
Mark Y. Herring
Winthrop University, herringm@winthrop.edu
**Here Lies The Book, R.I.P.: The Report of Its Death Has Been Greatly Exaggerated**

by Mark Y. Herring (Dean of Library Services, Dacus Library, Winthrop University) <herrimg@winthrop.edu>

If you’ve kept up with libraries at all lately, you’ve doubtless witnessed what might be called the harbinger of the death of the book. Every where you turn, libraries are either “deserted,” their books “vanishing,” or the concept “obsolete.” A $53-million renovation at the Walter Library, University of Minnesota–Twin Cities sequestered books to the basement or elsewhere. Supercomputers have replaced them. Book sequestrations at prestigious Duke University raised eyebrows. In the new College of Charleston library books have taken a decided backseat. Marquette University began with a traditional library structure but its trustees essentially said, “Nothing doing!” They wanted

through generations, Bible students will not be able to resist the enticements of the new media.

Yet it may be the non-canonical works of earlier religious devotion that can best prepare us for the wonders to come. I dream of making, during my lifetime, a grand virtual tour of Dante’s Inferno, Purgatorio and Paradiso. This will be the collaborative work of the finest translators, illustrators, animators and game makers, along with myself. I envision a Divine Comedy accessible in the late medieval Tuscan tongue, in modern Italian, and in English. Illustrators from Michelangelo through William Blake to Leonard Baskin have been inspired to illustrate Dante and in doing so have expended our vision and their own. Skilled contemporary artists will have visualized this netherworld for me (and possibly even the celestial one), and game makers will have animated it. I will travel at my own pace, conversing, as I choose, with the different characters I meet in Hell, Purgatory and Heaven. At any point, I may remember a person I quickly passed over. Virgil and I will then quickly backtrack to an earlier circle of the Inferno, so I can take another look and have a conversation. Or we may choose to advance to a higher rung of the Purgatorial mount, if I have limited time that particular day. As I move along, I will certainly try to comfort Paola and Francesca, in the outer reaches of Hell, but I will pause only briefly before Pope Adrian V, fearing to distract him from the earnest penance that will eventually win his release from Purgatory. Perhaps I may even reach the celestial city, though recreating it will be a supreme challenge for the artists and game makers; and I, in this fallen state, will feel as uncomfortable in the virtual Paradise as I do in the one on paper, as Dante certainly intended. When this Dantesque journey becomes available to me, I will not long lament the disappearance of my Penguin paperback with its awkward end notes and its yellowing pages.

---

**Endnotes**

something new.1 All of this continues to occur in the face of Cal-Poly's essentially traditional $45-million structure that will open soon.2 It would seem if the nation's single largest collection of computer-geeks and engineers couldn't come up with a Spielberg-type Minority Report futuristic library, no one else will. At least not yet. What's going on?

Unfortunately, our cyberage may be bringing us the research equivalent of fast food: it doesn't matter whether it's good or healthy, only that it satisfies. And very much like fast-food, we are slowly coming to understand that the "food" of the Internet isn't all that intellectually nutritious. Reliable Web-based information is very expensive, leaving us back where we began, with libraries supplying the bulk of information access but in various formats. Indeed, this is already true with respect to the Internet. Outside the home, libraries supply the greatest percentage of access to the Web for all users. While the Web relies on "free and open access" (read unreviewed and unchecked), libraries are beginning to supply a kind of oversight on the Web.

Yet the fact remains that the numerous protestations of the book's demise are greatly exaggerated for the Internet is no substitute for a library. This is true for a number of reasons of which space will allow only a few. First, the pool of information is very shallow compared even to a medium-sized library. Although there are over a billion Web pages on the Internet, many supply unreliable, uncorroborated information. Trustworthy Internet information does not come cheap, as we shall see. Furthermore, when you find what you want amid 3 million hits in 1.2 seconds, you print it if it's more than three pages, but more on this later. Finally, libraries have never collected vanity press publications. Remember that the next time someone boasts to you that the Internet has more than a billion pages of "information." The World Wide Web is the triumph of narcissism! Let's look at these in greater detail.

Habent sua fata libelli. Books have their fates, but no one, not even Gutenberg, could have predicted this. The Internet pool of information really is shallow. Right in the middle of a boom in book publishing, we have this rush to put books out of business. The simple truth of the matter is this: digital books have a much more uncertain future.3 Questia Media began with more than $100 million in venture capital. In the summer of 2002 Questia cut its staff in half. netLibrary [sic] began with nearly the same amount of money. In 2001-2002 the company filed for bankruptcy and OCLC bought them out. Xanadu has since closed its doors while other digital ventures either continue to struggle or are heading for the courts to salvage what they have.4 It is print materials that are running not only a mystery-guru Steve King threw his considerable weight into cyberspace with his 66-page novel, Riding the Bullet, e-zine Salon and others rushed to declare victory.5 There was one fly in the ointment: there wasn't one. Simon & Schuster began the demise by shutting off the print function. When that happened, the half-million who downloaded the book vanished as quickly as point and click. Apparently they were not reading all 66-pages on-screen after all. Moreover, eBook reader surveys have revealed that eBook readers are frustrated, but that many of them would rather order online . . . more print books.6 All of which is to say that with the mountain of evidence in favor of books, why have they suddenly been put in the dock?

Is the Internet that unreliable? Consider the chagrin of former Kennedy White House official, Pierre Salinger, when he charged a few years ago that our own government shot down TWA Flight 800 during a routine missile launching.7 Salinger's two-page document proved identical to a message that had been riding the Web's e-spoondrift for years.8 The message spawned rumors that "friendly fire" was behind the July 17 explosion of the Paris-bound jumbo jet, which killed all 230 people aboard. Salinger's mistake resided in the belief that the hundreds of conspiracy-theorists who lurk about the Web, spewing out as many lies as their febrile brains contain, were actually reputable researchers. If the information can convince Salinger, a respected political advisor, it can convince any high school or college-age student.

In many ways, the Internet is a vast, uncataloged library. Some hit will get a couple of million hits (more likely tens of millions) but the sad fact of the matter is that any one of them, or none at all, may lead you to what you want. A Google search on Saturn is as likely to turn up the planets, as the car, as some scantily clad dancer. You may or may not be able to tell which ones are worth looking at but it's certain that viewing the first twenty or fifty or one hundred may not be enough. If you're savvy enough you may be able to target your search better, but how many users know how to do that? Finally, imagine walking into a library and going to the history section only to find Paul Johnson's books side-by-side with the Unabomber's or the KKK's!

What drives this debate more than anything else isn't whether the Internet is replacing libraries, or making them obsolete (it does neither), but whether it works well enough to solve an enormous budget ill. Libraries are financial black holes, and even librarians know this. If the Internet can solve the expenditure problem, then university bean-counters can move on to other matters. It doesn't matter whether it solves that problem efficaciously or not, any more than whether fast food is nutritious. Fast food satisfies appetites, and the Internet satisfied the need for information. Fast food gives one the sensation of being full, and 1.3 million "hits" in 2.1 seconds provides the appearance of securing information. But both are full of indigestible fat. Budget cutters at the legislative level ignore whether the provided information is reliable or accurate. It's only later, when constituents are hammering on legislative and other doors that they realize students learning history from the Freeman Web page, or exploring sexual relations from weare18.com was probably not a good idea after all. All that "free" information suddenly pales in comparison to the firestorm of controversy that book find themselves in. Meanwhile, the library limps along.

The second answer is that electronic access is still fairly new and anything new almost always edges out (for a time anyway) anything old. Electronic access certainly has great advantages, ubiquity being the most obvious. But it also has many drawbacks, most of which leave me far less optimistic than the magisterial Umberto Eco.9 Eco is right in arguing that the Internet is made up of images, many of which are the alphabet as opposed to pictures. He was also right that electronic access has replaced certain mainstays in libraries—viz., encyclopedias, handbooks and dictionaries. In short, electronic access has already replaced two-thirds of the Reference collection, and it is quickly gaining on the last third. Moreover, the inroads electronic access has made into the periodical literature, viz., providing online access to thousands of journal articles, can only be seen as a great boon. No one wants to turn back the clock, or make it impossible to access journals electronically. But simply because one thing works well in one medium does not mean another one will work equally well.

Books will continue to outlast the electronic age for a number of reasons hereafter stated bluntly.

Copyright.3 We touched upon this earlier but now for a fuller explanation. It's not clear now where all this will fall out but it's a sure bet that Congress will ignore us (but I repeat myself) continue to extend copyright. This simply means that those materials falling into public domain will do so much later than anticipated, as in a century from now, if not later. Materials now in public domain will, of course, have to have copyright permissions before they can be digitized. In the long run, this is what will bankrupt most online book ventures. While much published before 1925 will continue to show up, fewer and fewer items published after this date will appear. Those that do will carry a hefty access fee.

Look, for example, at the history of Questia.com, mentioned above. The idea behind Questia was to offer students online access to 50,000 or so monographs and journal articles in humanities and Social Sciences. While they thought that would appeal to the college-age. While offering access to students, libraries were forbidden access early on. Oddly, the 50,000+ titles were mainly ones libraries had already purchased. Although the searching is free, "subscriptions" are by the hour, the day, the week, the month or the year. The advantages touted are that students may access entire books and journals, and that this access is 24-hours a day, 7-days a week. The disadvantages are obvious: how many of us will read an entire book online? Further, why would...
you pay for what you have in your library that is open 90+ hours a week and is free? Questia has discovered this, laying off more than half its staff.

The Physiology of Reading. Say what you will about evolution, it’s still pretty slow. Since the invention of the printing press, humans have read a certain way, with a light over their shoulder. How quickly it will take for our eyes (and minds) to evolve to a point where this is no longer troublesome is anyone’s guess.

Print Costs. In the meantime, where are Al Gore’s tree huggers when you need them? For most libraries, printing costs have risen more than 1,000 percent since 1999 and continue to escalate.

Current Technology. (The grantingness of most handheld readers and the life of the book just got longer.) Some will quibble that technology evolves much faster than humans, and so in a few years great readers will emerge. So far, however, nothing of the kind has happened, and mostly because there is no market. Those who have invested large amounts of capital in online access to books have been hugely disappointed before being made terribly imperfect.

Cost. What the above doesn’t kill off, cost will.

Digitization is an enormously expensive endeavor, much more so than most are willing to admit. Even a modest library of 500,000 will cost over a billion dollars to digitize.19 Where is this money coming from, and who is going to be responsible for doing it? Before discounting the figures, bear in mind that there are thousands of libraries of this size and larger in the United States alone.

Add to this other factors such as where such a massive site will reside, what will occur when the inevitable downtimes occur, will printing be offered and for how much, is downloading allowed, who will update and oversee the site and so on. The logistics of such a site make the mind whirl.

Plagiarism. No one doubts that the rise in recent years of widespread, even epidemic, plagiarism is linked (should I say, “hotlinked”?) to the proliferation of electronic sites.20 While it’s unlikely that this problem will put the genie back in the bottle, the fact that so much is being written about it adds to the angst that will prohibit widespread digitization without other assurances being put in place first.

Portability. We’ve all seen the Internet ruse about the mobility of the book but the fact of portability has not been jettisoned by electronic access or the ubiquitous handhelds. Handhelds are wonderful as daily reminders, calendars and the like. But books on handhelds simply have not caught on and are not likely to in the near future. While they have certainly gotten smaller, how much smaller they can get remains a problem. For the sake of argument, let’s suppose that someone makes a handheld the size of a credit card. Can you read a book on a screen that size? Would you want to read a book on a screen that size, assuming that you could? After all, “Books that you may carry to the fire and hold readily in your hand, are the most useful after all,” said Johnson, and who wishes to argue with the great bard?

Been There, Done That. If you’re over forty, you certainly recall that about 25 years ago there were doomsayers abounding gleefully that all education would be replaced by television. Educational television—an oxymoron if ever there was one—has fallen, rather I should say, has crashed and burned on its own petard. I would be the first to say that this medium is grossly underused; I would be the second to argue that its benefits were greatly exaggerated.

If you’re over forty you also remember that about 30 years ago many of these same folk bringing us this new cyberspace were also miniatuizing libraries. “Libraries will be the size of shoeboxes,” we were told, as everything would be microfilmed. Of course much has been microfilmed and microfilm still beats digitization and CD-ROM transfer as a preservation technique hands down. But microfilming was much overrated as well, and the dream or vision—or whatever it is you wish to call it—was never realized, despite the millions that were spent trying to accomplish just this.

Now, here we are again with yet one more round of doomsayers promising us everything while producing only a third of the promise. Forgive me if I remain somewhat dubious of the outcome.

Having said all this, one must not discount what is taking place. There is such a thing as a self-fulfilling prophecy and those who want to see everything digital may not like being wrong again. Many powerful people are pushing this envelope, and I am sad to say that many of them live and work in the profession known as librarianship. While much that Nicholas Baker has written is frantic, his last book, Double Fold, was filled with an uncanny accuracy that causes chills to shudder the frame. Sometimes, if you can’t be right, just get even, or so the saying has it.

On the one hand we have the onslaught of electronic everythingism, while on the other, we have the astonishing diminishing of adolescent literacy. Justin Timberlake of N-Sync and Brittanlyn Spears fame was asked to name his favorite read. “You mean like a book?” the enfant terrible agonized. What I am saying poorly is this: if this generation continues and passes on to the next its formidable print-allergies, it would not be a prophecy to say that a seismic change in print medium could occur. It would be a change that would not be favorable to book-lovers everywhere. We will see the demise of reading before we see the end of books, and this will come not through technology, but at the hands of our insistant dumbing down of the educational process.

Meanwhile, those of us who do love books can breathe a sigh of relief. We can breathe a sigh of relief that this admixture of anti-intellectualism and cyberage frenzy will not result in the demise of the book, at least not for the next 50 to 100 years. Some changes in reference tools will continue to occur, and the vast majority will be electronically accessible within the next 10 years. Moreover, many of these same
Monster of Non-circulating Library Collections Rears Ugly Head...Again

by Phil Davis (Life Science Librarian, Albert R. Mann Library, Cornell University) <pmd8@cornell.edu>

In economically desperate times, the monster of inefficiency rears its ugly head again to show how wasteful we are. This monster attacks collection librarians for purchasing books that are never used. While this argument is popular (even trendy), it is both unfounded and unproductive. The pinnacle study frequently cited is the famous (or infamous) Pittsburgh study which found that 40% of books and monographs acquired in 1969 never circulated after six years.

While the authors looked at the properties and attributes of those things that circulated, there was no analysis done on those things that did not circulate (the so-called "zero class"). Follow-up studies in other libraries have determined that many of their non-circulating items were:
1) things that could not circulate (i.e. reference materials),
2) things that the library didn't purchase (i.e. gifts and exchange),
3) things that the library receives out of legal requirement (i.e. government depository), or
4) things the library purchases because of a comprehensive collection mission.

With these classes removed, the proportion of non-circulating items becomes very low. So in summary, this argument of the non-circulating library collection is empirically unfounded.

But whether the non-circulating figure is 40% or 20% or 10% still leads us to the second part of the question, "why are librarians so wasteful?"

Circulation studies are all historical in nature. What they give us is a statistical and aggregate snapshot of a population of materials that the library has already acquired. Understanding what has circulated in the past, nevertheless, gives us little or no future predictive ability for future purchases.

It is clear that senior administrators and dubious library efficiency consultants that use the Pittsburgh study as an example of library wastefulness have never read this study—they always forget the key argument presented on page 5 in the introduction:

"...it is not particularly useful for a bibliographer to know that 10% of all the titles (s)he selects will satisfy 90% of client demand for materials in a given discipline, unless (s)he can also be told which 10%. It is useless to tell the acquisitions librarian that half the monographs ordered will never be used, unless you are also in a position to say which 50% to avoid buying. The simple fact is that the available data lack sufficient predictive power to enable the librarian to modify selection practices with assurances that the results will be more responsive to future needs of clients."

Tony Ferguson ("Back Talk — Use Statistics," Against the Grain, Sept 2002) provides several arguments for why the academic library mission leads to the purchase of books that may never be purchased and turn a profit.

If libraries only purchased what they knew would circulate, they would fail to serve academia. They would function like a bookstore that only carried the latest titles from the NY Times best sellers list—a reactionary library, and a poor one at that. Library collections are born from uncertainty and grow with uncertainty. It is through uncertainty that we best serve the needs of academics and support scholarly research. If this is the reason that we are criticized for wasting library funds, let the efficiency consultants eat their words.

Here Lies The Book, R.I.P.: from page 47

Tools will not be available in print formats. This is alarming but not catastrophic. Journals will also go the way of all ion but costs will remain as high as ever.

Books on the other hand will have a different fate, at least for now. There will still be many more obituaries written between now and 100 years from now. But by and large they will be greatly exaggerated. Some will surely argue that we who defend the book defend the wrong thing. Medium is nothing, they will say, only content. And I believe it is just that sort of nonsense that told us soup cans and oddly bent coat-hangers with metaphysical names were art forms. For now, anyway, we will thankfully live yet another generation or two in the "sweet serenity of books."

Endnotes

Rumors from page 18

"Bartow sure does get around!"}

"Just heard that the debonair Craig Flansburg joined TDNet on January 6."