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Why Do We Still Buy Books?

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Designing Librarians on the Web from page 81

One great strategy is to start by designing a page for yourself — a true home page. Heaven knows you're well acquainted with your audience. Whatever you do, don't be intimidated. Just let it rip.

Thumbs Up!

A Great Library Web Site

The home page of the **Caltech Library System** <<http://library.caltech.edu/>> is clean but colorful, with easy-to-read fonts and attractive small graphics, a clear easy-on-the-eye (though not boring) layout, and a elegant faint background that doesn't interfere with either reading or printing the page. It also has a few news items and links to trial subscriptions at the top — a great location for such items.

When I say library sites tend to the "dull," I don't mean to suggest we go overboard with animated graphics, day-glow colors, etc. Heaven forbid. Better dull than garish. They just need some polish — like this lovely site.

Fun Site

TipWorld <<http://www.tipworld.com/>> emails daily helpful hints. It's particularly good on software (e.g. **Windows 98** and **Microsoft Office 97**), but also covers subjects ranging from book reviews and litera-

ture trivia to car care and better sleeping. One caveat: the advertising in the daily email is a bit thick.

Web Book

Designing Web Usability by Jakob Nielsen (New Riders Publishing, 2000) ISBN: 156205810X \$45.00

Currently number one on Amazon's computer bestseller list, **Designing Web Usability** is a must-read for anyone serious about Web work. Nielsen is widely hailed as the expert in this field, and his book lives up to that reputation. You can see his weekly columns at his own Web site: <<http://www.useit.com/>>. Ironically the page itself is no visual tour de force, though of course it is quite usable. It's obvious he favors function over form. However his suggestions are astonishingly sensible and thought-provoking. Also, they are backed by hard data (e.g. typing and counting pixels of screen real estate), many helpful examples, and clear illustrations. 🐘

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Why Do We Still Buy Books?

by David H. Stam (University Librarian Emeritus, Syracuse University)

The following paper was delivered as the keynote address at the 19th Annual Charleston Conference and is presented here much as it was presented with minimal editing and a few sources added.

David H. Stam is University Librarian Emeritus at **Syracuse University** and is currently editing an **International Dictionary of Library Histories** to be published by **Fitzroy Dearborn** in 2001.

My first reaction to **Rosann Bazirjian's** invitation to speak at this conference was the typical victim's re-

sponse of "Why Me?" I was already happily retired, engaged in several other projects, unconcerned about tenure or promotion, devoid of ambition, tired of travel, and eager to enjoy whatever leisure my preoccupations allowed, including reading. But I was and am concerned about books and I could only assume that Rosann and the program committee were looking for the oldest and grayest defender of that outmoded commodity whom they could find; I had to admit that I fit the profile in every respect and I accepted the invitation.

But I expect some empathy for a tough assignment. The topic seems a lonely one on this program—even though the Conference title is "Issues

in Book and Serial Acquisition," I have looked in vain for any other title among the fifty odd papers of these three days which even mentions the word, apart from e-books. My wife charitably suggested that you acquisitions librarians have the book business so well mastered that you have to turn to new and knottier problems for your electronic survival. Another difficulty is in trying to balance the onslaughts of the doomsayers of the book against the sentimental claptrap of its defenders. We've heard so often for so many years that "you can't curl up in bed with a computer" that it becomes a challenge to try. Just yesterday I heard a variant new to me and a refreshing change: "you can't take a computer to the bath-

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tub." For better or worse, I accepted the invitation in hopes of consolidating some thoughts after a forty-year career of dealing with books and eventually bits and bytes.

Let me start with a story I read in an English magazine many years ago. It concerned a woman who was apprehended while peeling an orange in the **British Museum Reading Room**. A guard approached and said: "Madam, I'm afraid eating is not permitted in the Reading Room." Her curt reply: "I'm not going to eat it, you fool, I'm going to squeeze the juice on the books" [laughter]. (*The Listener*, 1950s.) I use this story as a litmus test; if none of you had laughed I would give up hope and we could move on to the next session right now. It isn't just the clever retort that makes the story funny, but the incongruity of the response, the respect we all subconsciously share for these objects. One just doesn't do that to books, and if you did laugh, even quietly, you betrayed some of that respect which I believe binds us together, if you'll forgive the pun.

Despite the need for increased library allocations for very necessary electronic resources, we continue to buy books because they are useful. We'll try to get into that in more detail, but since I was asked to tell some stories for this early morning audience, let me demonstrate some odd examples of such utility. The learned librarian, bibliographer, and collector, **A.N.L. Munby of St Johns' College**, Cambridge, tells a youthful story of his purchase of two medieval manuscripts sold a year later to help purchase a 1925 Bugatti which regularly needed roadside repair. "Its mechanical eccentricities involved me in a small piece of vandalism which I recall with shame. One of its gaskets, which kept blowing, was finally found to be responsive to vellum, and a thick leaf from a water-stained and ruined Antiphonal was cut up for the purpose; and this, when enthusiasts asked the Bugatti's age, enabled one to indulge in a little piece of lifemanship and reply nonchalantly, 'Parts of it date back to the fifteenth century.'" (*Essays and Papers*, ed. by **Nicolas Barker**. London, Scolar Press, 1977, p. 220-21.)

A more sentimental if not maudlin story comes from the folk-lore of the **Newberry Library** in Chicago where I once did time. The tale involves a well-known scholar-librarian, a Shakespearean by the name of **W. W. Willoughby**, who, for whatever reasons of incompetence or insubordination, was fired by the Library some time in the 1920s. For years on the anniversary of his termination, he felt compelled to give the Library increasingly valuable books, culminating on the 25th anniversary when he presented an incunable, rebound in the cloth from the tie he was wearing on the day of his sacking. It presumably joined a notable collection of bindings including such memorable spine titles as *Bourbon Works* and *Hare on the Stomach*, not to mention a volume bound in human skin.

But these stories are mere diversions to avoid the difficult topic of why we still buy books. The question is intended as institutional rather than personal--the public and even many librarians continue to buy books for themselves in record numbers. Last month a bibliomaniac friend of mine drove

from Syracuse to Ithaca at 6 am to get to a used book sale by 7 where he was fortunate to be number 287 in the line, and therefore among the limited number admitted at 8 am. He claims to have come home with over 200 books. If the book is dead more and more people are attending its memorial services. A whole new field of book history has emerged. Societies such as **SHARP** (the **Society for the History of Authorship, Reading, and Publishing**) are growing. Web pages and listserves devoted to the book use electronic media to debate and promote the printed book. Bibliophilic book clubs are thriving, as are social reading groups. Social action groups such as TV-Free America promote reading over television and other screens. The individual bibliomaniac is far from dead; its anatomy is complex but the phenomenon remains fairly pervasive. For an

account of some of its extremes you should read **Nicolas Basbanes' *A Gentle Madness***, itself a bestseller in cloth and now in paper. The more recent phenomenon of cybermania is perhaps equally interesting and deserves a similar study. Judging from some recent reports, it is not quite so gentle a madness.

Institutionally, by contrast, we have been under immense pressure to divert more and more of our acquisitions dollars and compelled to devote a greater proportion of our budgets to electronic resources. The book budgets themselves are under attack as wasteful excesses on materials that nobody will use, though that argument often seems forgotten when it comes to serials and in any case is a red herring. Our campus administrators have been misled by advertised visions of electronic utopias, the **Library of Congress** in a shoebox (where some people say it belongs), and often the technology moguls at our institutions would love to get their hands on our acquisitions budgets. What a splendid setup for self-fulfilling prophecies of the end of the book!

It does seem important to say, however, that attacks on books and our accumulation of them are nothing new. Many over the centuries, from **Seneca** and **Caesar** to **Nietzsche** and **Shaw**, believed that the burning of the **Alexandrian Library** was a good thing. Shaw's *Caesar* says "Let it burn." **Ecclesiastes** implies there are too many. My favorite bit of library bashing is in **B.F. Skinner's *Walden Two***, a utopian satire on many aspects of American society, and forgive me if this passage is overly familiar but I'd like to quote it in full:

"As to a library, we pride ourselves on having the best books, if not the most. Have you ever spent much time in a large college library? What trash the librarian has saved up in order to report a million volumes in the college catalogue! Bound pamphlets, old jour-

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nals, ancient junk that even the shoddiest secondhand bookstore would clear from its shelves--all saved on the flimsy pretext that some day someone will study the "history of a field." Here [in *Walden Two*] we have the heart of a great library--not much to please the scholar or specialist, perhaps, but enough to interest the intelligent reader for life. Two or three thousand volumes will do it."

"The secret is this," he continued. "We subtract from our shelves as often as we add to them. The result is a collection that never misses fire. We all get something vital every time we take a book from the shelves. If anyone wants to follow a special interest we arrange for loans [Skinner doesn't say from where]. If anyone wants to browse, we have half a barnful of discarded volumes." (*Walden Two*, New York, Macmillan, 1976, p. 111-12.) Presumably Skinner's views were not widely shared by his **Harvard** colleagues with their unparalleled access to one of the world's largest collections.

Indulge me in one more diversion on the decline of the book before I finally get to the topic and some brief remarks on why we still buy books. "A whole generation of young people are growing up, to whom solid books are unknown, to whom the great historic names of the past are but a sound, and whose ignorance of the world of fact is poorly compensated by their acquaintance with the world of dreams." That sounds strikingly like a contemporary jeremiad against the evils of MTV, but in fact was published in 1869 in *Popular Amusements*, by **Jonathan Townley Crane**, father of **Stephen Crane**. More recent obituaries have come from the technologists who have consistently, and not without self-interest, predicted the death of the book and the maturing of the paperless society for several decades. Some aspects of the information revolution may be seen as fore-

shadowing that death, with the construction of virtual towers of Babel, the decline in reading skills, and the pervasive assumption that everything worth knowing will be digitized. An almost millennial fervor accompanies the prediction of the demise of the printed page. Yet the ubiquity of computers certainly hasn't diminished the need for paper, and judging from my own experience in libraries, the increase in electronic resources often leads to greater reliance on the printed archive.

Who was it that said prediction is a tricky business, especially about the future? I once predicted in print that in the near future most research collections, for reasons of space and security, would be housed in closed stacks (*ALA*

World Encyclopedia of Library and Information Services. Second ed. Chicago, 1986, p. 732). Though

the **Library of Congress** did tighten security in its stacks a few years ago, I was wrong with my prediction and I'm not now inclined to make predictions on the survival of the book. But I do want to offer a few comments on the continuing utility of books in a schizophrenic period of tension between traditional and innovative technologies.

Like most of you, I too am enamoured by the potential of automation for teaching and research, yet suspicious of the uncritical and often unhistorical acceptance which both students and faculty display toward an undifferentiated mass of information indiscriminately assembled on the World Wide Web. The absolute necessity of keeping abreast of changing technology, just to remain competitive, is obvious to us all. But its distortion of other priorities and the need to balance new developments with traditional roles disconcerts us all, including our users, who collectively want more and more of both.

Transitions are seldom complete and irreversible: script to print; telephone to email; horse transport to air travel--none completely replaced the other, though smoke signals and horse-drawn

carriages have been largely superseded. Let me give a few random reasons why I think this particular transition from print to screen should continue for a considerable period. I said earlier that we still buy books because they are useful. They provide a textual fixity that their electronic counterparts often do not. The content of books obviously can be changed, but it is much easier to observe their alteration than it is with electronic texts. In certain disciplines, such as fine arts and medicine, the visual imagery works much better in print than in digitized form and is less easily manipulated as "true" images. Books last fairly well, while we have yet to solve the problem of archival survival of electronic information. (Years ago I started a speech on preservation issues by mentioning that **Penguin Books** and I were born in the same year and that I had outlived many of them. Almost immediately a friend in the front row said he had lots of Penguins in better shape than me.) A great deal of work has so far addressed that survival problem but very inconclusively. Even within that context the survival of the commercially viable is much more likely than the more ephemeral materials of both general and scholarly appeal, the obscure detritus that Skinner evokes. Nor have the more non-commercial products of research library digital initiatives yet guaranteed their survival. Most digital products end up being printed in any case. Why? Because print on paper is easier to read. Although this may change, the battle of the new digital technology versus the old "reading" technology still compels the survival of the book. Unlike their electronic counterparts, their cost is relatively cheap and predictable. Besides, a lot of our users want them, perhaps to take them to bed or the bathtub. So we end where we began: never under estimate the comfort factor, however sentimental it might sound. (For a recent defense published after this paper was written, see **William Gass**, "In Defense of the Book," *Harper's* [November 1999] p. 45-51.)

The last word goes to **Richard de Bury**, 14th-century Bishop of Durham who in his *Philobiblon* says: "Whoever" claims to be zealous of truth, of happiness, of wisdom, of knowledge, aye, even of the faith, must needs become a lover of books." I rest my case. 🐾