The Future of the Book

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flying the future of the book could
not have been relevant to Benjamin
Henry Blackwell, City Librarian of
Oxford, when he opened his small bookshop
on Broad Street to sell used books to students
and faculty. To booksellers, librarians, and
information specialists 125 years later, the topic
is of great relevance. Such a topic could easily
be a controversial one since any discussion con-
cerning the future is always debatable. As John
Seely Brown, former chief scientist of Xerox
and co-author of The Social Life of Information
wrote when explaining why so many predic-
tions remain predictions, “The way for-
ward is paradoxically to look not ahead, but
to look around. Only in this way can one
glimpse the future.”

As those familiar with James Joyce will
recall, June 16 is “Bloomsday,” that single
day in which all events in Joyce’s Ulysses, one of
the most important books of modern time, take
place. June 16, 2004 was the 100th anniver-
sary of that day. (In actual fact, James Joyce
met the love of his life Nora Barnacle on June
16, 1904. How’s that for romantic?)

We were preparing this paper on what fu-
ture there is for books just when this year’s cel-
bration for “Bloomsday” took
place in Dublin. The timing
seems ironic because Joyce
would have been helped enorm-
ously by computers in the
editing process (he wrote
Ulysses by hand in hand copy
books, rewriting the entire text of
a chapter whenever he revised).
No doubt, the concept of reading
Ulysses in digital form would
have seemed to Joyce to be
ludicrous, at best.

Returning to Brown’s notion of
seeing the future by looking around,
we will focus much of our dis-
cussion on what we see happening
around us — within Blackwell’s
and the market we serve. As many
of you are aware, Blackwell’s Book
Services is an academic library
bookseller. Since we still sell a lot
of festschrifts and the dynamics
of our business and the library
market are changing. Like
libraries, we’ve been making books
our business for a long time and
will continue that tenure regardless of
whether the definition of a book changes to include not
only a print edition but also an edition in
electronic format.

When Blackwell’s first started discussing
eBooks at library conferences, the most com-
mon questions we were asked were “Where are
your eBooks? Can I look at one?” People
equated eBooks with an appliance, an eBook
reader, and seemed confused when we pointed
to the computer saying that we can show
one online. There is now another generation of
readers out there. They are entering institutions of
higher learning able not only to play “Lord of the
Rings” on their GameBoys, but willing, you
can, to bet it on their PocketPCs.

So, what is an eBook? What better way in
this world of the “worldwide Web” to get an
answer to that question than to do an online
search. One search resulted in this definition:
“An eBook is a book published in electronic
form, similar to a word document, which can
be delivered to any computer that is connected
to the Internet from anywhere in the world.”
Another Web search defined an eBook as an
electronic book to be read digitally on a
computer, laptop screen or on devices called
eBook readers. Other searches came up with
similar definitions.

The online search led to the conclusion that
most of us, at this point, are now on the same
page of the definition of an eBook; that most of
us have moved away from the misperception of
an eBook as the appliance itself. We are adding
to our vocabulary eBook terms and products
such as electronic resources, digital reference,
and online journals. These latter two terms have
definitions similar to eBook: a digi-
tal reference or online journal in-
corporating already existing ac-
credited, fact-filled print
material, making it available
online for easier access and
researching ability. Print is
no longer the only reliable vehicle
for acquiring information. We need to
embrace what lies around us and
welcome the unfolding of the future.
Both books on paper and electronic
books exhibit distinguishing char-
acteristics. No matter how popular
electronic books become, they will
not replace books on paper. The two
media will coexist — each settling
into its own niche.”

In a 1994 symposium on the
future of the book, Umberto Eco,
author and historian, relating the
fears of an ever changing world in which it
is believed that new technology makes the
“old ways” obsolete, stated “The
idea that something will kill something
else is a very ancient one.” (“Ceci
tuera!” “This will kill that!” Eco
believes these fears are overblown, as we at
Blackwell’s do. We believe that
the expansion of the definition of a book to include eBooks,
digital reference, and online journals will not
make the need for or the use of printed material
obsolete. The print book still has a large
domain in providing access to the discourse
of the field. A book is still the medium best
suited to reading in long segments, if not
actually read from front to back.

The first time one reads Ulysses (notice
we said the first time), one reads it from start to
finish. That, at least, was Joyce’s intent. One
will read from page one to the last page (circa 700).
If you are a true Joyce devotee, you have, un-
doubtedly, read Ulysses at least once from start to
finish to really get a sense of the changing
narrative over a single day in time. Joyce wrote
his novel for the medium of print, a book in
print. It’s safe to say, that very few people
would be happy sitting down to read
Ulysses from start to finish using a PDA.

One of the most studied novels of or time,
Ulysses almost needs to be read with a concor-
dance in hand. The value gained by a
researcher—sophisticated searching to dis-
cover complex relationships and references
— would make the study of Ulysses, not easy,
but easier. Here is where reference materials
in electronic format aid the scholar.

Reference materials, such as concordances,
are designed to pick up pieces of information
from larger texts, such as a print book. This is
where the expansion of print into electronic for-
continued on page 40

So, the U of A Libraries are managing quite
well for now, with the benefit of the
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mat is most important. The sophisticated searching mechanisms within digital references and online journals are far better suited to meet the demands of the researcher.

In a beautifully developed exhibit on James Joyce organized by the National Library of Ireland, Joyce’s actual manuscript pages have been scanned into a computer. The viewing software allows one to magnify portions of the text, turn the hand written text into typescript, and even track evolution of the text through various revisions. One could move through the “pages” of the manuscripts by using one’s fingers to “turn the page.” A marvelous tool for the study of Joyce’s text.

We could have an entire conversation on the effects of online research in relation to the print book itself, but our focus will be the future of the book in electronic format, not the effects of online resources in assisting the creation, analysis, and study of the print book. We recommend reading The Future of the Book, twelve papers presented at the University of San Marino 1994 Symposium.

So what is the relationship between an eBook and its print counterpart? Anne G. Lipow, a research librarian and author, stated that “a growing number of libraries are noticing a decline in circulations and use of its reference service; many library administrators believe the hype that search engines are a handy substitute for librarians; and reference librarians are finding it daunting tasks to keep abreast of the new resources that appear daily on the Internet.” As we think this is an interesting comment and recommend reading Anne Lipow’s keynote address “Serving the Remote User: Reference Service in the Digital Environment.”

The Internet is a wonderful tool for research and we need to embrace it. One way of accomplishing that is to bring the Internet into the library by making online resources available via online journals and digital references to library users. In this way libraries can continue to be a vital source for fact-finding research. The availability of online journals and digital reference with assistance from knowledgeable librarians will keep patrons coming back to the library rather than just going online at home or in coffee shops. It is the reference librarian who will assist patrons in obtaining the knowledge and experience to excel in the use of both print and electronic resources.

Just as fighting the cell phone craze was a lost cause, eBooks will inevitably become a vital component of education in the future. “According to a survey, 90% of Internet users are under 35. For them, reading a book on the computer is a perfectly natural act. As time passes, reading habits and perceptions of books will, without question, evolve. From this evolution, the social foundation for the acceptance of electronic books will expand greatly.”

The eBook industry is maturing as the format continues to gain acceptance. The Open eBook Forum is a trade and standards organization dedicated to the development and promotion of electronic publishing. In early June the OeBF announced sales numbers for the first quarter of 2004. Sales of eBooks were up 46% and revenues from eBooks were 28% over the same quarter in 2003. At the same time, the OeBF’s eBook Bestseller List for May 2004 was also released. No surprise, Dan Brown’s The Da Vinci Code topped the list for the third straight month. Kevin Ryan’s Van Helsing, Dan Brown’s Angels & Demons, The Da Vinci Code: Fact or Fiction and Ian Caldwell and Dustin Thomason’s The Rule of Four rounded out the top 5 eBooks on the list. The top 30 bestselling eBooks for May 2004 can be found on the Open eBook Forum Website at http://www.openlibrary.org/pressroom/pressreleases/q104stats.htm.

The American Association of Publishers now includes electronic book sales in its monthly reports. As of April 2004, eBook sales were up over 73% from the previous year. Clearly, something is happening with electronic text. Many publishers sense that libraries and their patrons will be among the early adopters of this format. The format promises to create cost-savings, increase access, and move library services beyond the physical collection.

So, maybe the future of the book is already “around” us. Print is still here and will always have a place, but there is also a place and a need for electronic materials, especially reference materials for the scholar.

Digital books and eBook reader appliances, however, raise some serious issues for libraries. It’s surprisingly hard to disentangle those questions that are specific to digital books and book readers from those that are generic to network based information resources. To the extent that digital books are important works of scholarship, libraries, particularly research libraries, have little alternative except to purchase access for their patrons and also to provide assistance in utilizing digital books. If budgets allow the purchase of both print and its equivalent eBook, it would be wise for libraries to acquire both formats to offer to patrons.

A sure sign of maturity in the growth of electronic collections is an article in the May/June issue of Public Libraries, the journal of the Public Library Division of the American Library Association. Author Paula Wilson from Maricopa County Library District in Phoenix outlines baseline criteria for weeding an eBook collection! Just because a title doesn’t take up physical space on the shelves, the title still takes up a different kind of virtual space in the library’s general collection. Considering this part of electronic content management struck us at Blackwell’s as being very important when considering creating or adding to an eBook collection.

Licensing digital books raises the same questions that arise for general electronic content. Is it being licensed for in-library workstations or for access by library patrons wherever they may be? Are costs based on the number of concurrent users, on the size of the user community, or on some other factors? Are traditional interlibrary loan functions able to support these digital works, and if so how? Do the license terms recognize traditional library and education values such as fair use, free speech, and inquiry? Are there provisions to ensure the preservation of the material if the library wishes to preserve it?” A full discussion of these and other questions can be found in “The Battle to Define the Future of the Book in the Digital World” by Clifford Lynch.

These same questions are the ones that Blackwell’s Book Services is also asking and addressing. Blackwell’s is working hand in hand with the publishers of online journals and digital reference works to provide libraries with the most logical, organized, and cost efficient way for librarians to comfortably add electronic resources to collection. We are working with over 20 publishers to supply libraries with one contact and source for all digital reference and online needs. Blackwell’s wants to help with answering questions and concerns about adding electronic resources to library collections. We believe that this cooperative effort is not only good for the future of learning, but is an important synergy that should be welcomed by both the academic and library worlds. And, with this belief, Blackwell’s will continue to lead the way assisting and providing libraries with the best electronic resources and ways to manage those collections to match the ease of acquisition that libraries are accustomed to with print collections. This year Blackwell’s will be launching a new digital management tool within the already familiar Collection Manager. This new management tool will support every step of selection, ordering, reporting as well as licensing and access support for electronic resources.

We would like to conclude with thoughts expressed by Lynn Connaway of netLibrary that eBooks provide new opportunities for users, librarians, publishers, and providers. Despite the challenges associated with eBooks, this is the opportune time to assess how and why people use monographs and reference materials in order to develop new methods to use more fully and effectively these same resources in electronic formats. Working together in partnerships, librarians, publishers, book vendors and eBook providers can create a future for the digital library.

Works Cited

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