

## The Future of the "Book" in Light of the Present Rise in "E" Publications

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## THE FUTURE OF THE “BOOK” IN LIGHT OF THE PRESENT RISE IN “E” PUBLICATIONS

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“We make a mistake if we view books and screen technologies as competing for popularity or acknowledged superiority. These are not two approaches to the same thing, but two different things. Books cannot—and should not have to—compete with chip-powered implements”.

Sven Birkerts  
The Antioch Review

In the recent past, several professionals from the fields of publishing, librarianship and technology have written or spoken about the rapidly-evolving technologies and their impact on the book. A well-established cultural artifact, the book is the undisputed link between the idea, cultural practices, and social institutions.

The debates centering around the fate of the book raise questions regarding the following:

1. The book as artifact with established functionality that suits the habits of readers.
2. Will the book be superseded by technological development?
3. Will screen displays, databases, e-readers, etc. replace the functionality of the bound pages?
4. If the book is replaced by screen displays, what would be the effect of reading as practice?
5. Are books imperiled?
6. The emergence of new “technological imperatives”. What are they?
7. Do they adequately or effectively reflect the needs of readers?

Sven Birkerts, in an essay on the subject, asserts that any consideration of the future of the book would be incomplete without a simultaneous consideration of the emergence of “electronic technologies, which require and even” dictate new approaches and solutions to what is essentially a print-centered culture (Birkerts, 1).

The printed text, he argues, confers on the book a certain degree of authoritativeness based on the compilation of a complete set of claims, standardized and authorized, forming a complete entity. He writes, “The fixity of the word imprinted on the page, and our awareness of the enormous editorial and institutional pressure behind that fixity, send the message that here is a formulation, an expression, that must be attended to” (Birkerts, 1996).

For Birkerts, the printed book forms part of larger structure that embodies and communicates “knowledge and understanding”, legitimized in a way by traditionally-accepted societal imprimatur (author’s name, publisher’s logo, etc. etc.). Its identifying characteristics are the three-dimensionality of its form, and its solidity; all of which are fragmented by screen technologies.

Birkerts values the collective knowledge that the array of bound volumes on the library shelves represents. This physical collection facilitates browsing and offers us additional information serendipitously.

While the reader can access the info in electronic format strategically, it also has the tendency to facilitate avoidance of whole sections, passages or chapters that we may consider uninteresting or irrelevant—an act that distracts us from whatever serendipitous information we may have found in the surrounding text. E-texts are replete with features that encourage or even facilitate such truncated approaches to the act of reading itself. They do not bring closure to the subject discussed. The e-text then, fragments, deconstructs the structure of the univocal nature of the traditional text and promotes an open-ended use that hardly exhausts the totality of available options.

What kinds of books then are we using to “shape our thinking and our values (intellectual culture)?”

The e-text, though easily accessible and polysemous is mutable, and harder to rank and concretize, unlike printed books which can serve as “footprints” leading to successive centuries of culture and tradition. Birkerts suggests that this marks a shift from the diachronic approach of the printed text which privileges “historical depth” contrary to a “single vast collection of cross-referenced materials—synchronic”—(p. 265). This replaces the layered recession of texts with <webs> and <trees> which submerge any notion of story “in vast informational complexity”.

Birkerts further predicts that this may prove detrimental for posterity. He warned: “...it will be the generations of students who learn about the past from these connections-rich databases who will, over time, internalize a very different understanding of the past than was held by the many generations predicting them” (p. 265).

Matthew Bruccoli echoes similar sentiments in his paper entitled “The End of Books and Death of Libraries” (2006). Extending a quote by Samuel Johnson, he agrees that the chief glory of every people is perpetuated in its books. At the present time, these books are at risk—all books (for research-reference-study and recreations). The reason being that “Virtual Libraries, (in spite of their ability to ensure non-dependence on physical libraries) serve to alienate a good percentage of college students from their college libraries. Bruccoli contends that “to encourage students non-dependence on libraries is to betray them. The book is the most useful and usable learning instrument ever invented” (Bruccoli p.44). Further, when these books are digitized they are reduced to mere objects on a screen. He argues:

“Those electronic things on a screen are not books. They don’t work the way books work. They aren’t as good as books. On screen matter does not allow for sustained reading. The universal virtual library will destroy reading techniques. Reading will become an anti-social act ...” (Bruccoli p. 45).

While scanning has been valorized as an act of preservation, Bruccoli argues that it is unhelpful if not unreliable for textual scholarship, which relies for its effectiveness on the tactile, physical features of the printed text. Upon examination yields, the physical text yields “bibliographical, cultural, literary, graphic, critical, and biographical evidence.”

If a book “evokes the circumstances, culture, and society that inspired it, produced it and utilized it ...,” the current campaign to digitize, bodes ill for the rare book collection – which has to be ‘examined’ to be fully understood. However, a new problem arises and Bruccoli argues: “when the administrator and electronic junkies replace libraries with bookless buildings stocked with screens, the librarians who select the books for scanning and preservation will become essential people in the profession. They will be trained to recognize editions, impressions, issues, and states” (Bruccoli p.46).

In addition to the proper training of librarians Brucoli raises the issue of the fate of the actual book, after digitization. Source of these books are sent to remote archives or destroyed, with the valuable ones being salvaged by book lovers.

If books are preserved or digitized as a cost-saving measure, how is the cost of technology cheaper? Every year the cost of updating and replacing software and hardware escalates leaving Libraries to work with an ever-decreasing acquisitions budget.

The digital library presents serious copyright issues. Authors, realizing that they may no longer rely on income earnings by the sale of their books, may choose another field altogether. Many books, once digitized are downloaded for free, much to the disappointment of the author.

Implications for University and college Libraries. With the problem of diminishing budgets for acquisitions in the universities there has been a marked decline in the number of books provided by libraries, many of which do not even collect "text books." Collection Development librarians can hardly afford to "build" subject collections to the fullest. Rather, fewer books, no duplicates, consortial buying (some libraries share only one copy of a book per consortium to be shared through a system of Inter Library Loan.)

Scholars teaching in institutions that require the publication of a full length scholarly book are adversely affected. Academic presses have had to cut back on the publication of the monograph, because the size of the market has been significantly diminished by this reality. Editorial staff positions have been reduced and less lucrative scholarly publications are not being published at the same rate by academic presses.

### **Comparison with the Music Industry**

The sale of compact discs (CDs) began to fall in 2000. Causing a lot of chaos within the music industry. While some tried to blame the economy, others chose to blame Napster. Written in 1999 by a 19 year old student Shawn Fanning, Napster would scan the hard disk of a user's computer and compile any music into a central directory making it available for others.

In July 2000, Napster was sued for violation of copyright laws. This lawsuit required the removal of all copyrighted files from the database. However, other similar download sites created would face similar lawsuits and be forced to either shutdown or operate in a legal way. A similar trend in textbook is occurring.

Many schools are cutting acquisition budget because of funding problems. Hall states "this fact, together with the acquisition and merger of many publishing houses by transnational media conglomerates who frequently expect their publishing divisions to operate according to the same kind of profit margins as other areas of their business (such as music, film, and television), has led a number of publishers of academic texts to cut back sharply on their commissions" (Hall p.42).

G. Hall, in his new book, feels that if there were free academic download text sites it would help provide a way around many problems created by the kind of restrictive copyright regulations that enable the publishing industry to limit the number of photocopied texts. Students would be able to receive more copies of academic journals from their professors. Academics would not need to worry about their appeal to a publisher and focus instead on their research and academic work.

## Digitization and the question of stability

But, the question of fixity arises. How secure is our civilizations accumulated knowledge. If our world of ideas is documented in the printed book, and if the printed book is digitized, how stable will that electronic archive of knowledge be?

### Merits

- “The chief glory of every people is perpetuated in its books which are to be found in libraries”.
- “The book is the most prestigious valued mode of publication, and functions as main criterion for tenure and promotion.
- The book is the most useful and usable learning instrument ever invented-Fred Kilgour
- Fully searchable; 24/7; inter linked-full text
- Digitization of the book-enhances the possibility of making all the research literature open access and thus available at very low cost to researchers, teachers, students and the public, on a global scale
- Means of democratizing knowledge
- The ideal of one ‘global virtual archive’ of academic work is problematic-access may not be “seamless”
- Digitizing has a “...prosthetic effect on the performance of our existing disciplines and “paper” forms of publications that provides an increase in the amount of material that can be stored, the number of people who have access to it, the potential impact of that material, the range of distribution, the ease of information retrieval, reductions in staffing, production and reproduction costs, etc.
- Digital vs. books in print in research
- Surrendering to the organizing logic of the book is the way one learns
- Confront the text as a whole-not cut and paste disembodied passages
- Essential tool to supported learning

### Questions

- Can open access be maintained as a noble project? As a business model?
- Technology cost of making computer technology available to those who cannot afford – developing countries
- Fixity concerns that digital text “lack fixity” stability and permanence, relative to time and space
- Debate needed on the “institutional authority and legitimacy - ”Concern for the radical ethical and political questions digitization raises for academic and institutional authority and legitimacy”
- How does a digitized book affect our attitude to knowledge? Especially the humanities and social services

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