like real paper” claim for E-Ink screens.

Like me, Baker isn’t so sure that the conventional wisdom that an LCD screen such as that on the iPhone is harder on the eyeballs than E Ink is true. Actually, he’s pleased with the iPod/iPhone Touch version of Kindle as a way to quickly dip into a snippet of a book.

So am I—enough so that I’m flirting with the idea of selling my Kindle 2, since I do most of my Kindle reading on the go on my iPhone these days. I’ll let you know if end up parting with it.

Really? The *iPhone* as a superior alternative to the Kindle? I guess...

Banks came to Baker’s piece “with some healthy skepticism” given *Double Fold*, figuring Baker would just bash the Kindle. “But that’s not the case. He actually is hard on the Kindle, but after giving it a very thorough evaluation and doing lots of research.” Banks

usefully highlights the closed-system issue and the terms-of-service problem with library use of Kindles.

Banks runs in literary circles and finds in some of them “an unseemly fetish for paper.” He says, “Good writing is good writing, whatever the mode of delivery.” I agree.

That said...print culture has evolved in exquisite ways since the invention of the printing press, and it will take a long time for our comparative clunky digital media to catch up. But today it's easy to forget that standards for publishing books took a long time to mature post-Gutenberg. And anyway, I bet the scroll makers were plenty peeved when Gutenberg impetuously unleashed the printing press on Europe....

[W]hile it's bracing to worry about the death of the printed book, I just don't see it happening. The new often learns to coexist with the old. But in the meantime I hope the Kindle evolves into something that is less censorship-prone and more flexible. I'll probably keep on hoping.

I've skipped a useful paragraph because you should really read the post. I'm not disagreeing with much of anything here (big surprise!).

Why I'll Never Buy a Kindle

I disagree with the tease line for [this November 17, 2009 AlterNet](#) item by Benjamin Dangl—“Fancy new book readers save lots of trees, yes, but I'll pass.” The ecological issue is not settled and it seems pretty clear that borrowing from public libraries is the *most* ecologically sound way to read (just as bookstore return policies, especially for mass-market paperbacks represent the *least* ecologically-sound aspect of books). But that's not the point of the piece.

Dangl is a booksmeller of sorts, riffing on Baker's comment about Kindle books being smoke-free:

[A] lot of book-readers, myself included, enjoy the smell and palpable history of a book from a library or used bookstore. There is something comforting about the shared experience of reading a physical book many others have read, and will read in the future. I like the story of a used book – a folded page, the markings on the margins, the hints at its past. Sure, sometimes they smell like cigarette smoke, but they can also smell like the places they've been, whether it's a dusty old used bookstore or the tropical funk of Asunción, Paraguay. You can't share a Kindle book and so history doesn't cling to it the same way.

Dangl also mentions “leftovers”—things left in books by earlier readers. Frankly, I'll pass. Indeed,

I'll pass on much of this piece, and I'm a little wary of this conclusion:

With a Kindle on the other hand, you know where it will end up – with the rest of the toxic trash heaps that our newest technical gadgets are eventually destined for. Baker of the [New Yorker](#) writes that the Kindle is “made of exotic materials that are shipped all over the world's oceans; yes, it requires electricity to operate and air-conditioned server farms to feed it; yes, it's fragile and it duplicates what other machines do; yes, it's difficult to recycle; yes, it will probably take a last boat ride to a Nigerian landfill in five years.”

But equally wary of the next brief paragraph:

However, the Kindle does save trees, and in a country that trashes 83 million tons of paper annually, that's no small task.

What portion of that paper is books? I'm guessing a fairly small one. Then we get an odd quote from *Mother Jones*, in which a writer chooses to estimate San Francisco Public Library book circulation by doing a thought experiment instead of, oh, *looking it up*. (California public library statistics are readily available, *in spreadsheet form*, on the web.) The writer's guesstimate comes out to about 4.5 million book circulations in 2008. The actual statistics show about 10 million circulations in 2009—and if 60% of those are books, that's a considerably larger figure. The point's well taken, however: shared books save trees and carbon. But Dangl seems to assume public libraries are shutting down like crazy.

All in all, an odd piece. I should be more sympathetic than I am. Unclear whether there weren't any comments or whether they became invisible after discussion closed.

Why I Hate Ereaders, And Doubt They'll Ever Hit the Mainstream

There's a nuanced title—on [a December 10, 2009 piece](#) by Kat Hannaford at *Gizmodo*. After a slap at Sony, Hannaford gives us this “historical” gem:

Books, in the paper and ink form, have been around for over a thousand years. You can bet your prized copy of *Cloud Computing For Dummies* that when the first book, the Diamond Sutra, was finished, those still chipping their chisels into stone, or carving papyrus downed their tools and said something along the lines of “thank the lord, reading's become even easier now!” It was a much-needed change, unlike the electronic books manufacturers like Sony and Amazon have been trying to flog.

That's right: Print books were immediately praised by all concerned as great advances over earlier forms. *Not*. In what I think may be *Gizmodo's* signa-

ture style, Hannaford claims that Sony's Librie was the first ereader to come into "prominence, much like a curried egg sandwich on a humid day. In a rainforest. In Indonesia." Huh? Let's set aside historical ignorance—the Librie was far from the first heavily-promoted ereader, and Sony certainly didn't invent dedicated ereaders. She goes on:

A handful of people since then have invested the amount they could've spent on a couple of phones on one of these devices, but that's not the last time they've had to dig deep in their pockets, ignoring the loose change they'd normally spend on a paperback, searching instead for their credit card or Amazon gift vouchers.

By December 2009, there were a damn sight more than a "handful" of people who'd purchased ereaders. But never mind. Hannaford also tells us ereaders "are so physically large you also need to invest in a manbag just to avoid being mugged" and then gives us the reason you never see people using ereaders on public transport (which *might* have been true in December 2009):

They're impractical and expensive. It's such a Sony trait, to reinvent the wheel when the current model is still going 'round perfectly. While Blu-ray may've eclipsed the deceased HD DVD (RIP), barely anyone uses an SACD player anymore... Even less people than that still use Betamax and MiniDisc. They, like the ereader, are futile exercises in trying to create a market for something that has little demand.

That's the crux of my argument. Any company that attempts to own market share in that area is fighting a losing battle. Consumers won't buy an electronic book when they can get a paperback for the same price or even less, and when they can lend it to friends, read it in the bathtub or even sell it on and make a percentage of their money back.

Our grandchildren won't be housing first edition ebook copies of *War and Peace* in an antiquated Kindle, passed down from generation to generation. There's no opportunity to get sentimental over an ebook, and when it comes to works of fiction and non, which have had thousands of man-hours injected into them, surely that's the reason people read them? To escape for a few hours turning some pages, and then eventually handing it to a friend with a glowing recommendation to read it from cover to cover?

It appears Hannaford has a real hatred for Sony, so much so that she lumps the Betamax (which appeared before VHS but was outmarketed) in with the MiniDisc (which was hit so hard by Big Media litigation it had little chance to succeed)—and, of

course, ignores such disastrous failures as Trinitron TV and CDs themselves.

Apparently, she's not down on ebooks, just dedicated readers. In any case, she's confident that ereaders will be a "short-lived industry." Of course, by discussing this piece at all, I'm taking *Gizmodo* seriously, which may be a fundamental mistake. Certainly the commenters don't make that mistake: Every single one of the comments I read was "discussing" manbags, purses or the like. *Not one* comment had anything to do with the rest of the article.

Are people really ready for Books? My attempt to give away 100 of them

We skip over 2010 to Brian Mathews' [January 18, 2011 post](#) at *The Ubiquitous Librarian*. Mathews' campus (UC Santa Barbara) does a "one book" program every year:

We purchase a ton of print copies, host a variety events, activities, and exhibits, and bring in the author for a public lecture. We also work with our local public library system and schools (including high schools) to push a common reading experience and dialogue around a thought-provoking interdisciplinary topic.

The 2011 book is *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, and the library gave away more than 2,000 print copies to kick things off.

In less than 3 hours we gave away 1,700 books. Before we started there were several hundred students (and some faculty) waiting in line. This is the fifth year of the program and it is great to see people get excited about receiving a book. I've enjoyed walking around campus and seeing those bright orange book covers everywhere I look.

But Mathews wanted to try something new: The library also offered 100 ebook versions. It took some doing—Random House suggested he talk with Amazon, and "the Amazon fortress is kind of hard to break," but eventually he got an agreement to push out copies. With a minimum deal of 100 copies. At full price (\$9.99), with no quantity discount. To make it happen, he needed to send Amazon a spreadsheet with readers' email addresses and either Amazon accounts or Kindle serial numbers. Which admittedly seems like a lot of extra work in order to *pay full price for a hundred ebooks*.

But he was willing to try.

We received some decent press and promotion, and many of the academic departments blasted out emails to their students. Our planning committee was a little worried that we would not reach 100 interested individuals, but that wasn't a problem. Over

the span of five weeks we had 165 people submit their info for our drawing: 18 faculty members, 33 campus staff, and the rest were students.

Of the 165 people, 22 of them were incomplete entries. I put those aside and then randomly selected 100 from the pool to send to Amazon.

Of the 100 winners, Amazon found that 35 of them were invalid. Many of them were “deregistered.” Long story short—I emailed the 35 invalid accounts and shared the info that Amazon provided. I gave them a deadline of two days to fix their account. 17 of them did. The remaining 18 copies were given to others who were not the initial winners. This was a bit of effort, especially with people emailing and asking when their book would arrive or what was wrong with their account.

In other words, your chances of “winning” if you had a complete and active entry were awfully good—only 25 people (at most) didn’t win.

Mathews adds some advice for Amazon before returning to the ebooks themselves.

We promoted the eBook copies fairly heavily and while I am happy that we were able to reach the 100 marker, I was surprised at how difficult it was to sign people up to take a free digital version of the book. With a campus of 18,000 students, 800 faculty, and 1,000+ staff I thought there would be greater demand than 165 people.

One thing I noticed via the demographics was that about one third of the student respondents were from engineering or computer science. I didn’t expect this, however, it doesn’t surprise me. Perhaps this indicates the population that is quickly embracing digital books?

The other aspect that stood out was the wide variety of devices entered into the drawing. There were about 30 Kindles in the bunch, but the rest were spread across other platforms (iPads, Androids, laptops, etc). Undoubtedly, many students are interested in receiving books on their phones.

Mathews quotes from feedback from a dyslexic student who uses audiobooks for all reading and who says, “there is still something magical about actual books that seems to be missing from eBooks.” Mathews *does* say “It’s inevitable that eBooks are going to be the primary format for general collections in the future” (which surprises me, coming from Mathews) and goes on:

What strikes me about this patron’s comments (a young Gen Y-er) is the affinity to print despite her reliance on digital editions. I feel like a big part of my role over the next 30 years of library leadership is going to be directed toward helping this transition oc-

cur—providing patrons with experiences and opportunities to make the leap from the page to the device. But if I’m being honest then I have to admit that I feel like I am betraying them somehow—I’m definitely not in the “print is dead” camp, but if I’m going to buy into the “Education for the 21st Century” and the goal of “preparing students to compete in the global economy” than this is important. It is ~~my~~ our responsibly to ensure that they gain exposure and experience with digital content in all it’s various forms, including the long form (books).

Mathews says again in the next paragraph “the future is digital”—apparently *only* digital. Why? Because it is, I guess. It bothers me that Mathews feels it’s his responsibility to “give the impression to our campus community that the library endorses eBooks and that this is something they should explore as well.” The reader’s preferred format is irrelevant? In comments, he refers to *the transition* away from print (it’s inevitable, y’know) and says his experiment was about generating interest in reading. But it wasn’t: It was about *pushing ebooks*.

The Dangers of E-books

That’s by Richard Stallman, [a single-page PDF](#) dated 2011. Stallman has a distinctive viewpoint. Go read the whole thing (it’s short), considering his points if perhaps not agreeing with his solutions. I certainly don’t.

Quality not Quantity

This short piece, by Brian at *Survival of the Book* on June 26, 2011, probably doesn’t belong in this section any more than Mathews’ piece does. He quotes and endorses a comment [from Don Linn](#):

We are, at bottom, a creative business. We are fighting for share of mind against hundreds of alternatives and if we do not put our best foot forward with regard to the titles we acquire, the care we give to the editorial process, and to the production quality of both our print and digital books, we won’t (and don’t deserve to) survive and prosper. When I see a poorly conceived, apparently unedited or copy-edited, badly designed book, that is produced (whether in hardcover, paperback or in a digital edition) in what is obviously the cheapest possible way, I fear for our future. Resources are limited, but if we can’t produce consistent quality, then let’s reduce quantities until we can. Nobody wants to buy a bad product.

That speaks, directly or indirectly, to part of my desired future for books, publishing and readers. It’s my distinct impression that much of Big Publishing is *not* a creative process and has gone for quantity at

the expense of quality, with poor editing and inadequate design. It doesn't have to be that way.

Getting back to ebooks, Brian recounts two recent anecdotes about ebooks:

First, someone told me that he travels a lot for work and relies on the iBooks app on his iPad to read digital books. But he has started buying "hard copies," as he said, as well, because often the plane pulls out from the gate but then taxis, and while everyone with "hard copies" is reading away, he can't read his e-book because passengers have been told to turn off mobile devices. Second, a coworker (though someone not in publishing) admitted that she followed my advice and read Jennifer Egan's fantastic book, the Pulitzer Prize-winning [A Visit from the Goon Squad](#) - but on her Kindle. Well there is a whole chapter done in Powerpoint, and it's a surprisingly touching and sweet chapter, and it simply did not work on the Kindle. This person feebly claimed, "I got the gist," but she clearly didn't. Such a shame. A whole chapter lost? That is just the kind of "bad product" Linn references above.

Take it for what it's worth.

Print Books Are or Should Be Doomed!

Let's continue with wildly oversimplified section headings, this time for the flipside—articles about why print books *should* die or *will* die.

By any other name

This essay by Mandy Brown [appeared on January 12, 2009](#) on *A working library*. The full title of the blog: "A working library is an exploration of—and advocate for—the reading experience." Which makes this particular post all the more interesting.

After a brief scroll-to-book intro, Brown says:

The book is an object of technological invention that has functioned with only minimal advancement for centuries. Until recently, there was nothing broken, and therefore nothing to fix.

That age has ended. We are now ushering in a new age of books which exist without any physical presence at all, which can be transmitted across oceans in moments, in which annotations and criticisms can be shared in ways no one of the seventeenth century could ever have imagined. (Indeed, ways we of the twenty-first century are only beginning to understand.)

So the age in which books worked just fine *has ended*? Why? Unless fast transmission is a critical difference for a book-length text, I guess we must take it on faith. Brown's point, as far as I can tell, is that ebooks shouldn't be called books, even with "a sly

vowel up front...as if we're afraid to really admit how much has changed."

Dramatic changes in form require equally dramatic changes in terms.

The rose can go by any other name because the rose is unchanging; the book is not so constant. The ebook is an experiment, a study of possibilities, an idea in search of a name. We will know we have arrived at a new form when we learn what to call it.

Maybe. Somehow, I can't get past the simple *supposition* that print books are suddenly broken. There's not a thing in the essay that justifies that supposition. So it goes.

Farewell to the Printed Monograph

This [March 25, 2009 post](#) by Rhonda Gonzales on *@ the Library* is commentary on a [March 23, 2009 "News" item](#) of the same name at *Inside Higher Ed*. That item discusses the decision of the University of Michigan Press to make most of the monographs the press publishes digital-first. It's an interesting news piece on what I consider an interesting—and not at all negative—situation. That is: It's simply not feasible to produce traditional press runs for most niche scholarly monographs (e.g., 50 of the 60 monographs Michigan publishes each year). The new Michigan process *will* provide for printed monographs—but using print-on-demand technology, which is almost certainly the appropriate technique for any monograph likely to sell fewer than 1,000 copies. In other words, Michigan is being sensible: Preparing high-quality digital editions for books that simply don't have the sales volume to support traditional print technology. The results should be reasonably priced print volumes for libraries and scholars that need or want them. Everybody wins. (The shift also makes the UM Press part of the libraries, which also seems sensible.) On the other hand, it appears that Michigan wants to use site licenses for *all* of the digital monographs—and that may be an issue.

Not surprisingly, one comment goes much further—"The future of publishing is electronic" and the digital versions should have hypertext and rapid updating. At the same time, "Joe Editor" takes a distinctly dim view of the whole idea...and a copy editor slams this idea because it will lead to more undergrad plagiarism.

Rhonda Gonzales read the item "with a fair bit of sadness. And a little skepticism."

1. I haven't met anyone yet who actually prefers to read an entire monograph on a computer screen,

Kindles notwithstanding. Sure, there are good reasons why a Kindle or other similar device is useful; like when traveling or reading in bed at night. And yes, electronic texts are useful for adaptive technology and also for full-text searching. But for regular cover-to-cover reading of a monograph, given the choice, most of our patrons have indicated they still prefer print.

2. I am concerned about the price ramifications of this announcement. Especially the following excerpt: “In terms of pricing, Sullivan said that Michigan planned to develop site licenses so that libraries could gain access to all of the university press books over the course of a year for a flat rate. While details aren’t firm, the idea is to be “so reasonable that maybe every public library could acquire it.”

There’s more, mostly having to do with her experiences as head of a smaller academic library. All of it’s worth reading—but it appears to ignore the print-on-demand option.

When will the print book disappear?

[That question](#) comes from Robert Slater, *The Overly Caffeinated Librarian*, posting on November 6, 2009. He’s been “itching to try out an e-paper device” since he first read about them in 2001—and yet, eight years later, he hasn’t sprung for one.

Lately, I’ve heard a lot of talk about the Kindle being the harbinger of the end for print books, and wanted to toss in my two cents. I like the idea of e-paper in particular, the main selling point of the Kindle and similar third (or fourth depending on who you ask) generation e-readers over other portable devices like netbooks. However, the idea of a dedicated device for reading books just doesn’t do it for me (other than a good old-fashioned print book, of course – since that’s a single use device too... :).

Slater does seem to subscribe to the “tipping point” theory—that there’s a point at which ebooks will become the norm—but thinks it’s years and possibly dozens of years away. He faults the single-purpose ereader as part of that issue: He doesn’t really want a single-purpose device.

What we lack (we being the players in the book industry, from publishers to distributors, including libraries) is that truly magical multi-purpose ubiquitous device that will finally launch the e-book to the place of prominence we all know it will eventually achieve.

“We all know”? Once again, the Oscar Brown, Jr. classic “The Lone Ranger and Tonto” comes to mind, but the key line could be misconstrued as racist, so I won’t quote it. But Slater’s certain not only that we’ll get there but that *we’re all waiting for it*:

E-paper is great for static text (and low power consumption), but (right now) terrible for general purpose use as a laptop/cell phone screen (grayscale only right now, with a ridiculously limited number of shades of grey, and absolutely atrocious screen refresh rates, compared to other display technologies). Once there’s a way to do both – display static text in a way that’s pleasant for extended reading (and consumes very little power) as well as to display full color dynamic content (possibly even including two display types on a single device) at a reasonable price point, **I think we’ll see the sudden and massive shift to e-consumption that we’ve all been waiting for.** But even then, I think there’ll be a fairly long, slow dwindling of print books, with them still representing a fairly significant chunk of publications/sales for several decades to come (at least as significant as the current <2% of sales that e-books make up of the entire book market). [Emphasis added.]

Some of us are neither waiting for, nor desire, nor even *expect* a “sudden and massive shift to e-consumption.”

A Book Is Not an Object

Here’s a curious, relatively brief, post—by Steven Harris [on November 22, 2009](#) at *Collections 2.0*. Curious for several reasons. He quotes Cory Doctorow approvingly on not getting hung up on the notion of the book as object and, I suspect, correctly questions some writers who seem to confuse the whole publishing structure with print books. But:

In fact, I think the greatest objection to ebooks as we see them now is their potential impact on the economic aspects of publishing. Many factors contribute to the fear of ebooks within the publishing market. Amazon subsidizes the cost of ebooks by underselling the competition, which diminishes the profits that publishers and writers might realize. Digital content is easily copied and transmitted across the Internet, making publishers fear an age of piracy like that experienced in the music industry. And Google is digitizing “all the world’s knowledge,” and seemingly cutting authors and publishers out of the action. None of those activities, however, are intrinsic to the nature of ebooks. Those who fear and castigate the ebook as object have aimed their emotion in the wrong direction.

I don’t see those connections, particularly where Google’s project is concerned, and I don’t think they have much to do with dislike of ebooks (“fear” of ebooks?). I have to note two things: Sometimes a book is also an object—and typographic designers and layout artists have good reason to fear ebooks, given that most ebook standards seem to strip away their efforts. And:

...Our current online technology has already demonstrated its ability to empower many more people to speak, write, and perform. Some from this expanded speaker-base will make a good living at their craft. Most won't. Some will exert real cultural impact and influence. Most won't. If this networked and digital commerce has the effect of diminishing the profits of a few blockbusters, I won't really feel that bad. There will still be lots of people around who want to tell stories and create art, even if it is in the form of an ebook.

I don't think this has much to do with ebooks vs. print books either. The creation of print books has been democratized as thoroughly as the creation of ebooks. (Maybe more so. I can turn a Word document into a handsome print book easily; so far, I can't create standard ebook formats as easily.) And, well, I'm another who "won't really feel that bad" if blockbuster profits are diminished. I just don't see much connection between that discussion (with which I agree) and ebooks as objectless content.

Former Book Designer Says Good Riddance to Print

Here's another case where I discussed [the original article](#) (by Craig Mod) in the May 2011 issue—and didn't buy what he was selling. This citation is for [a laudatory discussion](#) of Mod's piece by Nick Bilton, on March 5, 2010 on *Bits* (a *New York Times* blog).

Mod may be a book designer and publisher—but he's also a programmer. And there's some reason to believe that Mod doesn't care much about actual reading. He doesn't think reading requires or benefits from physicality—and he's not fond of physical metaphors within ereaders. It's pretty clear that Bilton is all for this, as he closes his brief comment:

For hundreds of years, we've been consuming information on static pages, and for the most part, this content has been presented with a beginning, middle and end. Nonlinear, digital platforms will prompt a new range of thinking about stories and how to tell them.

Guess what? Stories had beginnings, middles and ends long before there were books; a story that doesn't have that structure is (in my opinion) not a story, but something else. Exploration? Maybe—and the enormous success of more than a decade of hyperlinked "novels" may say something about exploration as a mode of telling or reading stories.

In this case, I find the comments—*lots* of them—far more interesting than the post. I won't attempt to go through them all, but there's one paragraph—from a Kindle owner (who lives it) who's also a big physical book reader and buyer—that I think is worth quoting:

What all this boils down to is that in the view of the technorati NEW always has to replace OLD, instead of simply complementing it. Why is that?

Shelf Life

This odd little blog post, by Virginia Heffernan [on March 4, 2010](#) at *The New York Times Magazine's* "The Medium," is mostly an attack on booksmellers—and, more generally, on print books as anything other than carriers of text. Frankly, I don't find Heffernan's writing coherent enough for me to be sure what she's trying to say. The first paragraph *seems* to be a heartfelt endorsement of the lack of context of a Kindle:

People who reject e-books often say they can't live without the heft, the texture and — curiously — the scent of traditional books. This aria of hypersensual book love is not my favorite performance. I sometimes suspect that those who gush about book odor might not like to read. If they did, why would they waste so much time inhaling? Among the best features of the [Kindle](#), Amazon's great e-reader, is that there's none of that. The device, which consigns all poetry and prose to the same homely fog-toned screen, leaves nothing to the experience of books but reading. This strikes me as honest, even revolutionary.

This—that paragraph—strikes me as fourth-rate snark, even though I'm not much for booksmelling myself. The rest of the piece? She trivializes an apparently well-known essay about book *collecting*—which is a different pastime than reading—by saying "we're not talking Hello Kitty here." Huh? Her response to Walter Benjamin's honest assertion that collectors buy books, in some cases, *because* of their physicality and provenance is—well, frankly, incoherent. Maybe she's saying it's hard to treat ebooks as collectibles. Damned if I know.

The comments—22 of them—include a number that are much better written and more coherent than the piece itself. Were it not for the comments, which I commend to your attention (some pro-print, some pro-ebook, some more complex), I might ignore this sad little column entirely.

The End of Books? (For Me, At Least?)

Will Richardson [posted this on April 24, 2010](#) at *weblogg-ed*. The title itself puts the post firmly in this subcategory—Richardson seems only too happy to swear off print books, even as he says "Life feels better when I'm surrounded by books" and loves that his kids love books.

But he put the Kindle app on his iPhone and "was surprised in that the experience actually wasn't as bad as I thought it would be." Then he started

downloading books to his “shiny new iPad” and learned about a function in the Kindle app that “syncs up all of my highlights and notes to my Amazon account.” And concluded:

Game. Changer.

All of a sudden, by reading the book electronically as opposed to in print, I now have:

- all of the most relevant, thought-provoking passages from the book listed on one web page, as in my own condensed version of just the best pieces
- all of my notes and reflections attached to those individual notes
- the ability to copy and paste all of those notes and highlights into Evernote which makes them searchable, editable, organizable, connectable and remixable
- the ability to access my book notes and highlights from anywhere I have an Internet connection.

Game. Changer.

There’s more to it, and a fair number of comments. I won’t argue the points—for Richardson and for his form of reading (all books?). When I’m reading, especially fiction, I’m not annotating or highlighting; I’m engrossed in the story. The last thing I’d want is a permanent page of book notes and highlights on books I’ve read for pleasure. But that’s me.

How many people read *all* books in this highlighting-and-annotating mode? I wonder. Richardson thinks about pushing his kids in that direction; is that really the way people *should* read books? I don’t have an answer.

Print Books Are Great!

Another oversimplified heading, this time for items that appear to focus *primarily* on the superiority of print books. (Trust me: We’ll get to the section comparing and contrasting ebooks and print books real soon now.)

Designing Design

This is a book review, posted by Andy Polaine [on March 15, 2009](#) at *The Designer’s Review of Books*. The book reviewed is *Designing Design* by Kenya Hara. The book isn’t primarily about books; it’s about design in general. I note it here because of these two paragraphs:

“If putting as many words as come into your head in some place that’s convenient and easy to access is your goal, you can house them on the web or on something like CD. But here I’ve chosen the medium called a book. That’s because I want to hand it to people as an object with a resistant weight.”

“If electronic media is reckoned a practical tool for information conveyance, books are information sculpture; from now on, books will probably be judged according to how well they awaken this materiality, because the decision to create a book at all will be based on a definite choice of paper as the medium.”

While I believe print books will continue to be widely published and used as text carriers because they work so well in that regard, I think that quotation is also apt for some subset of books—a subset that, while small, will continue to be important.

2010—the year of e-readers (or why print media is here to stay)

Andrew Finegan offered this perspective [on January 8, 2010](#) at *Librarian Idol*. He links to other essays, then “digresses”:

I want to briefly discuss what seems to be a false dichotomy between bibliophiles and tech-lovers.

From these articles, and many others, there is a very conscious sense that this year is going to be a big year for e-readers...

And here’s the thing. I absolutely love the fact that if I want to, I will be able to download a new release book into my device, and have that immediate satisfaction of being able to start reading it in a lightweight device. I could happily lie in bed and read a book on an e-reader, the same way that I read a book. After all, I do most of my recreational online reading that way.

But here’s the catch. I like to own my favourite books, and have them on a shelf for my own re-reading purposes. But moreso, my personal shelf collection is a part of my life. Whenever I need inspiration, cheering up, profound reflection on life, or the beauty of poetry, I can go straight up, gaze over the titles, pick one out, and flick through them. My collection is part of my personality, and the visual stimulus of physical books on a shelf is a necessary part of my natural habitat. It’s my home.

Furthermore, I like to share. If somebody comes over to my house, and expresses an interest in one of my books, I’ll take it off, and thrust it upon them, saying “Here! Read it, and then come back and tell me what you thought about it.” For me, the mutual love, or hatred, or impassioned disagreement over books are what defines much of my relationship with people.

And, of course, this is all legal, because I paid to own the book. I can read it, and then give it to a friend to read, and so on. In the same way, libraries pay for books, so that they can be shared with a vast amount of the community. And then, once they start falling apart, or are no longer en vogue, then can be sold off in a second-hand book sale, and somebody can have the pleasure of owning a book

that has been physically enjoyed by countless of other people in the community...

When you download an e-book, you don't own it. You own a licence to read it, in the same way that you would own a licence to use a piece of computer software. But you may not share it. Unless, of course, you physically give your e-reader to a friend to borrow, so that they can read it that way. You don't own the book - you own the right to view the contents of the book on your device, but that's all.

And it's in this respect, that I honestly do not believe that the e-reader will "replace" the book, any more than pay-per-view film has replaced DVDs. I use iView (for example) to watch TV and films from ABC, but I also buy films and TV shows on DVD that I can share with other people...

And, again, I will doubtlessly have my own portable e-reader in tow, as a solitary reading device. But I will never underestimate the power of the physical book in building communities, friendships, and fostering a love of literature and culture in the world.

I've omitted portions of this post to encourage you to read the original. I don't have much to add.

HP, UMich deal means a "real" future for scanned books.

Here we are back to the University of Michigan—but this time it's the library directly and an interesting arrangement with HP as reported in this piece, written by Jon Stokes and appearing "[about a year ago](#)" (October 2009 based on the URL) in *ars technica*.

The arrangement? Michigan is scanning rare books. Then:

HP's BookPrep service, currently in beta, will take in raw scans of books, clean them up to prepare them for re-printing, and then offer print-on-demand copies for sale via normal online book distribution channels like Amazon. This new arrangement mixes a number of aspects of existing efforts like Google Books and current print-on-demand (PoD) offerings, while being a little different from either, and in the process it points the way to a real future for the digital contents of libraries' special collections.

Michigan will provide the books for free online (to the extent that they can legally do so, which will be the case for rare books dated earlier than 1923 and many dated later). Those wanting print copies can buy them, presumably at plausible prices. It's a good use of print-on-demand technology and seems likely to keep print books relevant in a number of ways.

"People around the world still value reading books in print," said Andrew Bolwell, HP's director of New Business Initiatives, in a press release. HP clearly

hopes that this statement will continue to hold true for some time to come.

As the article notes, lots of institutions have been and are scanning special collections, so this could be the first of many similar deals.

Hopefully, HP will announce more such deals in the near future, because there are plenty more institutions that would love to take the terabytes of raw, high-resolution scans that are sitting on dusty hard drives and make them available to the viewing public.

This time there are a handful of comments, some of them useful.

Why e-books will never replace real books

Jan Swafford's piece, [posted June 29, 2010](#) at *Slate*, carries the title "Bold Prediction" on the article itself and the title above as its web page title and tease—one of *Slate's* charming/infuriating practices. It's a claim I'd be reluctant to make for two reasons:

- "Never" is a very long time.
- "Real books" implies something about ebooks that I don't believe—that is, that they're *not* real books.

That is what Swafford's saying, as emphasized by the first paragraph:

Because we perceive print and electronic media differently. Because Marshall McLuhan was right about some things.

We then get a discussion of McLuhan—what he said, how things have worked out, his hot/cool medium dichotomy, and of course his seeming claim that context (the medium) counts for more than content (the message).

McLuhan didn't think content was unimportant, but he believed the delivering technology is what ultimately involves and evolves us. "The 'message' of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs." TV changed the world, in ways good and bad. And a computer screen is essentially a TV. Have you noticed the blank absorption on the faces of people watching TV (except, of course, for sports and politics)? It's much the same as people watching a computer screen.

Pardon me while I scream a little. The suggestion that using a computer is "watching a screen" with a look of "blank absorption..." Not happening for me. (Swafford also claims that HDTV is *still* a cool, that is, low-information, medium as compared to movies. I find that claim bizarre.)

Now Swafford discusses the process that "most writers" follow:

Here's how it works, with me and with most writers I know (because I've asked). I've used computers for more than 25 years. I draft prose on-screen, work it over until I can't find much wrong with it, then double-space it and print it out. At that point I discover what's really there, which is ordinarily hazy, bloated, and boring. It looked pretty good on-screen, but it's crap. My first drafts on paper, after what amount to several drafts on computer, look like a battlefield. Here, for example, is a photo of the initial first page printout of this article.

Double-space it? Really? I cheerfully admit that I'm not a Great Writer, but I also claim that what I produce on-screen isn't crap. I do go through one print review stage (for books, columns and *C&I* essays—not for blog posts) but rarely see the kind of “battlefield” revisions Swafford seems to do. I dunno; maybe I'm just a hack.

I've taught college writing classes for a long time, and after computers came in, I began to see peculiar stuff on papers that I hadn't seen before: obvious missing commas and apostrophes, when I was sure most of those students knew better. It dawned on me that they were doing all their work on-screen, where it's hard to see punctuation. I began to lecture them about proofing on paper, although, at first, I didn't make much headway. They were unused to dealing with paper until the final draft, and they'd been taught never to make hand corrections on the printout. They edited on-screen and handed in the hard copy without a glance.

Maybe. I'm fairly certain that people do more revisions on the screen than they did in the days of handwritten drafts and typewriters. There's another paragraph about students' inability to edit properly on-screen. Of course, it cuts both ways:

For years, after I got a computer I held onto my romantic attachment to writing first drafts by hand on long legal sheets. Then halfway through a book-for-hire I got in deadline trouble and for the sake of time had to start drafting on computer. I discovered, to my chagrin, that drafting first on computer tended to come out better than by hand. Computer drafts were cleaner and crisper. But, after that, I also discovered, paper rules. The final polish, the nuances, the pithy phrases, the tightening of clarity and logic—those mostly come from revising on paper.

Hmm. Oddly enough, I find myself arguing with some of the punctuation and writing in that paragraph, edited in paper form by someone who teaches writing. Has my mind been ruined by writing on a computer? Perhaps.

Anyway, the piece continues by lauding ebooks for certain uses and includes a paragraph that's both true and by now sort of a cliché, forgiving “real books” as an unfortunate choice:

So real books and e-books will coexist. That has happened time and again with other new technologies that were prophesied to kill off old ones. Autos didn't wipe out horses. Movies didn't finish theater. TV didn't destroy movies. E-books won't destroy paper and ink. The Internet and e-books may set back print media for a while, and they may claim a larger audience in the end. But a lot of people who care about reading will want the feel, the smell, the warmth, the deeper intellectual, emotional, and spiritual involvement of print.

I think that's true (substituting “print books” for “real books”), although I have no idea whether ebooks will eventually “claim a larger audience” than print books. Why am I being critical of this article? Partly because I think it's important to address articles on “my side” at least as critically as I address those that regard ebooks as the only future.

An amusing sidenote, noted in a correction: This article, *proudly edited in print form because that's what writers do*, originally misspelled “Jane Austen.” How could that happen?

Lots'o'comments—145 in all. Some worthwhile (I didn't read the whole theme), some not so much, and of course a few “only technology matters” bits of nonsense.

Mashable Readers Choose Real Books Over E-books Here's another use of the unfortunate “real books” instead of print books, in [a July 24, 2010 piece](#) by Ben Parr at *Mashable*. That website runs a weekly “Web Faceoff” poll—and got the wording right in the poll itself: “Which do you prefer: e-books or print books?”

I'm going to quote portions of two central paragraphs. See if you can spot the problem:

We wanted to know whether you, the readers, prefer the digital technology of the e-book or still desire the feel of the paper in your hands. After over 2,000 votes...

...the printed word scored the victory! With 41.9% of the tallies (898 votes), the printed book was the clear favorite over the e-book's 23.24% of the ballot (498 votes). Interesting enough, a lot of you voted that you like both formats for reading your favorite novel; 34.86% of you (747 votes) said that it was a tie between the e-book and the print book.

Well, no: *Nobody* voted that they like both formats “for reading your favorite novel.” Roughly 35% of

the respondents chose “Tie: Both have their advantages.” That’s a clear statement and has nothing to do with novels.

I’m bemused by one comment claiming the poll is invalid *because* it allows people to say they like both ebooks and print books—it should force them to choose only one. Really? One post-poll comment seems to say the results must be really old, since once you’ve “experienced the iPad” there’s no going back. Since the poll was explicitly stated as “posted this week,” we have here anecdotal evidence that some people using iPads are unable to retain what they’ve read. That anecdotal evidence can safely be extrapolated to, well, one person.

I find this piece interesting because *Mashable* presumably has a tech-oriented audience. Otherwise, the results aren’t remarkable. Let’s restate them: 58% of respondents read or anticipate reading ebooks; 76% read print books. In some ways, that first number is more impressive.

iPad, Meet Your Nemesis

That’s the direct article title for [this October 7, 2010 piece](#) by Jim Lewis at *Slate*—but the subtitle and web page title is “Why art books won’t become ebooks any time soon.” It has an odd start, with Lewis proclaiming “it’s becoming increasingly clear that Kindles, iPads, and the like will soon be the dominant medium—if, indeed, [they aren’t already](#).” (The link is to *TechCrunch*’s version of the silly “tipping point” when Amazon reported ebooks outselling hardcover books.)

I’m not sure what causes Lewis to *assume* dominance, but since he’s a novelist and mostly just wants people to read, maybe that’s OK. This piece is about a different kind of book:

Unless you’re very dedicated, and very well-traveled, most of the art and photography you’ve seen has been on the printed page as well. Will these, too, gradually be replaced with e-books? I suspect not, and I certainly hope not, but to understand why, we need to indulge in a little metaphysics.

I could argue that Lewis is simplistic when he says, “A book—or, for clarity’s sake, let’s say a work of literature—is impervious to the constraints of its physical medium.” I don’t believe it’s that straightforward. But never mind. He’s saying that this is *not* true for paintings, photography and, to a lesser extent, movies and music. (Really? Recorded music is inherently affected by the medium? Not sure I buy that one—that my experience listening to a lossless WAV audio file on my computer, or for that matter a 320K MP3

for anything but orchestral music, is significantly different than my experience listening to a CD.)

He moves on to “arithmetic”—the resolution of various media. Technically, he’s wrong on at least one point:

Monitors, inkjet printers, and books all make images out of dots, in the first case of projected light, in the second and third of light reflected off of paper.

Letterpress books, at least, do *not* make images out of dots. But never mind... His comparisons of resolution are familiar. It’s true that movement toward 600 dpi, probably minimal for really good artistic reproduction of photographs and painting, is painfully slow (and, given consumer acceptance of 130-160 dpi as “good enough,” seems likely to remain slow). His point on how you see is also good—problems with color accuracy, the difference between projected and reflected light, etc. (That difference is one reason photos can look so remarkably vibrant on a big-screen TV or really good monitor: The resolution isn’t as good, but they gain from the same effect that makes stained glass windows so marvelous.)

The article’s worth reading, noting that it’s about a relatively small segment of the book market, namely art books and photography collections.

Comments are interesting, with one commenter persistently arguing the digital case, including comments on other people’s comments.

The Real Kindle-Killer

Let’s close this section with this piece by Richard Curtis, CEO of E-Reads (an ebook publisher), which [appeared May 21, 2011](#) on *e-reads*. It’s important to note that Curtis is both an ebook pioneer and makes his living publishing ebooks. I’m going to quote the fun part of the post, but it’s the serious part—longer and more involved—that I believe is truly important.

Here’s the fun part:

Behold, emerging from 500 years of beta testing, the real Kindle Killer. Like so many other reading devices it’s got a cutesy name. It’s called The Book.

Let’s review some of its features.

* It’s really sleek. At five inches by eight inches, the Greeks would have appreciated the perfection of its dimensions.

* It’s light. It weighs 15 ounces, placing it between the flimsy-feeling Kindle and the weighty iPad.

* It’s flexible: you can roll it up without damaging it.

* Its operating system is 50-pound paper stock bound on the left-hand seam.

* It has no battery that we're aware of, nor are we able to locate anything resembling a wireless antenna.

* Its graphic interface is ivory-white and its surface packs so many dots per inch that we are able to read eight- or even six-point text clearly in ambient light.

* There is no pixilation whatever.

* How about surface reflectivity? Unlike the Apple iPad, whose mirrorlike surface will blind you at the beach, the surface reflectivity of The Book is negligible.

* It's almost impossible to smudge. You can press your thumb onto the surface but you won't see a hint of fingerprint.

* You can drop the book on a concrete floor but when you pick it up it will still operate perfectly.

* Bookmarking is a cinch. You just insert a small card to mark your place, and when you're ready to resume reading you pick up where you left off without a moment's delay.

* Pagination? Instead of a progress bar, this gadget reckons your progress in consecutive numbers. Just like the Kindle.

* The Book smells great.

* It sound great, too. When you activate the page-turning feature (the technical term is "flipping the pages") you will hear a satisfying pffft. Just like the iPad.

There are admittedly a few design flaws. The Book is not backlit and requires supplemental lighting in a dim room. such as a light bulb. Another small problem is that it must be operated with two hands, one to support it and one to activate the page-turning mechanism. And dictionary and thesaurus lookup are a little clunky, requiring offsite reference texts.

But these are petty annoyances, especially when you hear the price. Fully loaded, how much would you expect to pay for this baby? Three hundred bucks? Five hundred? Would you believe \$14.95?

Is he kidding? Not really:

I may be a pioneer in the e-book business, but as far as I'm concerned the printed book remains the perfect reading device, and anyone who thinks it's nothing but a fifteenth century artifact is in for a big surprise.

But that's really not the interesting part of the post. That comes in a discussion of the book industry. You need to read that discussion—and maybe go back to my introductory essay. Curtis focuses on the biggest problem in print book publishing, particularly Big Media-style print book publishing:

About eighty years ago publishers and booksellers made a Devil's pact making unsold stock returnable for full credit. That worked for a few decades, but after World War II the rate of returns began to soar. Today it's not uncommon for 50% of any given print-

ing to be returned to the publisher, and the industry never solved the problem of what to with returns.

There's a lot more about how returnability has "poisoned the publishing industry." I don't believe his solution is a universal solution, but I believe it's a big part of the future: print on demand. As he notes, Lightning Source Inc. *alone* is producing some 10,000 books a day and growing at 20% to 30% a year—and it's not the only PoD operator.

Curtis anticipates a future with increased uses of in-store book machines like the Espresso Book Machine. I suspect that's right—and I suspect we really do need to reconsider returnability. I *don't* believe all books will or should be PoD; it doesn't work all that well for the highest-quality art books, and there *will* be books desired in large enough quantities for offset or letterpress to be cheaper. But his points, in general, are good ones. He closes:

Whether you're an adult or a child, you want to immerse yourself in a book. It's hard to immerse yourself in an e-book. It's the difference between reading a book and watching one. Have you watched a good book lately? Not the same thing!

There's no question that the e-book revolution has arrived and arrived with a vengeance. Thanks to the convenience and low prices, the print book industry has taken a big hit. But it's still a 24 billion dollar business, and e-book sales represent only nine percent of the total. There's plenty of fuel left in print, and once the new model of business takes hold, one based on preorder and prepayment, a day will come when you're as likely to see someone on a bus or train reading one of these devices called The Book as you are to see them reading a Nook or Kindle.

That \$24 billion figure may be a bit low (it sounds like AAP's old figure, not BISG's \$40 billion—but both AAP and BISG now seem to agree on roughly \$29 billion. Those are U.S. figures; the world book industry is, I believe, at least twice as large.) Still, I'm encouraged by this resounding endorsement of print books by somebody who's an ebook publisher.

Comments? Interesting, including—of course—one Digital Supremacist.

Compare and Contrast

Now we get to the core of this essay: Discussions that compare and contrast print books and ebooks. Yes, much of what's already appeared *could* and maybe should be lumped in to this middle-of-the-road group—but that would make it even bigger and less digestible than it already is. If these top-level headings confound more than they edify, well,

at least they split the material into more manageable chunks.

Will books survive? A scorecard...

This misnamed article by David Weinberger [appeared November 21, 2009](#) at *Everything is Miscellaneous* (where else?). Why misnamed? Because it's about print books, not books—and because it's not so much a scorecard as a slightly bizarre thought experiment. Namely: If, *for each and every aspect in which print books excel*, you posit that ebooks will be as good or better, then will people still buy print books?

It's not *quite* that much of a “let's line up a bunch of straw men and set them on fire”—he admits that it's going to be damnably difficult for ebooks to beat print books as æsthetic objects, sentimental objects, historic objects or “specialized” objects and he's uneasy about single-mindedness. Still, this does seem to be a comparison of the Platonic Ebook in its eventual perfection with plain old print books—a comparison that's tough for print books to win.

Making it tougher: He then lists at least one advantage of ebooks that some of us would say is not unique to them, namely social reading. Really? There are no book clubs? People never engage with other people who've read the same print book? You coulda' fooled me.

In the end, this is an unsatisfactory piece, one that seems determined to relegate print books to becoming a tiny set of sentimental relics. His closing questions are so clearly answered, at least if you buy into his essay, that I regard them as rhetorical.

Review: Those new-fangled paper books

This piece by John Goerzen [appeared December 28, 2009](#) on *The Changelog*. It starts right off with a slight overstatement: “Everyone seems to be familiar with ebooks these days.” Goerzen owns a Kindle 2 and obviously loves it—and defuses any potential anger about his silly essay by *saying* it's silly:

Before I begin, I feel it wise to offer this hint to the reader: this review should not be taken too literally. If you have an uncontrollable urge to heave a volume of the Oxford English Dictionary at me as if I am some European prime minister, please plant your tongue more firmly in your cheek and begin again.

I won't quote the whole thing; it's nicely written and worth reading. He's basically reviewing a “paper book” from the perspective of a devoted Kindle user. So, for example, he likes the “dashing use of color” on the cover of the book—but dislikes the inability to “scale the font size down from the default.”

He misses being able to look up an unfamiliar word—“My paper dictionary was in the basement, so I didn't bother looking it up...”—and, while noting the lack of interface malfunctions, finds “severe stability problems” when reading outdoors in the wind. For that matter, he thinks it would be impractical to put a paper book in a ziplock bag to read at the beach.

Paper does have its advantages. For one, it's faster to flip rapidly through pages on paper than on an ebook reader. If you know roughly where in the book something was written, but not the precise wording, searching can be faster on paper. On the other hand, if you are looking for a particular word or phrase, the ebook reader may win hands-down, especially if the paper book has no index.

(Perhaps I should note that several comments on Weinberger's “comparison” mentioned browsability as an advantage of print books.) He thinks print books will wear out faster than ebooks—“If my Kindle wears out, I can always restore David Copperfield from my backup copy to a new one.” As we all know, it's not *possible* for Amazon to go out of business—why, that would be as impossible as, say, Borders dissolving. Corporations never disappear.

There's more, and while it's partly silly it's also reasonably fair. I'm not fond of his library comparison (and he doesn't seem to really *care* that library books cost him nothing), but it's so clearly jesting that it's OK. He concludes:

All in all, I prefer reading books on my Kindle, but still read on paper when that's how I have a book.

A cute piece. The library paragraph is by far the weakest (including use of “DRM” for late fees, which is silly), but as an extended jest with a certain amount of truth, it's not bad.

Five lessons from my e-book experiment

Shane Richmond posted this [on January 26, 2010](#) at *The Telegraph*—and right away I'm reminded of one of my wife's big (and correct) complaints about some library websites. Namely, there's *nothing* on this page that tells us where *The Telegraph* is located, assuming it's a print publication at all. (Yes, there are library websites that don't mention the state, and if the city is, for example, Lincoln, that's a real issue.) As it happens, the URL gives it away, and it's of a piece with the old Library Association: It's from the UK, and since that's the Mother Country no identification is required. (The Library Association, since become CILIP, is younger than the American Library Association and much smaller—but

Dewey and his buddies didn't have the chutzpah to call their group *The Library Association*.)

Never mind. That's a digression. On the web there is no physical location, right?

Anyway: His experiment was to avoid print books entirely for three months (October-December 2009). He read nine books on a Sony Reader Pocket and one on a Kindle.

The result of the experiment? I'm back to reading books on paper. I'll explain why in a moment but here are five things I learned from my e-reading experiment.

Summarizing the five things: Weight is an advantage for e-readers, especially for travel (when you want multiple books); page-turning is "less irritating than you'd think" (having to do with the e-ink refresh delay); being able to search a book is useful; "text formatting can be annoyingly sloppy"—all ten books had formatting problems; availability of titles is the biggest problem.

The text-formatting problem is one I've encountered: line-break hyphens turning into "real" hyphens, so that they appear inappropriately in mid-line. That seems likely to happen because of conversion problems; it's something you should be able to avoid entirely, and I suspect it's a *very* temporary problem.

So why is he returning to print books? Availability and discovery, as far as I can tell—he seems to have no particular interest in print books as such. Since his focus is generally technology (and specifically Apple products), that's reasonable.

Publishing and Books in 10 years

By "switch11," [appearing February 3, 2010](#) at *Kindle Review*—and, as always with "switch11," I have mixed feelings. Partly because this writing *seriously* needs copyediting and proofreading. Partly because I know of no purer cheerleader for ebooks, specifically Kindle ebooks, as *The Solution*. Partly because this writer seems to assume a whole lot more inside knowledge than there's any evidence he or she really has.

So why don't I ignore the blog altogether? Because, for all the faults, there's some interesting speculation. Such as this long list of predictions on the ten-year horizon.

The first one starts out weakly, as the writer asks whether there will be more readers and whether readers will read more books per person. This paragraph, to me, makes no sense whatsoever:

There's an important category of readers – those who aren't able to find the time to read though they would

love to. eReaders and eBooks are reaching a lot of these people and getting them to read again.

Say what? People who don't "find the time to read though they would love to" are going to *buy* dedicated ereaders, much less start reading more? Why? How? The Kindle doesn't add hours to the day. Even if you disagree with studies showing that it's a bit slower to read ebooks than print books, it's almost certainly not faster. In any case, I really don't envision people who "don't have time to read" investing in ereaders.

That's speculation, of course, as is everything else here. "switch11" speculates that ebooks will have 50% of the book market in 10 years, based on...well, nothing. It's also speculated that there will be 100 million ereaders (dedicated devices, that is) in 2020—again, for no particular reason.

There's more like this, and if you're fond of *Kindle Review's* fact-free approach, you should read it yourself. Oh, here's another one where the writer seems *certain*, a certainty that makes a bit less sense in 2011 than it might have in February 2010. I'll quote the whole section, grammar and all:

What prices will books be at?

Somewhere between \$4 and \$10.

1. The lower bound is \$4 because even with sales of books doubling we still need \$4 to keep quality book making alive.
2. The upped bound is \$9.99 – For better or for worse it has been established as our first benchmark and it's a nice, pretty number that a lot of people find reasonable.

There will be a secondary market of indie authors pushing free and \$1 books. However, all established authors and several 'on the verge' authors will stick with \$4 and higher – to be able to focus their energies on writing.

That's right: Nobody's going to sell ebooks for more than \$9.99. Whoops...

Interestingly, the discussion of "publishers" is really a discussion of the Big Six, and "switch11" assumes that Publishers (with that capital P) will dominate the market.

Free ebooks correlated with increased print-book sales

This brief piece—by Cory Doctorow on March 4, 2010 at *boingboing*—is about complementarity, and it's an attempt to add real data to Doctorow's consistent anecdotal (he gives away his ebooks and finds that his print books do just fine).

The piece links to an article in the *Journal of Electronic Publishing*, "[The Short-Term Influence of Free Digital Versions of Books on Print Sales](#)." That peer-reviewed article (*JEP* is a Gold OA journal) notes the long-time experience of National Academies Press (which makes its publications digitally readable in a cumbersome one-page-at-a-time manner and has found increased sales of print books, especially for books that would otherwise be out of print) and the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago (which offers free digital versions and finds that print sales haven't decreased), then adds an actual study with a specific question: "Are book sales in the eight weeks following a book's free digital release different from the eight weeks prior to this release?"

The study used BookScan to track sales (which excludes Wal-Mart but includes about 70% of U.S. book sales) and organized books into four groups:

The first group consisted of seven nonfiction books that had digital versions that were released at various times. The second group consisted of five science fiction/fantasy titles that had digital versions that were released at various times. The third group consisted of five science fiction/fantasy books that were released together by Random House. The fourth group consisted of 24 science fiction/fantasy books released by Tor Books. The Tor group was different from the previous three in that Tor ran a special promotion in which they released a new book each Friday. The book was available for free download only for one week and only to those who registered for Tor's newsletter. With the other three groups, once a book was released in a free digital format it remained available, at least for several weeks, and in many cases, indefinitely.

These are small enough samples to still be anecdotal, but at least well-researched anecdotal. In all but two cases, the books studied were downloadable as entire PDFs; the exceptions, *Cult of iPod* and *Cult of Mac*, involved BitTorrent—with the encouragement of the author.

Except for the Tor books, each group shows more print sales after free PDFs are available than before they are—but the Tor books showed a substantial drop. Why? That's not clear.

An interesting study, worth your time to read. Interesting comments on the *boingboing* post—including a response from one of the study's authors.

How Green Is My iPad?

I've seen a couple of takes on the comparative environmental impact of ebooks and print books. This one, by Daniel Goleman and Gregory Norris, [ap-](#)

[peared April 4, 2010](#) in The New York Times Opinion section.

It's based on life-cycle assessment and considers five steps: material, manufacture, transportation, reading and disposal. (Know what the biggest item in materials is—in both cases? Gravel—either for the landfills holding the waste from ereader manufacturing or the roads used to transport materials in print books' supply chain.)

Summarizing, and noting that "denuding forests" should never be an issue for book paper, the authors conclude that a single e-reader has the impact of 40 to 50 print books for material consumption, 100 print books for global warming...and somewhere in between for health consequences. The final paragraph:

All in all, the most ecologically virtuous way to read a book starts by walking to your local library.

Publish or Perish

The New Yorker, like *ars technica* (hmm: they're both from the same publisher), likes to confuse us with titles. On the web page and URL, this piece—by Ken Auletta, [published April 26, 2010](#)—carries the title "The iPad, the Kindle, and the future of books." It's a moderately long piece (a print preview runs 14 pages with very little white space) and nicely written. I won't attempt to summarize or criticize the whole thing. Of course we get Steve Jobs' idiot remark "The fact is that people don't read anymore" and an interesting comment from an unnamed "advisor to Jobs": "Steve expresses contempt for everyone—unless he's controlling them." Sounds about right.

There's some discussion of the Big 6 and its pricing and other models, and how Apple and Amazon have messed with those models. I love this bit, especially the first sentence:

Publishing exists in a continual state of forecasting its own demise; at one major house, there is a running joke that the second book published on the Gutenberg press was about the death of the publishing business. And publishers' concerns about Amazon are reminiscent of their worries about Barnes & Noble, which in the eighties began producing its own books, causing publishers a great deal of anxiety without much affecting their business. Unlike Barnes & Noble, though, Amazon generates more than half of its revenues—which total about twenty-five billion dollars a year—from products other than books. Many publishers believe that Amazon looks upon books as just another commodity to sell as cheaply as possible, and that it sees publishers as dispensable. "Don't forget," the chief of a publishing house said,

“Bezos has declared that the physical book and bookstores are dead.”

There’s a *lot* here, including discussions of how Amazon might be trying to undermine both print publishing and print publishers. There’s also plenty to indict the Big 6 as getting in the way of modern, survivable publishing in general, be it e- or print. And consider this paragraph:

Good publishers find and cultivate writers, some of whom do not initially have much commercial promise. They also give advances on royalties, without which most writers of nonfiction could not afford to research new books. The industry produces more than a hundred thousand books a year, seventy per cent of which will not earn back the money that their authors have been advanced; aside from returns, royalty advances are by far publishers’ biggest expense. Although critics argue that traditional book publishing takes too much money from authors, in reality the profits earned by the relatively small percentage of authors whose books make money essentially go to subsidizing less commercially successful writers. The system is inefficient, but it supports a class of professional writers, which might not otherwise exist.

I’d love to take that paragraph at face value. Really I would. But I can’t. It’s become increasingly clear that some big publishers are only too happy to discard “midlist” writers—you know, the ones who actually write their own books but only sell 3,000 to 30,000 copies.

Read the article yourself. I’m not *at all* convinced that a battle pitting “three behemoths” (Apple, Amazon and Google) against the six behemoths of New York publishing is workable or beneficial for writers and readers, although I’ll agree that it’s better than having either Amazon or Apple as a choke-point for nearly all books. There’s a lot more here, and it’s worth reading...with several grains of salt.

Man of the House: He can speak volumes about the demise of books

Another silly piece, intentionally, and well enough done that I’m citing it—by Chris Erskine, [appearing August 7, 2010](#) in the *Los Angeles Times*.

They say these Kindles and other electronic reading gizmos will replace books one of these days, and to that I say, “NOT SOON ENOUGH!”

I am all for that. I can never get paperbacks or hardcovers to work. They won’t hold a charge, and they’re so hard to reboot.

Erskine continues—his inability to upgrade *The Great Gatsby* and the ways print books ruin warm summer days.

Know what I really hate? Days like this—warm August afternoons by a lake or an ocean, when there’s a gnat floating in your margarita, both of you comatose. On a perfect day like this, how do many people spend the time? They ruin it with books.

And, if we really get rid of books, maybe we can be rid of “those annoying old libraries where, if you’re not careful, you end up whiling away an entire day.”

Go read the whole thing. It’s charming. Even on a screen interlarded with ads.

5 Ways That...

Two pieces, both by Richard MacManus, both on *ReadWriteWeb*: “...eBooks Are Better Than Paper Books” [on August 10, 2010](#), and “...Paper Books Are Better Than eBooks” [on August 11, 2010](#). MacManus is in New Zealand, and he basically started buying ebooks as soon as he *could*—when the Kindle app for iPads became available.

His five reasons for ebooks are social highlighting, notes, word lookup, “ability to Tweet & Facebook quotes” and word searches. For print books—and he does note that *ReadWriteWeb* is a technology blog? Feel (“paper books just feel good in your hands”); packaging; sharing; keeping; second-hand books.

In some ways, they’re both odd lists. MacManus says this isn’t an either/or argument—but he thinks it *could* be an either/or argument in the near future. Perhaps.

The comment streams are interesting and peculiar, including several cries that ebooks are ecologically superior (apparently from people who regard paper production as the only significant issue, since ereaders are made from fairy dust) and seeming claims that ereaders emit “dangerous UV-rays or others harmful rays.”

E-books just aren’t as satisfying as print books, even to some millennials

That’s Michael Sauer’s title for [this September 3, 2010 post](#) at *The Travelin’ Librarian*, but he’s mostly pointing to Emma Silvers’ “E-reader revolt: I’m leaving youth culture behind” [posted that same day](#) at *Salon*.

Here’s the paragraph Sauers quotes:

And yet, I know what having an iPod has done to my attention span and ability to sit through an entire album, in order, by one artist—even an artist I love—and I’ll be damned if I let the same thing happen to the way I read. Out of every argument I’ve heard in favor of e-readers—no dead trees, portable research, “it’s the future,” etc.—my least favorite might be the central point of the thing: the fact that it allows you to choose from thousands of books at any given time. I simply don’t want that kind of potential for distract-

tion. Would I have ever made it through any book by Herman Hesse if I'd had the choice, with a press of a button, to lighten the mood with a little Tom Robbins? Will anyone ever finish "Infinite Jest" on a device that constantly presents other options?

His comment:

I'll admit that locking me in a room and not letting me out until I've finished *Infinite Jest* still wouldn't get me to finish it I will say that having something to distract me from it would make it much easier to ignore.

Now please excuse me while I go back to playing the Angry Birds beta on my Droid.

Well, yes, the quoted paragraph is one of Silvers' issues (and she has *issues*—when she saw a young woman pull out her Kindle on the morning train, she had "a surprising wave of disgust") but there are others. Indeed, some of the so-called advantages of ebooks are, to Silvers, *disadvantages*: "The highlighting. The online 'sharing.' The ability to just zip on over to Facebook for a minute." I'd probably quote this paragraph instead:

For me, to deny books their physical structure simply ignores far too much of what makes them enjoyable. The commitment they require, the way they force you into a state of simultaneous calm and focus -- these are things I have yet to duplicate by any other means. Not to mention other factors that I'm terrified have been lost in the transition from paperback to screen: the mood it puts you in to carry a particular book in your bag all day, or the giddy/strange feeling of seeing your favorites on someone else's shelves.

There's more (talking to employees at a major bookstore—and seeing all those customers), and it's probably worth reading. Many, many comments; some thoughtful, some controversial, some just plain snarky.

The Death of the Book has Been Greatly Exaggerated

That's Christopher Mims writing [on September 21, 2010](#) at *Mim's Bits*, part of MIT's *Technology Review*. He cites another post of his in which good old Negroponte pontificates that the physical book will be dead by 2015. He notes that other pundits have "moved up the date for the death of the book" (odd how "book" becomes synonymous with print book, isn't it?) and makes this assertion, next to a copy of the classic hype cycle chart:

I'm calling the peak of inflated expectations now. Get ready for the next phase of the [hype cycle](#) - the trough of disillusionment.

Why? Because he sees the signs of a hype bubble, "mostly in the form of irrational exuberance." He notes the Clearwater, Florida high school principle replacing all his students' textbooks with Kindles—even as trials of Kindles as textbook replacements at Princeton and Arizona State U. were failures. He's more charitable to Negroponte's nonsense than I would be, but after all, this is a blog under the purview of MIT. He notes the lengths some pundits go to in order to be rid of print books. And he sees a backlash coming.

And as for the death-by-2015 predictions of Negroponte, it's just as likely that as the ranks of the early adopters get saturated, adoption of ebooks will slow. The reason is simple: unlike the move from CDs to MP3s, there is no easy way to convert our existing stock of books to e-readers. And unlike the move from records and tapes to CDs, it's not immediately clear that an ebook is in all respects better than what it succeeds.

I'll omit the "LPs sound better than CDs" argument with that last sentence, as it gets us into deep and murky waters—but his next point is certainly valid:

So the world is left with an unconvertible stock of used books that is vast. If the bustling, recession-inspired trade in used books tells us anything, it's that old books hold value for readers in a way that not even movies and music do. That's value that no ebook reader can unlock.

In fact, it remains to be seen whether legions of readers raised on 99c titles at their local used bookstore (or \$4.00-\$5.00 titles delivered via Amazon.com) will be so eager to start buying brand new books at \$10 a pop. And then there's libraries—who gets left behind when owning an ebook reader, and not merely literacy, is a requirement to borrow a book?

Sims clearly is *not* saying ebooks don't work or won't matter; he is offering reasons to believe print books won't disappear any time soon. His final note:

Books have a kind of usability that, for most people, isn't about to be trumped by bourgeois concerns about portability: They are the only auto-playing, backwards-compatible to the dawn of the English language, entirely self-contained medium we have left.

Comments, of which there are many, are as all over the place as you might expect, certainly including people treating Mims as a hopeless Luddite.

When Ebooks Are More (and Less) Cost Effective Than Physical Books

This relatively short piece by Whitson Gordon appeared [in December 2010](#) (I guess) at *lifehacker*. Setting all other issues aside, the conclusion is that

ebooks are cheapest when books are very new or very old. That is:

- Brand-new ebooks are usually cheaper than brand-new print books.
- Public-domain ebooks are usually free (although, as the piece points out, you can usually get those free from the library as well).
- “E-books suck for most titles published between 1923 and, say, 2008”—since you can borrow those from your public library, buy them at used bookstores or thrift stores or, for that matter, buy mass-market paperbacks for less than the ebook prices.

The piece notes that this doesn't take into account the cost of an ereader. The first commenter notes that this *also* doesn't take into account the fact that you can sell your print book after you've read it.

How I Think About E-Books

Here's a pure essay in complementarity, by Joshua Kim on January 19, 2011 at *Inside Higher Ed*—and Kim starts by quoting the “marvelous Barbara Fister,” always a good start. (In this case, her discussion of the extent to which undergrads, specifically those under 30, prefer printed books to ebooks.) Kim:

Given a choice between a paper version or a Kindle version of a book, I'd take the paper version any day. The only reason I buy Kindle e-books is price. A Kindle book usually costs around what I'd pay for a soft-cover edition, and I like to read books when everyone else is also reading them.

Note that Kim *does* buy Kindle ebooks. Since I don't much care about reading books “when everyone else is also reading them”—I'm quite happy to be five or fifteen years behind—the library offers me a better price point. But that's me.

Kim's now read enough to be aware that physicality isn't that big a part of the price of a print book. He quotes *Wired* as saying that physicality accounts for “as little as” 15% of a title's cost. I think that's a little off; all the sources I've heard say it's *no more than* one-seventh, that is, about 14%—and in the example given (a \$26 hardcover), the figure is 12.5%, which is certainly *less* than 15%. (For trade paperbacks, and for niche and professional books, I'm betting the percentage is frequently much lower.)

So why does Kim still “love e-books” (given that he'd rather read paper)?

He offers two good reasons: First, that an ebook *could* be a great complement to a print or audio book—if Amazon or others start bundling. Second, that ebook self-publishing could open publishing to

many more people (although, given PoD, this doesn't depend on ebooks). He finishes:

Perhaps it is time we found a way to move beyond the e-book vs. paper book debate, and instead focus our energies on getting people to turn off the tube and pick-up (in whatever format) this glorious and wonderful technology that we call a book.

Not that many comments, but they're mostly worthwhile—including one from Ms. Fister herself, including this paragraph:

I agree entirely about the complementary nature of e- and p-books. I love the fact that after I've read a book, I can quickly index the page on which a passage can be found using Amazon's Search Inside. It's terrific when teaching contemporary fiction, too, because students can easily find a quote that they only vaguely remember. Oh yeah, that was in chapter five. And given printed books are created with digital files these days, why not both?

Oh yes, there is one comment with the title “inevitability.” There almost had to be. It's...no, I'm not going to say it.

The Future of the Book

Did you know that *Newsweek* was still around? Well, sort of—online, it's now part of *The Daily Beast*, and that's just sad. In any case, this brief article by Ramin Setoodeh appeared [on February 6, 2011](#) in what's left of the print magazine. (Don't get me wrong: I *love* print magazines—but I also question the future of some of them. I suspect *Time* will survive. I'm nearly certain *The Economist* will survive. Any other “news”weeklies? The weekly is a really tough slot for news orientation—too quick for leisurely reflection, too slow for the fast synthesis that good remaining print newspapers now do, and way too slow for actual news coverage. This is all, to be sure, a digression.)

Maybe I'm snarky about the piece because the lead is so obviously biased:

The transformation of the book industry has reached a tipping point. Electronic books now outsell paperbacks on Amazon, the retailer recently announced. And Borders, the second-largest bookstore chain in the United States, is reportedly considering a bankruptcy filing.

Since you've already told us it's all over, why even bother with the rest of the story? Not that there is a story—it's just some comments from “literary brains.” Who, oddly enough, aren't quite agreeing that we're at a “tipping point” for “transformation.” Judith Regan...oh, sigh, this editor-cum-radio-host says “I'm marrying my iPad” and says that publish-

ers will sell “infinitely more [books] electronically,” so I’m writing her off entirely.

Dave Eggers doesn’t own an e-reader, is aware of the *real* numbers (“I don’t think e-books have topped 10 percent of the market”) and expects to see that top out at 15 to 20%. Mostly he sees the need to give readers a choice.

James Billington is aware of history and nervous about ebook distractions:

The new immigrants don’t shoot the old inhabitants when they come in. One technology tends to supplement rather than supplant. How you read is not as important as: will you read? And will you read something that’s a book—the sustained train of thought of one person speaking to another? Search techniques are embedded in e-books that invite people to dabble rather than follow a full train of thought. This is part of a general cultural problem.

William Lynch—Barnes & Noble CEO—doesn’t quite come out and say “we’re not as mismanaged as Borders was,” but does make it clear that B&N isn’t going anywhere. As for print books and ebooks:

Amazon does not equal the market. About 50 percent of physical books are sold in non-bookstore outlets, like drugstores and club stores. There are people with agendas in this industry, but the physical book is not going anywhere.

Finally, Joyce Carol Oates notes that her husband (a neuroscientist) immediately ordered the Kindle and the iPad, and when they travel they read books and newspapers on the iPad. “I’d much rather have a book.”

There we have it: Unanimous agreement that we’ve reached a tipping point in the transformation of the book industry. Or maybe not.

Incidentally, the web page title of this piece is “Big Brains on E-Books.”

Guest Post #34: “Print Book vs. E-Book by Qin Tang”

The author appears in the title above; it’s [a February 8, 2011](#) “guest post” on Will Manley’s *Will Unwound*. Qin Tang is a librarian and writer. She begins by noting a recent experience, when she borrowed a Kindle from her library with a book that she needed. “Half way through the e-book, I abandoned it and changed to the print book that finally arrived. I had to reread the print book from the beginning.” So for her, with her habits of flipping back and forth and the like, ebooks don’t work very well. Since she knows that others *love* ebooks, she tries to summarize the advantages of each format.

Print book advantages:

People love the feeling of actually holding the book in their hands and turning the pages.

People love reading at night in bed. It’s more comfortable to cuddle up with a book. It’s just not the same feeling to cuddle up with an e-reader. You can touch and flip between the pages and see more at once. There’s nothing like curling up with a good book.

Quality hardcover books are still the easiest on the eyes.

Book cover/book jacket has its appeal that is lost in the e-book.

It is more reliable. Print book can be used anywhere. E-book is subject to power shortage, hardware malfunctioning and software glitch. If the hard drive is damaged or wiped out, the books are gone. E-reader also needs recharging or boot time.

Real ownership – Once you purchased the print book, you own it. You can sell it, loan it and give it away. But with e-book, you don’t really own the book. You are granted the right to read an e-book, but no right to resell it or even share it with a friend.

E-book advantages:

Instant gratification and speedy access - buying an e-book is easy and instant. You don’t have to wait and don’t have to go somewhere to get it. It’s easier to download a book than to go buy or borrow one.

Convenience, flexibility and portability – the e-reader is light and easier to carry around and pack for travel. You can read it on your phone, Kindle, desktop and laptop.

Better price – digital editions are cheaper than their print edition counterparts, though you can buy used print books very cheaply at thrift stores and garage sales, but e-books are not resellable.

Space saver – the e-reader can hold thousands of books and doesn’t take any shelf space.

Free books – classics and books that are in the public domain can be downloaded for free.

More privacy – with e-books, no one can see what you’re reading. Others can’t see your book cover.

Being green – e-books can save trees.

As we’ve seen, that last one is disputable (and library books are even cheaper than ebooks), but these are nonetheless good lists. She does make one enormous error (unless *Newsweek* made the error), citing print book 2009 sales as \$249.2 million vs. \$29.3 million for ebooks. Since 2009 print book sales were somewhere between \$24 and \$40 *billion* in the U.S. alone, this is off by quite a bit. (It could

be referring only to *trade* books and be one month's sales rather than one year's sales.) Her close:

While e-books are certainly gaining in overall market share and becoming more mainstream as time passes, the print book industry is still the dominant player. I don't think print books will ever go away. As long as there are people like me, the print books will never become extinct.

That's followed by 46 comments—and I should note that, for some time at least, I stopped reading Manley's blog because of some commenters. This is not one of those cases.

Reading E

T. Scott Plutchak offered this [on April 1, 2011](#) (no significance to the date, I think) at *T. Scott*. He's read a couple of books on the iPad and has some likes and dislikes.

Likes (excerpted):

I can write notes of any length (or, at least, I haven't hit a word limit yet). Since I have to type them (which is easy enough with the wireless keyboard) they're more legible than my handwriting ever is, and I don't have to squeeze them into the margins of the page...

With the case that Marian gave me, I can easily prop it up and read while I'm eating lunch.

I love that you can touch an endnote number and go right to it and come back.

Dislikes:

Blocking the passage that I want to highlight or attach a note to is very awkward...

There's no variation in marks. You can highlight or attach a note, but that's it...

I was startled, when I started *The Information*, at how much I didn't like the fact that it looks exactly like the *Turtle* book. It's a different book. It ought to look and feel different.

Then (there's more to the post, and as always with T. Scott it's well said and worth reading):

I'm trying to imagine the technology getting to the point where I would prefer the electronic version of a print book. But unless the "book" does different things, I can't see why I would--and then it's no longer a "version" of a print book. It's something else.

UC Libraries Academic e-Book Usage Survey

I'm mostly [pointing to this May 2011](#) 34-page PDF based on a Springer e-book pilot project at the University of California, as a reasonably good way to end this section. There's far too much text in the report to summarize and it's dealing with a specific case that may or may not be typical. Findings on specific advantages of ebook forms are interesting

and not terribly surprising. Of more than 2,400 survey respondents indicating a preference, 49% preferred print books, 34% preferred ebooks and 17% had either no preference or usage-dependent preferences. There's a *lot* more in the study.

Why Springer ebooks?

Springer was chosen for the UC Libraries' first major systemwide e-book pilot because its e-book licensing terms are consistent with principles established by UC, including broad academic use rights, support for interlibrary lending, perpetual ownership, unlimited concurrent users, and a digital rights management-free format.

Read the report; draw your own conclusions. UC is to be congratulated for preparing a clear and fairly comprehensive report and making it freely available.

Other Voices

Finally, we have a few items I couldn't readily slot into one of the other chunks—but they are all, to some extent, about print books and (or versus) ebooks.

The Electronic Book Burning

That's [an essay](#) by Alan Kaufman in the October 2009 *Evergreen*. Kaufman lives in San Francisco and says he's witnessed "a sudden episode of bookstore closings that has turned my city into a bookstore graveyard." There's not much question that a lot of independent and some chain bookstores have closed. I'm not sure it reaches to the level of this:

According to reports coming in from other parts of the country, the awful scene is reoccurring everywhere: venerable, much beloved bookstores closing and that portion of the populace who cherish books—an ever-shrinking minority—left baffled and bereft; a silent corporate *Krystallnacht* decimating the world of literacy.

The portion of the populace that *reads* books continues to be a majority. Those who "cherish" books? I'm not sure I even qualify. If this was an online discussion, it would have reached Godwin's Law in the first paragraph, with "*Krystallnacht*" closing out any hope of sensible discussion.

If anything, the next paragraph is worse:

Accompanying this plague is a feel-good propaganda campaign that enjoys the collusion of the major media outlets, including such true hi-tech believers as the NY Times and NPR—print and broadcast venues that are themselves cheerily being rendered obsolete by the hi-tech rampage—and that in subtle ways positions the destruction of book culture like so: "books" in and of themselves are nothing, only an-

other technology, like the Walkman or the laptop. What is sacred are the texts and those are being transferred to the Internet where they will attain a new kind of high-tech-assured immortality. Like dead souls leaving their earthly bodies the books are, in effect, going to a better place: the Kindle, the e-book, the web; hi-tech's version of Paradise.

Good heavens. Perhaps I should be ashamed of having been a systems analyst/programmer for five decades. And perhaps it's odd that I'm reading this essay...on a computer.

This massive deportation of literary texts to a new home in electronic heaven has about it an air of inevitability that makes its consummation seem all but certain, a veritable act of God.

I, too, complain about excessive and worthless claims of inevitability, but my English rarely rises to Kaufman's rhetorical heights. After this startling introduction, he discusses Google, the "mysterious lawsuit" (mysterious?) and its apparently equally mysterious settlement. Actually, I should pause here to note something about the visual aspect of this article: The serif text appears in black paragraphs on a background that's something close to flame-red...with rows of flames separating the paragraphs. I guess this is all to emphasize "book burning."

It doesn't get better. We get "late-stage hypercapitalist imperatives"; we get technologists slitting the throats of publishers; there's a paragraph on book sales that suggests that only a few titles—all blockbusters—are still being published:

Like any product, the book must run harder and faster in the marketplace or else fall and die. And the books are falling. Only the fittest now survive. While mid-list authors drop in the snow, blockbuster thrillers and middlebrow memoirs and diet books huff their way forward. Soon, though, they too will drop. The idea is for no one to be left standing. All physical books must go up the chimney stack. Such was the methodology of the SS who forced their prisoners to run naked races round and round the barracks yard in the Polish winter, a race that no one was meant to win.

Think Kaufman's done with the Nazi comparisons? No such luck:

The book is fast becoming the despised Jew of our culture. Der Jude is now Der Book. Hi-tech propagandists tell us that the book is a tree-murdering, space-devouring, inferior form of technology; that society would simply be better-off altogether if we euthanized it even as we begin to carry around, like good little Aryans, whole libraries in our pockets, downloaded on the Uber-Kindle.

After more dramatics, Kaufman notes that many of the writers he knows have little trouble foreseeing a career that's primarily in ebooks. "To them, my sentiments and opinions may seem exaggerated, even silly, perhaps crazy." You think?

Apparently, Kaufman finds book writing so difficult that the *physical book* is what makes it worthwhile—"a kind of sacred and appropriate temple for the text within." If he thought he'd be shuffled in with other "texts" (his scare quotes) on "some 7 inch plastic gismo," he would have become a hit man or a rabbi. (Seriously: I'm not creative enough to make this up.)

After that we get the assumptions of one single central repository, of "hi-tech totalitarianism," the "hi-techers" as absolute censors. After a set of swipes at Christianity, we get Kaufman's calm evaluation of a move toward ebooks:

It is a catastrophe of holocaustal proportions. And its endgame is the disappearance of not just books but of all things human.

Whew. That's one voice heard from.

What's a Real Book?

David Lee King pretends to ask that question in [this April 20, 2010 post](#) at his eponymous blog—but he's really making an assertion: Not so much that ebooks are real books, but that **"It's time for us librarians to get over our paper fetish."** [Emphasis in the original.] Which is, really, a different discussion.

The background's interesting: David Ferriero gave a keynote at the Computers in Libraries conference and mentioned that he prefers print books over ebooks. DLK says "That's fine—I get that."

But then, the audience ... at Computers in Libraries ... applauded! Like he'd just won an award or something. And soon after, someone tweeted "Yeah! David Ferriero still reads **REAL books!**"

One person tweeted. *Some people* applauded. And that's the basis for a post that seems to imply that librarians as a group are showing a bias toward a particular form?

Help me out here – what's the most important part of a book – the paper? Or the stuff on the paper? Anyone?

At what point does "the most important part" become "the only part worth considering"? David?

Then he makes comparisons that seem to put print books in the same category as Super8 movies and print journals. (If he'd said print *magazines*, I'd guess a number of folks would agree that print magazines are still great.) So print books are, to DLK,

essentially obsolescent and not to be applauded. I guess. The word “fetish” doesn’t help.

His final paragraph:

Don’t get me wrong. I’m not saying books are bad. I’m also not saying print is bad. But I am saying that when lots of people applaud someone ... at a conference dedicated to computers and the web ... for favoring one container over another, it shows our bias, it shows our professional bent ... and that bent needs to be adapting and growing and watching the horizon.

I don’t think I’m getting you wrong. I think you *are* saying that a preference for print is bad. Unless you can prove to me that *everybody* in that conference was applauding, you’re using a contrived example to push for librarians to ignore containers altogether. Failing to do so doesn’t show bias; it shows recognition that there can be more to books than pure content.

The comments are interesting, especially the point at which DLK applauds his library director for saying the library already has too many print books. I suppose that will change.

Is an ebook a real book? Yes, by my lights—but it’s *not* the same thing as a print book, and recognizing differences is not bias on the part of librarians, it’s good sense.

Kindle and iPad Books Take Longer to Read than Print [STUDY]

That’s a news item [on July 2, 2010](#), by Lauren Indvik at *Mashable*. It refers to a usability survey done by the Nielsen Norman Group (Jakob Nielsen’s crew). The claim is that reading speeds declined by 6.2% on the iPad and 10.7% on the Kindle compared to print.

These were *short* studies: Ernest Hemingway short stories, taking an average of less than 18 minutes to read. After reading, participants filled out comprehension questionnaires and rated satisfaction with each device. The satisfaction scores were nearly identical for print, iPad and Kindle. (PCs were also included, and they didn’t score as well on satisfaction.)

Here’s the thing: This is anecdotal. There were 24 participants—which may be a lot for a usability study, but doesn’t even count as noise for a statistical study. The commenter who says, “There’s nothing conclusive in this study” is understating the case.

Tipping Points and Moments of Zen

I’m going to cheat on this one, if only because it’s by Barbara Fister ([on September 30, 2010](#), on Peer to Peer Review at *Library Journal*.) Part of it’s about her participation in, and fragmentary comments about,

a “virtual summit” on ebooks. (I’m *so happy* that I wasn’t part of that virtual summit, even as a listener: between Eli Neuberger’s “books and libraries are doomed” and Kevin Kelly’s digiphilia, I’d be climbing the walls.)

The key part comes after that—a moment of Zen based on Fister’s interaction with a student named Matt.

I’m not going to say any more. Hell, it’s *Barbara Fister*. You’ll enjoy reading her a lot more than you’d enjoy my explication. And it’s a short piece. Short, but typically worthy.

Digital Underclass: What Happens When the Libraries Die?

Pardon me while I scream silently for a moment here. Whew. That’s better. This piece is by Jason Perlow, [published November 10, 2010](#) in the “Tech Broiler” on ZDNet. If that title isn’t enough to set you off, here’s the summary:

Libraries will need to be replaced with digital equivalents as publishing moves towards eBooks. As a result, will a new “Digital Underclass” be created from the base of technology have-nots?

What? Huh? Oh, Perlow’s clear enough: “Whether it’s eBooks, websites or some other form of digitized distribution mechanism, the writing is on the wall for the printed ‘dead tree’ medium.” That’s right: Print books are doomed. Perlow says so:

Within 20 years, perhaps even as few as 10, virtually almost all forms of popular consumable written media will be distributed exclusively in an electronic format.

Wowzers. *Exclusively*. “Virtually almost all forms” isn’t really English, but the point’s clear enough: *It’s inevitable, it’s 100% replacement, that’s the way the world works*.

And, since public libraries are nothing but “big, quiet buildings in your town filled with shelves of books, card catalogs, and librarians to help you find that material” (really—that’s a direct quote, “card catalogs” and all), we won’t need them. Period.

They won’t be cost effective, and there will be far less new printed books, magazines and newspapers being released to stock these libraries with.

Wait a minute. A bit earlier you said *none*—now it’s “far less.” And, since *all public libraries do* is distribute printed books from their card catalogs:

As printed content becomes more scarce and less people visit the libraries, there will be a culling which will start with library consolidation in towns, counties, major metropolitan areas and states.

This might be a good place to wonder about Perlow's omniscience and expertise. He's a technology editor at ZDNet and has "over two decades of experience integrating large heterogeneous multi-vendor computing environments in Fortune 500 companies." Certainly qualifies him to make absolute predictions about the future of media in my book—or, rather, ebook.

The second half of this article is about how to "reboot" public libraries—by which Perlow clearly means *shut down all the buildings and start an electronic library*.

I didn't read all the comments; in the first two pages, there were none from anybody who has apparently used a public library within, say, the last decade—and it's fairly clear Perlow hasn't.

Closing

I offered my own perspective on one possible future for reading and publishing at the start of this piece. But I can't finish it with that awful piece from ZDNet (card catalogs? really? public libraries as nothing but book collections? in what decade?), so I'll add a few personal observations.

I don't have an ereader—or an iPhone or an iPad or, in fact, any portable device with a screen larger than 2 inches (a Sansa Fuze, an excellent 8GB MP3 player, loaded with about 800 of the songs I really care about, all encoded in 320K MP3 from CDs that I own). I don't buy ebooks or borrow them from the library.

That's me—now. I should add that I don't really buy loads of print books either. I borrow at least 90% of the books I read from the Livermore Public Library.

I've said that if I was traveling a lot more frequently, I'd probably buy a netbook or an ereader and probably read ebooks. That might not be true: When I was speaking more in the past, I used those trips to catch up with the three "big" science fiction & fantasy magazines, all of which I subscribe to (*Analog*, *Asimov's* and *Fantasy & Science Fiction*). Since I rarely travel at all, I'm reading those when I go out to lunch—and, frankly, pulp SF magazines are about as bad as print reading can get: Small type on cheap, newsprint-quality paper, with narrow margins. I'm pretty sure an ereader would represent an upgrade—but it's so easy to "haul around" two-ounce magazines that fit in my pocket.

I would buy an ereader and read ebooks if it made sense for me. But I'd still read many books

(probably most) in print form—because the form works so well.

Yes, I think ebooks are books. "Equal" to print books? No—or at least not identical. In some ways, for some purposes, *for some readers*, better; in some ways, for some purposes, *for some readers*, not as good.

I would like to see more bundling. I like the idea that a purchased print book could include a code to download an ebook version.

I don't want to see print books go away. I don't believe they will entirely—at least not in my lifetime (I plan to be around for at least three decades). I will continue to be irritated by claims of inevitability, by digital purists, by people who believe what's *never* been true: That there can only be one medium for a given form of content and that higher tech always wins *to the exclusion* of alternatives. That's nonsense, and reflects both historical ignorance and lack of thought.

On the other hand, I hope I'll continue to be irritated by those who disdain ebooks entirely, or who put them down for reasons that don't seem to make much sense. I call myself a Luddite at times, mostly in jest—but claims that people in general *can't* or *won't* read text from an electronic device make no more sense than claims that nobody reads books anymore.

If you made it this far—novella length at around 25,000 words—congratulations. Go enjoy a real book—in print form, on a dedicated ereader or on some multifunction device.

Masthead

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