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S. David Mash
Columbia Biblical Seminary and School of Missions

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Libraries, Books, and Academic Freedom

by S. David Mash (Dean of Information Resources and Services, Graduate School (Resident Faculty), Columbia Biblical Seminary and School of Missions (Resident Faculty))

"After school Pulcifer stopped at the library. There weren't too many books, because the audio-visual equipment took up so much room, but finally he found a book about a boy and his dog that he'd been wanting to read. When he went to the desk to check it out, the librarian said, 'It's very disappointing to see you taking out a book, Pulcifer, when you could be watching television. Do your parents know you come here to get books?' Pulcifer shook his head. 'I didn't think so. I don't think they would like to know that you were coming in here, getting books out, taking them home to read.' She frowned at Pulcifer. 'I remember one boy, Pulcifer, who started with just one book. Two months later he was checking out three books. Three, Pulcifer! The habit had formed. It was too late to help him.'"

The fictional Pulcifer attended school in the 1980s. Pulcifer's nonfiction cousins are now enrolled at Eastern Michigan University where, according to the Chronicle of Higher Education, half the book collection has been put in a vault to make room for anything but books. Morrell D. Boone, Dean of Learning Resources and Technology at Eastern Michigan, admits he has no idea how this arrangement has affected book circulation. But, he says, "I don't care [because] undergraduates do all their research online now."

eBook publisher Susan Moldow believes we are but five years away from a generation of young people who may never see a book.

The Death of the Book . . . Again

Thirty years ago cable television spelled the doom of libraries. Twenty years ago computers were going to make books obsolete. Ten years ago we were told printed materials would steadily decline. Now at last, another decade later, the undergraduates at Eastern Michigan University are finally living the vision; they do all their research online. There is only one problem: it isn't true. In a letter to the editor of the Chronicle of Higher Education, Dr. Higbee of the history department at Eastern Michigan wrote that Boone's claims that undergraduates do only online research is ludicrous. Higbee versus Boone might pass as a parochial academic spat were it not emblematic of the broader confusion in American higher education over the place of the traditional library. This confusion is not trivial matter, for it blinds our minds to its corrosive effects on the scope of educational quality in our colleges and universities.

Why does this confusion over the place of the traditional library persist? Because influential and tenacious advocates for a book-free future continue to cast visions even in the face of decades of failed death-of-the-book prophecies. Even the formidable computer giant Microsoft claimed the death of the book three years ago. But something unexpected happened on the way to the future. In July of 2001, PC Magazine bluntly stated this was bunk. One month later the New York Times reported that eBooks, in addition to not gathering dust, are also not gathering any readers. Less than three years after founding the ambitious Francfort eBook Awards, Microsoft withdrew financing and discontinued the event. A glimpse at other recent mega-digitopian initiatives, such as the deceased Publish project and the shut down Questa e-library, provide similar case studies.

Adding insult to injury, in August of 2002 The Chronicle of Higher Education reported the results of an eBook study conducted with students at Ball State University. The study, supported by a $20-million grant from the Eli Lilly and Company Foundation, found that college students are not yet willing to replace textbooks with eBooks.

The Web We Weave

But won't the Web come to our rescue? Many students—and an increasing number of faculty and administrators—think of the Web as infinite as the universe and as bottomless as the proverbial pit. Yet it's not that simple. The Internet is a tree-for-all haystack requiring no editorial oversight, no quality control, no integrity checks and no mooring to reality. With no quality control, the Web is as likely to cite information on breast cancer as it is on breasts, so to say. What you find there today may be gone tomorrow, and the owner leaves no forwarding address. Anne Mintz, Director of Knowledge Management at Forbes and award-winning information industry author, admits that "Web houses, counterfeit sites and other spurious information on the Internet can give even the most discriminating of searchers a hard time." Ditto that, Barbara Quint, Editor of Searcher magazine who warns that getting information off the Web may be as useless as getting it from a random telephone call. Add to that the essential reading for all researchers, the eye-opening book Web of Deception, Misinformation on the Internet, a veritable tome of Internet glitches and disinformation, and you have the makings of a disaster.

Even with educationally credible sites, a phenomenon known as "link rot" further complicates matters. The June 2002 issue of the Journal of Science Education and Technology reported the link rot rate as a half-life of only 55 months. Imagine a library of useful materials mysteriously halving in size in just five years. It's no wonder that former Wired contributing writer Paula Boorsook believes a growing number of young people are deluded into thinking, "it if isn't on the Web, it isn't real." The upshot of this idea can turn out to be a life-or-death matter. In the summer of 2002 a Johns Hopkins medical researcher discovered that a customary Internet search failed to uncover a deadly protocol available only through a thorough and calculated search.

Despite these unrythmic realities, the Internet is an indispensable research tool. But the notion that it is sufficient as the tool of choice, or worse, the only really necessary tool for all or even most research tasks, is both pernicious and thoroughly out of touch. How has this quixotic notion obtained such wide acceptance?

Habits of Mind in an Entertainment Economy

The cardinal mantra of today's book-free advocates is that the current generation of students simply does not learn through books. Take, for instance, the Des Moines Area Community College West Campus where in place of a library, the school has a resource center furnished with Web-based computer workstations and eBooks and online journal access. The resource center houses no books. Dr. Anthony Paustian, executive dean of West Campus, defends the decision by arguing that young people grow up staring at computer screens. Far be it for educators to inculcate anything as valuable as proper research skills.

Apparently, books and other paper media just aren't "interesting" enough for all these gamers-turned-college-students. A substantial body of literature indicates that the kind of learning proclaimed by the pundits is not what many students coming to our colleges and universities associate with the Internet. Perhaps then, for twenty-first century students, we may need to reintroduce the learning styles that have stood the test of time. Isn't this what education is all about?

Can we cast aside linear habits of learning that 500 years of book reading has taught without consequence? Probably not. Neil Postman certainly doesn't think so: "A major new medium changes the structure of discourse; it does so by encouraging certain uses of the intellect." Perhaps, we're throwing the baby out with the bath water, and many experts agree. The Internet is championed as a nonlinear medium. But is nonlinear thinking all that it's cracked up to be? David Rothenberg, a professor of philosophy, thinks the Web invites a randomness of thought that leads to a weakness in logic and argument. Pandit Gertrude Himmelfarb sees the Internet as contributing to our sound bite mentality and piecemeal creativity, especially in creative concerns. Unabomber victim and Yale computer science professor David Gelernter has expressed strong
doubts about the Web. “Everyone knows what you do with the Web: You surf, sliding from site to site with the click of a mouse button. Exactly what problem will Web-surfing attack? … Is insufficient shallowness? Excessive attention spans? Unhealthy fixation on in-depth analysis? Stubborn unwillingness to push on to the next topic until they have mastered the last?”

In some instances nonlinear thinking is just newspaper for mental incoherence. But though nonlinear or lateral thinking is sometimes beneficial and even preferable, the de-emphasis of linear modes through the de-emphasis of print media is educationally regressive. The price of gamer-in-gamer-out educational strategy is mass intellectual insularity. Thomas Mann believes that making students comfortable with computers is not the same as making them comfortable with reading and analyzing text. Social critic David Shenk cautions that “In our restless technological optimism, we tend to look down on old technologies as inferior. But we need to resist this. Traditional narrative offers the reader a journey with a built-in purpose; the progression of thought is specifically designed so that the reader may learn something, not just from parts of the story, but also from the story as a whole.”

Educators succumb to technological determinism when they place their faith in the dictum that since our students come to us with minds habituated to visual media, then educational processes should further harden the habit. It quickly follows that attempts to expand or deepen or mature their intellectual life beyond the thin screen through extensive and intensive use of print media are off the mark. Such attempts, we are told, just don’t adequately account for this generation’s visual way of learning. While we are at it, let’s design a nutrition program based on this generation’s way of eating. And certainly the science of exercise physiology should be more attentive to the priority of this generation’s way of exercising.

But higher education isn’t “higher” if it doesn’t rise above the practice of tracing pre-existing roots. Education is useless if all it does is inure us to our preconceived narrowness and myopia. Furthermore, programmatic de-emphasis of print media (expecially books) strikes at a core value of the academy: academic freedom.

The Depredation of Academic Freedom

No one could have imagined the context of today’s academic libraries where the issue of academic freedom was forged. Yet, it is no less important today. The systematic de-emphasis of print media and the unique habits of mind it alone inculcates suppresses the spirit of inquiry because it foreshadows the horizon of ideas to which a student may be exposed and narrows the cognitive options for developing and exploring alternative ways of thinking. Administrative decisions which misappropriate the role of books by marginalizing their presence deprive students of a means of inquiry and intellectual growth with attributes and effects all its own and necessary for the sustenance of a balanced and considered life of the mind. When substance is traded away for a popular perception of relevance, both substance and relevance are lost.

Moreover, since “freedom to learn” foreshadows the possibility of learning, the exile of material resources (books) with unique content found only offline is a depredation of academic freedom, an indirect and unintentional but potent act of censorship. Any academic process or administrative disposition which fails to account for the fact that an immeasurable flood of important scholarly and educational material continues to appear only in print resources is at best naïve, but the effect is far from benign: flashlight to the Johns Hopkins tragedy. Librarians face the problems daily as we shift funds from one source to another, looking for ways to purchase materials. With online access, however, we further truncate the process by adding to the mix of materials, shelving the good side by side with the useless. Paul Gilster, author of the best selling books The Internet Navigator and Finding Fun on the Internet agrees: “When is a globe-spanning information network dangerous? When people make too many assumptions about what they find on it.”

How ironic that extensive research on the information habits of college students, published in 2007, reveals the brutal fact that traditional library resources continue to receive heavy use on American college and university campuses, even amidst some displacement of library use by use of the Internet in general. The research, conducted by Harris Interactive, was a blind study with 18-24 year old U.S. college students who use the Internet for course work. The sample was drawn from a pool of 7 million individuals, representative of all U.S. regions. The study found the majority of college students are ambivalent about paper versus electronic copies. A strong majority use the campus library Website for some of their assignments, while 20 percent use it for most assignments. Yet a strong 90 percent use the library for its print resources, including books, journals, articles and encyclopedias.

Conclusion

In Fahrenheit 451, firemen execute state censorship through the burning of books. A central character, Mr. Valery, observes that “The folly of mistaking a metaphor for a proof, a torrent of verbiage for a spring of capital truths…is born in us.” The “information superhighway” metaphor (referring to the Internet), carried to the masses by years of torrential verbiage from influential and tenacious advocates for a book-free future, has attained the status of a proof. Merely invoking the phrase is to express a capital truth. But in our case firemen don’t burn books; educators (and too shamefully often, some are librarians) continue on page 24
I have decided to frame this reflection on the comparative value of the print world of books and Internet pages, and the new world of print and other sources of information, as a reflection on one of the most important bibliographic questions that I have been asked recently. It is a question about the nature of the relationship between print and Internet, and the way in which these two forms of information are used and understood.

The question is: what is the value of print in the Internet age? Is the Internet a replacement for print, or is it a complementary tool? Is the Internet a disruption of the traditional print world, or is it a way to extend the reach of print into new areas?

I believe that the answer to this question is that the Internet is not a replacement for print, but rather a complementary tool. The Internet can be used to extend the reach of print into new areas, and to provide new ways of accessing information. However, it is not a complete replacement for print, and there are still many cases in which the value of print cannot be matched by the Internet.

The value of print lies in its ability to provide a permanent record of information, and to provide a focus for reflection and critical thinking. The Internet is useful for accessing information quickly, and for providing a way to share information with others. However, the Internet is not a permanent record, and the information that is accessible on the Internet can change quickly.

In conclusion, I believe that the value of print lies in its ability to provide a permanent record of information, and to provide a focus for reflection and critical thinking. The Internet is useful for accessing information quickly, and for providing a way to share information with others. However, the Internet is not a permanent record, and the information that is accessible on the Internet can change quickly. Therefore, I believe that the value of print lies in its ability to provide a permanent record of information, and to provide a focus for reflection and critical thinking, while the Internet is useful for accessing information quickly, and for providing a way to share information with others.