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IMHBCO (In My Humble But Correct Opinion) — The Book Is Dead and It's a Good Thing, Too

by Rick Anderson (Director of Resource Acquisition, University of Nevada, Reno Libraries) <rickand@unr.edu>

As a group, we librarians are certainly not unique in our ability to deny the obvious. But sometimes I think that we take that ability to a unique extreme.

It is obvious, for example, that as a research tool for all but a very few academic disciplines, the print monograph is dead. The very fact that such a statement will be taken as controversial is, I believe, proof positive of my introductory observation. Not only should it not be controversial, but it really isn't even news to us. Because as upsetting as it may be to state the fact out loud, we've all voted with our budgets and the results of the referendum are clear: books are out. According to the 2002 edition of the *Survey of Academic Libraries*, library purchases of print materials in general are down for the second year in a row, and the decline is precipitous: six percent between 2000 and 2001, and roughly another eight percent in 2002.¹ Look more specifically at sales trends for scholarly monographs — books that are used primarily for research rather than pleasure reading — and the numbers are even grimmer: according to an annual survey by the **Association of American Publishers**, library purchases of university press books are actually down just over twelve percent in 2002 as of June² (the **Association of American University Presses** reports a more modest decline³). Look specifically at hardbound UP books, and the AAP's numbers are grimmer still: a decline of twenty percent (twenty percent!) between June 2001 and June 2002. In other words, the printed book is dead as a research tool, and whether we say it aloud or not, our buying behavior indicates that we know this to be true.

If the AAP's numbers can be trusted and the current trend continues, academic libraries will effectively stop buying hardbound scholarly monographs within the next five to ten years.

This brings to mind the old joke about the difference between a neurotic and a psychotic: a psychotic is someone who says "White is black and black is white! Really, I know it is!," whereas a neurotic is someone who says "No, white is white and black is black. But I hate it that way."

When it comes to books, I get the impression that most of us in the library profession are either psychotics or neurotics. I encountered the psychotic type at my local public library a little while ago, when I went with my daughter to help her with a homework assignment. The librarian behind the reference desk launched (bizarrely, and with no prompting

on our part) into a speech about the essential superiority of print resources over online ones. As an example he cited that bible of used-car shoppers, the *Kelly Blue Book*. He pulled out a print copy and invited me to compare it to the online version (<http://www.kbb.com>). We compared the two and, no surprise, found the online version to be clearly superior — it's free, it's fast, it's intuitive, and it allows the user to find valuation estimates using many different variables, all of which can be changed (and the estimate recalculated) in the twinkling of an eye. Perhaps best of all, from the patron's point of view, is the fact that it can be accessed without a trip to the library. The difference in usability and convenience was dramatic, and it was wholly invisible to this librarian, who seemed puzzled that I found the online version preferable.

"Psychotics" of this sort are relatively unusual in our profession. The neurotic type is more common. These are the librarians who say, in essence, "Yes, I understand that patrons prefer to get their information from online resources rather than print ones. But they're wrong, and we need to convince them to change their behavior." This attitude manifests itself in varying degrees, of course, from the simply judicious ("Don't forget, the best source might not be available online") to the downright idiotic ("Just because it's online doesn't mean it's better").

To deliver ourselves from both psychosis and neurosis, we must take two difficult, but not impossible, intellectual and emotional steps. The first is to acknowledge what is obviously true. This may be painful, but professional ethics demands it — it is impossible to serve patrons well with one's eyes squinched shut and fingers in one's ears. The second is to decide to accept the truth and make the best of it.

The first step is not really controversial; few will argue that we should refuse to accept reality, even if many of us are doing so slowly and reluctantly. The second is more problematic: is the death of the book a good thing or a bad thing?

Let's begin with the first step, in which we acknowledge reality. The simple (and again, really quite obvious) fact is that as a research tool, the print book or journal is a dismal failure. This was the case even before the advent of online information, but that reality was camouflaged by the fact that so much good research got done anyway. What we need to bear in mind is that most of that research was possible not because of the essential nature of

printed information, but in spite of it. This can easily be demonstrated by comparing the relative strengths and weakness of print and online formats.

On the negative side, print books and journals are:

- physically heavy and unwieldy
- environmentally wasteful
- usable by only one person at a time
- difficult and expensive to distribute
- not searchable (except, in some cases, by means of very crude indexes)
- available only to those who are physically present in the library
- incapable of offering dynamic links to other information resources
- available only when the host institution is open

On the positive side, print books and journals offer:

- a considerable degree of archival permanence
- a comfortable format for extended reading

Online books and journals, on the other hand, are:

- weightless
- environmentally friendly (at least as compared to print materials)
- usable by multiple persons simultaneously
- generally deeply searchable
- available to remote users
- capable of broad and dynamic linking to other sources
- available 24 hours per day

On the downside, online products offer:

- Only a tenuous promise of archival permanence (with some exceptions)
- A less-than-ideal reading environment (unless the item can be printed out by the user, in which case the online format offers the benefits of both online and print formats)

Stack these benefits and liabilities next to each other, and it's difficult to see how a rational person could conclude that print materials constitute anything other than a massive disservice to our patrons where good online alternatives exist. In other words, those who say "Just because it's online doesn't mean it's better" are dead wrong. All other things being equal, the online format is dramatically better. All other things are rarely equal, of course, and not all online alternatives to print are acceptable. But the liabilities of any particular online product have to be pretty dra-

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ATG Interviews Karen Hunter

Senior Vice President, Elsevier <k.hunter@elsevier.com>

by James Mouw (University of Chicago) <mouw@midway.uchicago.edu>

ATG: *What were your first experiences with digital content initiatives? What was your first glimmer?*

KH: The very first was back in 1978 in the early years of **Adonis** when we started looking at scanning journals onto optical disks. We thought we could use technology to bring down the cost of document delivery for institutions such as the **British Library**. We hoped — if we could reduce their costs, they could pay some royalties. Unfortunately, at that time, it turned out to be more expensive. A **Phillips** optical workstation cost \$40,000 in the early 1980s, when we were ready to go ahead. Until we got PC's and CD-ROM's, the costs just weren't reasonable.

ATG: *What do you see as the actual milestones?*

KH: If you talk about straight text services, the things like abstracting and indexing services and legal databases. I mean the real digital content; the milestones to me were things like **Dialog** and **Lexis Nexis**. That got us all realizing what was possible from database searching and what was possible for getting information to a remote user. There were a lot of reasons why it took a long time to move from straight text into more complicated things like journals and **Adonis** was certainly among the earliest. There were a lot of products using CD-ROM and we're all delighted that CD-ROM turned out to be just a step on the way. What we really needed were the local area networks on campuses; that's where we stepped up, for example, with the **TULIP**

experiment and getting information via **LAN** to the desktop. We started getting really more powerful desktop PCs that could handle more complicated graphics. Then came the Internet and the World Wide Web. But what really in my mind made the difference was **Mosaic**.

ATG: *Yes, the first browser.*

KH: The first browser is just what really blew things away.

ATG: *Then the pieces fell into place, we have the Internet, we had the Web browsers, and the users were ready — I guess. What would you actually see as the first successful, beyond a pilot, the putting of all the pieces together to give the information directly to the users?*

KH: **ScienceDirect** was early. It was early because when we were coming out of **TULIP**, we decided that we'd go ahead with an on-site solution that we called **Elsevier Electronic Subscriptions**.

That was a commercialization of all of our journals of what we had done with **TULIP** for a limited number. That was early 1996. And **Academic's Ideal** system was really an early pioneer. They had articles up as PDFs or scanned.

ATG: *The other milestone that comes to mind is when publishers realized there was also value in back files.*

KH: Yes. That brings me to a milestone that you might not have had in mind: **JSTOR**. **JSTOR** opened that up real wide and said, "Wow, if somebody can go back and do this,

these will be used." The other thing is **CrossRef**. Once we put a publisher cooperative linking mechanism into place, there was a way to generate hits on back files.

ATG: *You link from the reference that was the quoting article that was 20 years old.*

KH: Exactly. So suddenly there was a reason to do that because somebody might actually want it in a much more organized and reliable way. **JSTOR** and **CrossRef** opened a lot up.

ATG: *What are your concerns?*

KH: I'm not particularly concerned about some kind of wild pirating or unlimited copying or that kind of thing. We're concerned about costs and revenues; it comes down to money most of the time.

ATG: *You want to keep that paycheck coming, right?*

KH: Absolutely. It's very easy to say, "Well, gee, electronic publishing must be cheaper," but it just isn't the case. If you look at a very narrow view of exactly the same thing and just not printing it, distributing it on the Web instead, that one change is cheaper. But the whole ball of wax certainly is not. We worry about expenses all the time.

ATG: *Ten years from now, when print is gone, is electronic going to be cheaper, ever?*

KH: Potentially. The question is: Do we stand still? It's not going to be the same set of services. There is no question we are driving costs out of parts of the service. But because

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matic to outweigh its benefits relative to a print version of the same product.

Now for the second, and more challenging step, in which we decide to accept this new reality. For most librarians, it is an article of faith that students use the Internet primarily because of laziness. And despite the fact that laziness is often simply efficiency characterized uncharitably, let's grant, for the sake of argument, that the popularity of the Internet as a primary source is *prima facie* evidence of character weakness in our patrons. That still does not mean there is anything morally superior about the print format. The simple and really indisputable fact is that a world in which multiple library patrons can access needed information from their homes or offices 24 hours a day rather than having to schlep across town or campus at inconvenient hours in the (often frustrated) hope that the book or journal they need will be in its design-

ated spot is a better world for researchers, not a worse one. Online formats may not be as character-building as print formats, but maybe we should worry less about that. I'm confident that most of our patrons will have plenty of other character-building experiences in the course of their college or professional careers.

Don't get me wrong here: there's nothing wrong with loving books. I love them myself, and I have a big pile of them by my bed at home. At any given moment I'm in the middle of reading at least two or three print books. The thought of a library that is largely stripped of print materials makes me sad. But I can't in good conscience hold my patrons hostage to my personal nostalgia. Here's the bottom line: if you're a librarian because you love books, you're in the wrong profession. If you're going to work in libraries, you need to be prepared to provide information services to your patrons in the way that works best for them, whether or not it is the way that makes you the most comfortable as a librarian or that best conforms to our "professional standards."

When books and print journals were the only way to provide those services, it made sense for us to focus on ways to provide books and print journals. Far better options exist now, and if we are true professionals we will acknowledge the new reality, embrace it, and put it to work for our patrons. Luckily for them, the best of the new reality offers an enormous step forward from the reality to which many of us remain so irrationally attached. Our patrons are not the ones who need convincing on that score. 🐾

Endnotes

1. "AAP Numbers Not Encouraging for University Presses," *LJ Academic News Wire*, September 12, 2002.
2. "June Bring Sales Numbers Back to Earth," press release, Association of American Publishers, August 5, 2002.
3. Personal email communication with Brenna McLaughlin, Communications Manager, Association of American University Presses, September 20, 2002.