December 2005

Tell Me One More Time: Why Is It We're Going Electronic?

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Recommended Citation

Anderson, Rick (2005) "Tell Me One More Time: Why Is It We're Going Electronic?," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 17: Iss. 6, Article 8.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.4590>

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that they thought that although the electronic journal was likely to surpass the print in the near future, they were not as sure about the electronic book. Many remarked that the sectional quality of textbooks or reference books lends itself nicely to digitization because small sections can be searched or printed off for easy reading, but they felt that the electronic book still doesn't work well for books in the humanities, or for fiction, because it is difficult to somewhat challenging to "cuddle up" with a nice computer screen and a cup of cocoa. Still other respondents commented that with the rapid advances we have seen in technology over the past decade, something new may be introduced into the mix that will set us off on yet another transition. Only time, of course, will tell.

Conclusions

The fears that existed in **Trithemius** and his contemporaries during the onset of the print revolution still exist in some of us today about the electronic medium. We, the authors of this paper, do not want to be today's **Trithemius** and declare the death of print and or the future of electronic publishing. It is difficult, from where we stand today, to predict if one medium will obviate the other. Our survey respondents were asked if they believed that electronic books and journals were the future. Approximately 50% said yes, approximately 25% commented that electronic journals were already taking over print versions and expected the latter to be obsolete within the next 10 years. The same group also believed that the electronic book would take much longer to catch on. The remaining 25% indicated that they didn't think that print would become obsolete until access and preservation issues are resolved. For now, it seems that it is still necessary for some libraries to keep hybrid collections, and necessary for others to adapt to an "electronic only" model, but these decisions should be based on your library's needs, your user base, your funding and your administrative support. Procure all information possible about either format — its publishers, licensing agreements, user fees, archival access, your user preference and anything else that might be appropriate to your library's needs. No one knows for sure whether electronic formats, as we know them today will endure the test of time. But again, librarians also have to keep up with the changing needs of their patrons or run the risk of becoming irrelevant to their users. There are studies showing that different scholars have different preferences when it comes to formats. **Siebenberg** et al concluded in their research that "the popular lore/common wisdom that people are changing from using print journals to electronic journals is not true across the board."²⁰ Their study suggested that users' migration between formats varied depending on the subject area. This echoes the responses we received that many users still prefer print and that just as many would be happy to move to electronic only. Simply stated, until library patrons can agree on one format, it will be necessary to continue to provide some kind of access to both.

Tell Me One More Time: Why Is It We're Going Electronic?

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You know you've asked yourself this question, and maybe even posed it to your staff (or your boss). It's one that comes up usually around the end of the day, when you were all set to go home; maybe you were even halfway out the door, and a staff member told you that the library's access to **ScienceDirect** or the **HighWire** journals had suddenly gone down. Shoulders slumped, you returned to your desk and fired up the email again (it being too late in the day to get the provider on the phone), while muttering dire imprecations under your breath about **Al Gore** or whoever it was that invented the Internet.

Life used to be so much simpler, didn't it? Back in the day, libraries smelled like books. Now they smell like coffee. The library collection used to be something you could physically manipulate and something you could depend on; you didn't have entire sections of shelved books suddenly disappearing into thin air for no apparent reason, only to reappear again in 10 or 30 or 500 minutes. You bought the book, you processed the book, you put the book on the shelf, and it stayed there. Nobody got hurt.

Of course, one reason that the book stayed there so dependably was that no one wanted to check it out. But that's a topic for another essay.

For now, let's focus on the reasons why it really is worth it to deal with the ambiguity, the complexity, the ephemerality, and the general, all-purpose grief that inevitably comes with shifting our collections from print to online formats.

Obviously, it's not that there aren't arguments both pro and con when it comes to going online. It's just that the pros outweigh the cons so dramatically that, in most cases and for most types of research information, the decision really is almost a no-brainer. But let's start by enumerating the benefits of print format.

Benefits of Print

Permanence. Books have a marked tendency to stay where you put them, to retain the content they held when you put them there, and not to disappear in a puff of smoke if left alone for an extended period of time. The same simply cannot be said of online products and publications.

Ease of use (for reading). Ah, print. You pick up the book, you settle down in a comfy chair, you flip through the pages, you read for hours and hours without developing a headache or a backache, and no former Nigerian cabinet minister will interrupt your reading with an offer to put a million dollars in your bank account.

When you want to read (rather than do research), print is as good as it gets.

Sensual enjoyment. Printed books — especially big, 400-page hardback ones — feel good in your hand. They smell good. They give your bag or backpack some ballast, and make you feel less silly for carrying them around. If they're bound well they'll lie open on a table, which makes them the perfect accompaniment to a large, leisurely Mexican meal at a corner table near the back. They make you look smart.

The problem is that the benefits pretty much end there, and unless you're a public library that caters primarily to readers rather than researchers, they aren't benefits that mean that much to your patrons. Patrons care in a vague, platonic sort of way about permanence, sort of the way you care about a former boyfriend whom you're not angry at anymore. If you ask a patron whether disappearing information is a good thing, of course he'll say no. But if you ask him whether the benefits of immediate access, remote access, and 24/7 access outweigh the risk of spotty access, he's going to say yes, and without hesitation. The problem with print is that you have to travel to get to it, it's only available when the library is open, and although it's a wonderful format for reading, it's a terrible one for research. If your patrons are doing research, then print actually works against them in the ease-of-use area — they don't want to sit down and read these products in a comfortable, leisurely way. They want to interrogate the content of these products in a fast and rigorous way. A back-of-the-book index is a horribly crude and ineffective (not to mention inefficient) way to do that.

So what does online format give us that print doesn't? The list of benefits is almost frighteningly long and comprehensive.

Benefits of Online

Ease of access. Print is very easy to use once you get the book in your hand. But there's the rub — getting your hands on the book can be a terrible chore. For many people (such as those with serious physical disabilities, those who live far away from a library or bookstore, and those who can't see well), the difficulties of accessing printed information may actually be insurmountable.

Enhanced searchability. One of the great beauties of online information is the fact that its entire content can actually be searched. Full-text searchability offers *exhaustive* indexing where books, by their very physical nature, can offer only *approximate* indexing.

Portability of content/remote access. One big problem with print is its simple mass. You need an entire book cart to move the *Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* from one place

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to another. Online access to that same content means that you can read it from anyplace where Internet access is available. (That's not everywhere, of course, but it's many, many more places than you can access the library's print copy.)

24/7 availability. As frustrating as it is when an online resource goes down, we need to remember that our print collections go "down" every time the library locks its doors. Not only must printed collections be used in the physical space in which they reside, but they can only be used during hours that librarians are willing and able to provide them. This is a heavy price to pay for the (very real) benefit of physical permanence.

Environmental friendliness. Relatively few trees die in the publication of an online journal, and unwanted issues of online journals inhabit no landfills. If we consider ourselves environmentalists, then print should be a hard sell for us.

Timeliness. For many types of information, the permanence of the printed record is a problem, not a benefit. Printed directories, almanacs, statistical compilations, encyclopedias and research guides are often significantly out-of-date before they reach the library's shelves, there to sit offering inaccurate information until they are replaced by updated versions (which then go out of date just as quickly). Superseded volumes then go into the landfill (see above). Online versions of these tools can be updated in real time, and do not need to be replaced, only renewed. In most cases, there is simply no rational basis for preferring printed versions of this type of material.

Small physical footprint. Related to the environmental issue mentioned above is the question of physical space. Library space is an expensive commodity, of which printed materials absorb a very large amount. To the degree that online equivalents are available, valuable space can be freed up for other purposes.

Ability to track usage. While the full potential of online usage statistics remains to be realized, there is no question that their potential is great, and that it is realizable. The same cannot be said for usage of printed materials. It is difficult if not impossible to know, in any really useful detail, how much and what type of use a print collection gets.

Ability to manipulate text. A chapter or article that takes up 30 pages in a printed book or journal issue may be manipulable into a much smaller document by using word processing tools. The ability to copy and paste text makes it possible to minimize the waste of paper, ink and money that inevitably comes with photocopying. (Of course, that ability also makes plagiarism easier; more on that below.)

One could continue, but at this point it would just feel like piling on.

Now, none of this is to say that there are no downsides to moving information online. Every choice involves a cost, and the choice to switch from print to online is no exception to that rule. Apart from the sacrifices we make in the areas of permanence, ease of use and sensual enjoyment, there are other downsides to the online world. They include the following:

Problems with Online

Unreliability. Print partisans will all acknowledge that print collections are unavailable for large blocks of time. But, they point out, at least the print collection's downtime is predictable — the library posts its hours, and patrons can plan accordingly. Online resources tend to go down unpredictably, sometimes leaving researchers stranded — perhaps shortly before a deadline.

Computers and Internet access are not universally available. While the majority of American households now include at least one computer with Internet access (and the vast majority of patrons can get at least limited access at their local public libraries), Internet access is not yet universal. This means that online products are not available to everyone.

Computer screens provide a poor medium for extended reading. While computers are wonderful for doing research, most computers do not provide a comfortable or satisfying medium for long-term reading.

Online information makes it easier to plagiarize the work of others. Being able to copy and paste text from an online source makes it much easier than it has ever been to copy the intellectual work of others and pass it off as one's own.

These sound like serious downsides, and they are. But compare the number of problems to the number of benefits. And even more importantly, compare the *relative weight* of the items on either side of the "pro" and "con" ledger. It's not just a matter of counting arguments; ten weak "pro" arguments don't counterbalance ten strong "con" arguments any more than ten feathers can counterbalance ten bricks. And in this regard, the online side wins hands down on both number and weight. Just as researchers care more about 24/7 access than they do about the greater risk of coverage gaps, they care more about timeliness than about the sensual pleasures of print reading, and more about remote access than about minimizing eyestrain. (Some of them even care about preserving the environment and actually see a connection between wasteful publication practices, deforestation and landfill proliferation.)

It is also worth pointing out that while the downsides cited above are all quite real, many of them apply to print materials as well. It's certainly true, for example, that not everyone has access to a computer, but it's also true that not everyone has access to a library, and even fewer people have access to a rich research collection. Access to extensive, high-quality print collections is a luxury enjoyed by the elite, not by the general population.

It's also true that library users often don't know how to use online products and are not necessarily good at discriminating between reliable and unreliable online sources. But they have the same deficits when they walk into a library. True, they can ask a librarian for help, but the fact is that few of them do. Instead, most of them muddle through as best they can by themselves.

Now, even if one accepts that all of the argumentation above adds up to a slam-dunk victory for online over print, it's important to remember that general rules always have exceptions in particular circumstances. Even if online is *generally* better than print, it's not necessarily the better choice in every case. When considering whether to buy in print or online, or whether to shift a particular product from print to online, remember to ask questions like these:

1. What is the nature of the content?

How are your patrons likely to seek out and use this information? (Not "How would we like them to?" or "How should they," but rather how *will* they, knowing what you know about how your particular patrons use the information your library provides?)

2. What is the relative cost of the two formats? Remember that one format may have a higher price than the other in dollars, but may cost less in the long run in terms of staff time, space or maintenance.

3. Is space an issue? Remember that space, like staff time, is a zero-sum commodity — every foot of shelf space you fill with one thing is a foot less that you have to devote to something else. Is shelf space at a premium in your library (if so, you might lean towards online formats) or is it relatively abundant in comparison to collection-budget dollars (in which case you might lean towards print where print is cheaper)?

4. How many workflows do you want? Acquiring online products requires the design and implementation of workflows that are drastically different from those needed for the management of print resources. The cost of designing and maintaining those workflows will be significant. Is it worth it?

While considering these and all the other issues that must be addressed in deciding how and whether to go online with some or all of your collection, remember that perfect solutions are not available to us. Those who argue that online is not a perfect solution are barking up the wrong tree; our job is to find the best possible solution, not the perfect one. It's our job to find the solution that will work best — that will put our institutions' dollars to work most effectively in helping as many of our patrons as possible get the most and best information they can, as quickly and easily as possible, in the pursuit of their research goals. 🐘