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“The True University of these Days Is a Collection of ...” eBooks?!

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“The True University of these Days Is a Collection of ...” eBooks?!

We do live in interesting times, don't we? This is especially true of those of us who spend most of our working lives in libraries. The last ten years have been so filled with change that it's almost become a byword: if you don't like something, just wait a few hours and it will change. This isn't a complaint, just an observation.

No other area has changed so much in the last ten years as books, or, rather, I should say ebooks, and that includes the very spelling of the word: e-books, Ebooks, E-books and now, more often than not, ebooks. Carlyle's words, which serve as this headline, don't quite ring as true today as they did when he wrote them about print books. We are, after all, still getting used to ebooks, so perhaps in decades to come. We talk about electronic books so often, we forget that they have been around for quite some time, standing as we are chest-deep in their fourth decade.

Yes, that's right, ebooks are approaching forty years old. But what is as surprising as their longevity is their equal lack of acceptance. We like them, sort of, but under certain circumstances, and not always then, or so it would seem. They are certainly easier to search, much easier to scan quickly, and, of course, you can carry 1,000 or more of them in one hand. Further, right now anyway, they are much cheaper than their print counterparts. It would appear (<http://wrd.cm/1iZgOTX>) that even in certain cases, especially with struggling readers, ebooks may make them read more because ebooks define words and can even read to you. All of these things are critically important. And yet, we're still not at the point of full ebook embrace.

Now all of this I know sounds a bit skimble-skamble, but that is unfortunately where things are presently. Ebooks are being used in libraries, especially in public libraries for leisure reading and of course by individuals for the same. But exactly where they will end up in the vast calculus of the full panoply of library services is anyone's guess.

This sounds counter-intuitive because many very vocal but still small cadres of ebook readers proclaim ebooks for all, for everyone, for all time. Some still claim, again, for the 1,000th time, that print books are dead and that libraries, if they aren't already obsolete, should collect only ebooks before they fade like so many spent bottle rockets. At the opposite end of the spectrum are those who say that we're rushing much too fast into the digital apocalypse, and we'll be sorry when we get to digital Armageddon. As is the case in most such antipodean quarrels, the truth is somewhere in the middle.

The inquisitive folks at Pew did a survey on the internet and its usage. Now you would expect that those over fifty aren't especially enamored with ebooks, and you'd be right. But guess what? It turns out that 16-24 year olds are not that enamored with them either! Nationwide, our high tech, never-without-an-iPhone-attached-to-my-ear crowd loves traditional libraries. Furthermore, according to Pew (<http://ow.ly/ueHaI>), this group also prefers print books! Some of you are doubtless thinking that must be a minority preference, but you'd be wrong. More than 70% of those 16-24 year olds feel that way.

Just last month, a survey (<http://ow.ly/ueIY2>) of students at the University of Iowa (600 of them) found that the 18-22 year olds there much preferred printed textbooks to e-textbooks, even e-textbooks that had some sophisticated bookmarking, underlining and note-taking features. In fact, most students didn't even use those features. These students used ebooks, but apparently only when they had to. Yet this should not have come as a complete surprise since most students favor print over digital for serious academic reading (<http://bit.ly/QJ628g>).

Finally, after increasing in sales year-after-year, the ebooks sales have declined (<http://ow.ly/ueJVs>) in 2013, and rather significantly. For more on the decline, see here (<http://www.rougtype.com/?p=3590>). Mr. Bezos, call your office, immediately!

Okay, so what's up with all this?! Are we just technophobes, Luddites, unenlightened slob? Foot-dragging, knuckle-headed, digital nincompoops?

I don't think so, but I do think I have a good idea why we're at this juncture.

The roll-out of ebooks decades ago was simply dreadful, more botched than the Obamacare website. Everything about them was wrong, but especially wrong were the ereaders, which were simply unaffordable to most, and unusable to all. (Kindles are still very substantially subsidized to make them as "affordable" as they are.) You couldn't read all that well on any of them. The next iteration proved hyperlinked-filled with more distractions in the first paragraph (some actually on topic) that reading was like crossing a dangerous intersection in a major metropolitan area: you were so fixated on getting to the other side intact that you often forgot why you wanted to go there in the first place.

The third iteration saw so many ebook readers rise and fall that no reader knew which device to buy. Simultaneous with this came content restrictions: this ebook reader held content A, this ebook reader held content B. If you bought content A, you realized too late that you really wanted content B, and vice versa. It proved devilishly difficult to figure out what to do. If you could afford them—and most could not—you bought as many different contents as you possibly could, but it also meant buying and changing ereaders, too.

The iteration that brought us the iPad, not really an ebook reader but served as one, appeared to bring us to the promise land of ereading. But, alas, the late Zen-master Steve Jobs allegedly conspired with others in a price-fixing scheme (<http://ow.ly/ueLqi>) to make all ebooks cost \$12.99 each. That case is now in the courts and does not promise, at least at this juncture, to bode well for Apple.

If all of this were not enough to poison the wine, ebook content providers gouged libraries who dared to lend them. Libraries do not really own ebooks; they lease them. Even today, there is a librarian-led movement to rebel against this by calling on libraries to boycott these products until vendors removed most, if not all, the restrictions (<http://bit.ly/QJ628g>). When you look back over the recent history, the question isn't so much why ebooks haven't yet caught on, but why they haven't died on the vine.

What has also slowed down the ebook revolution is that those reading etexts face a comprehension problem. What our eyes do when we read, those oddly jerky, jittery dances—what experts call saccades—are very different in print environments than they are in electronic ones. No one knows for sure whether the difference is owing to this very new way of reading, or to some hardwired make-up in our brains. Some researchers (<http://bit.ly/1dBCtsw>) tell us that reading on a screen simply drain our brains of all our mental energies to comprehend. Apparently we exhaust ourselves just getting through the material and therefore forget what we've read. Certainly, there are too many distractions in web-based texts that cause us to lose our focus.

Additionally, we have read for the last millennium with a light over our shoulders. Now we're telling our brains it will be directly in our eyes, however faint that light may be. We are discovering the switch to be a little more difficult than we anticipated, and some of us simply cannot make the switch at all without headaches, eyestrain, and more. We are also finding that those who read electronically first cannot easily make the switch to a print environment very easily at all, while those who learn to read in print first, make the switch, *ceteris paribus*, just fine.

So, is the era of ebooks over? Hardly. But changes will have to come to solidify their place in the reading pantheon. Doubtless those changes will come, are coming, but we aren't there just yet. Meanwhile, libraries continue to purchase ebooks because vendors make them altogether too fiscally attractive to ignore. It would take a medium-sized library about a decade and a half to purchase 100,000 print books, assuming they had space for them (most do not). In one year, any library can purchase that many for about thirty cents each and have them available to readers in a matter of days.

We are well on our way to ebook paradise, but it will take longer to get there than any of us imagined. Until we sort out all of these things, however, you shouldn't burn that library card.

Libraries are not obsolete after all, and I for one hope they never become so, regardless of the changes that are surely to come, not only with ebooks, but with all library services.