December 2014

Op Ed -- The Death of the Bookless Library

S. David Mash Ph.D.
Lander University, dmash@lander.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg
Part of the Library and Information Science Commons

Recommended Citation
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.6031

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.
Op Ed — The Death of the Bookless Library

by S. David Mash, Ph.D. (Dean of Library Services) <dmash@lander.edu>

I recently flew through Atlanta and Dallas to visit my family in Texas. At both airports — each a teeming anthology of travelers — I had a good amount of free time between flights. I decided in advance to do a brazenly unscientific study of the reading habits of people at airport gates. Taking special care not to draw attention to myself, I adopted a data collection method I will call “observational strolling.” I took no notes, and I certainly did not gaze at anyone, lest I be taken for something other than a librarian. I “observationally strolled” past gate after gate with three research questions in mind:

1) of those reading to pass the time, what proportion were reading digital formats versus paper formats?
2) what was the general age range of those reading digital formats? and
3) what was the general age range of those reading paper formats?

I observed many hundreds of readers representing a phenomenally broad demographic profile. For the sake of full disclosure, I own an eBook reader, and I believe in the enduring value of print media. But what I saw surprised even me. First, of those reading to pass the time, the proportion of digital to paper was at best two digital readers for every ten paper readers. Second, the general age range of those reading digital formats was over thirty. In fact, everyone reading digital formats appeared to be over thirty. Yes, what I am saying is that everyone in the preschool through the twenty-something group was reading paper media. This included parents reading to very young children, grade-school children reading children’s books, and college-age adults reading novels. Just to keep myself honest, I began looking for young-in-appearance people reading digital media. I saw plenty of these young people with tablet devices and laptops, but all the screens that I could see were filled with entertainment and social media. There’s nothing wrong with any of this, of course, but the absolute lopsidedness of it all gave me pause.

My last observations were made on the final flight home. It happened that the person on my right (someone over fifty) was reading a paper book and the person on my left (someone nearing forty) was reading from one of the best-selling eBook readers. The person on my left read from the device, from ephemeral page to ephemeral page, in stillness and calm. The person on my right actively marked sections of text, wrote notes in the margins, and flipped back and forth at times. Dare I suspect that she was interacting with the paper text? Dare I suggest that the format has a tangible effect on the kind of reading that is possible and the quality of retention that is achieved?

It would be irresponsible to draw grandiose conclusions from my airport observations. But the death of print, the tipping point into that transformative print-less future, has been “immanent” for decades. It has been right around the corner for my entire professional life. Let’s give it a rest. Research has begun to emerge which suggests that eBooks are far less adequate than print books for substantive reading and comprehension of long and complex texts. Incessant multitasking and ubiquitous digital immersion may have a costly dark side: habituation of the mind into a rigid bias against protracted complex thinking. The stakes are monumental. Students with this kind of bias — a sort of cultivated simplemindedness — may be able to graduate from high school or college, but they will not have the mental habits and intellectual discipline necessary for protracted attention to the complex problems that plague us.

It is encouraging to see the new Joe and Rika Mansueto Library at the University of Chicago described not as “another bookless library” for the digital age” but as “an $81-million bet that researchers still need ready access to print!” Librarians, educators, and administrators who stay on point with the script that print is second-class may not be acting in the best interest of the people we serve. It is time to apply some rigorous scrutiny to one-dimensional polemics about the inferiority of print. It is time to ask new questions about the limits of digital media. It is time for the digital prophets, pundits, and product pushers to scale back on extreme anti-print caricatures and anecdotes. In fact, I think it is time to declare the death of the bookless library. The social and cultural benefits will not be insignificant.

© 2011, S. David Mash, Ph.D.

Endnotes