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# Op Ed -- Opinions and Editorials -- Books and the Future of Collection Development?

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# Op Ed — Opinions and Editorials

## Books and the Future of Collection Development?

by **Steve McKinzie** (Social Science Librarian, Dickinson College, Carlisle, PA 17013; Phone: 717-245-1601) <mckinzie@dickinson.edu>

A part of collection development has always involved buying books — purchasing those bound, hold-in-your-hand printed volumes. But now it looks as if all of that could change? Futurists and a bevy of savvy technocrats predict that books themselves may be on their way out, insisting that in the future the old **Gutenberg** technology may cease to be the preferred or even a valid means of transferring and storing information. Such assertions, of course, have an enormous bearing on our thinking about collection development. They invite troubling questions. With the advent of the Web and the wonders of digital technology, should we now (or very soon) dispense altogether with adding traditional books to our collections? Or at the very least, should we consider investing much less in what must be an outmoded and dying medium?

To all such predictions, speculations and pontifications, I have a simple response. Hang on to your monograph budget. Weed your book collection sparingly, and keep those end-of-the-book-era dreamers at arm's length. They don't know what they're talking about. The book is here to stay.

That's right. Despite its critics and the exaggerated prediction of its demise, the old **Gutenberg** commodity is frankly and unquestionably going to be with us for a very long time. The reason for the books future viability isn't what you think. It has nothing to do with nostalgia, for instance. Books fascinate millions and they reflect an older technology that people tend to enjoy, but neither aspect will ensure their durability — at least not into the coming centuries. People love phonographs and covered wagons, but both are rare and becoming rarer.

Nor will our use of the book become static. Books won't remain, because we use them in ways we always have. Uses will change. One dimension of the books usefulness is already nearly over. In earlier centuries, (or more specifically — earlier decades) people relied on books — encyclopedias, almanacs, dictionaries — for quick reference, for ready information. These are all now functions largely left to the Internet. For most of us, search engines trump old printed book indexes every time.

No, books will survive, because they provide a unique commodity that has value in of itself and in relation to other products. To be specific, books have

three things that make them well-nigh indispensable for the culture — three things that secure them a solid market niche. They have, in short, durability, portability and reliability.

- **Portability:** You can take them almost anywhere — no network, no infrastructure, no energy source.
- **Durability:** They last. Even cheap, low quality printed works endure for decades and even centuries.
- **Reliability:** Century-old books are not only valuable, but they can be used, read by anyone who knows the language. Don't worry about format alterations or software changes. These things are immune to upgrades and oblivious to technical fashion. Books are accessible, useable — always, every time.

These three characteristics of printed books enable them to offer the culture something unique and enormously valuable — even in the face of competing formats and in the presence of what appear to be superseding, replacement technologies. This unexpected survival of an older technology even in the face of enormous technological change isn't a new phenomenon. It has happened before.

It is true of books in much the same way it has been true of other commodities, products or means of transportation. Early in the mid-twentieth century numerous technical experts reckoned that railroads were on their way out. They fancied that the rise of automobiles, interstates and a burgeoning trucking industry would render railroad transportation virtually obsolete. They similarly predicted television would put radio stations out of business and that the cultures fascination with VHS would undermine the old movie houses.

Today, railroads are far from extinct. They have a corner on 41% of the nations transportation market share, and they are growing. Radio is another success story. As both a medium and an industry, radio broadcasting has not only exploded but advanced in totally new directions. Witness the success of NPR and influence of talk radio. And

as for movie houses, the industry that some thought was over has soared in recent years, hitting record sell highs in both box office sells and dollars.

In all three instances, the experts were wrong. But one wonders. How could the apparent introduction of a transforming new medium of information or a revolutionary approach to transformation fail to supersede and eliminate the old? The answer is simple. The older commodity had an intrinsic value, a market niche. There was something about the product that gave it unique value — and in some instances surprising sustainability.

Railroads, for instance, delivered economy of scale — the movement of large heavy loads, such as coal or chemicals, over enormous distances at relatively low costs. They could never compete with the versatility of trucks to haul almost any thing anywhere. But ton for dollar railroads won hands down. Similarly the radio industry couldn't rival the combined features of television (the tantalizing spectacle of sight and sound), but they could and did offer users something else — nearly ubiquitous

access to audio information and entertainment without the distraction of video. This rather mundane dimension of radio ensured its success. Similarly movie house tickets cost far more than a video rental, and people had to leave home to enjoy them. But America flocked to movie houses. They valued the big screen viewing experience and the opportunity

to view the latest, more current films.

Books will flourish in the same way. Of course, they won't be able to compete with the Internet on its own turf. For sheer speed and up-to-minute information, the Internet and digitization are hard to beat. But it won't matter. Books offer something very different — something that will enable them to sustain a market niche: durability, portability and reliability.

So when your articulate and techno-savvy friends tell you books are on the way out, don't believe them. Like railroads, radio and movie houses, books will endure. Books, in short, have a market niche that ensures their longevity and place in the culture. They are in it for the long haul. 🌱

