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Op Ed -- Opinions and Editorials

Matthew Goddard

California Baptist University, mgoddard@calbaptist.edu

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Op Ed — Trends to Watch: Books

by **Matthew Goddard, MLIS, MA** (Digital Services Librarian, Annie Gabriel Library, California Baptist University, 8432 Magnolia Avenue, Riverside, CA 92504; Phone: 951-343-4365; Fax: 951-343-4523) <mgoddard@calbaptist.edu>

It started with a small pilot project at **Belvedere University**, but a new trend in libraries is picking up steam across the nation. Last fall, librarians at the **Cooper Library** on BU's main Seattle campus took the unusual step of installing a shelf and filling it with ... books.

You read that right: *physical* books, *print* books, made up of hundreds of paper leaves bound together along one edge. Unlike eBooks, every single letter in these novelties is actually imprinted on the leaves in ink. Readers simply hold the book open with their hands and use their fingers to rotate each page from the right side to the left as they read. Within just a few days, without much marketing or fanfare on campus, every single book had been borrowed by students eager to feel the weight of knowledge in their hands, the soft grain of paper under their fingertips, and to lay their eyes on, as one student said, "literally anything besides another digital display."

For as long as anyone can care to remember, readers have navigated books with a combination of mental and ocular cues with the time-tested "think and blink" navigation, leaving their bodies largely passive and their senses unengaged. However, noticing that nearly all of their students have bodies, and that most of these bodies could theoretically allow these students to engage with the external world in interesting and novel ways, a group of particularly forward-thinking librarians formed a committee to outline their opinions.

The germ of the final proposal actually started out as one of those whimsical ideas tossed around in a long brainstorming session, mostly for the laughs. "At first it sounded absurd," says **Nancy Martial**, one of the six librarians on the committee. "I mean, who wants to lug around a block of paper? But there's a certain elegant logic to it. We have bodies, so why shouldn't our texts?"

We sat down with **Mary Lightfoot**, Dean of Libraries at **Belvedere**, to get her take on the unexpected phenomenon her librarians helped spark. "Rarely in

one's lifetime, even just once if you're lucky, some new technology comes along that really shakes things up. From what I've seen over the past few months, I think we could be looking at a real paradigm shift. Embodied information that you can hold in your own two hands is an idea whose time has come."

Asked if print books might turn out to be just a fad, **Lightfoot** responded, "Time will tell. Right now we're seeing a lot of enthusiasm from your typical early adopters, like you'd expect, but what's really telling is the response from young people like our students. They're really embracing it. Libraries that refuse to take notice of this and respond to it accordingly are in for a wakeup call. My granddaughter isn't even two years old and she loves these print books, it's like second nature to her. But more than anything I think we need to frame it as a real opportunity for libraries. I'm challenging folks to think big about this, I really am. Imagine if we had, in addition to our traditional study spaces and cafes, entire rooms full of these things."

Lightfoot added, however, that budget limitations would very likely make such extravagance impossible for the foreseeable future.



Nevertheless, **Lightfoot** is enthusiastic about this topic. She talks about research as a physical activity, not failing to note recent speculative medical research on the possible long-term health benefits of physical movement. She suggests organizing print books by subject, enabling students to almost literally walk through their chosen discipline. "But you can't just stack them in piles, you'd need to use something like the shelves you see at Target or Wal-Mart. 'Book-shelves,' if you will. That's the approach we've taken, but I'm looking forward to seeing what other libraries come up with."

Not everyone shares **Lightfoot's** enthusiasm. Some who choose to opt out of the print book trend note the lack of comprehensive full text search, while others cite hygienic reasons. Noting the additional real estate these collections would require, some administrators

have privately expressed their concerns about sacrificing valuable campus space that could be used for student recreation centers, athletics facilities or high-end retail.

We spoke to several students to hear their opinions of this unorthodox library offering: "I just thought it was funny at first. So many sheets of paper, oh my gosh! Like I mean, literally hundreds just in one book. I honestly thought it was a little bit of a waste of resources at the beginning, but I really like reading these books now," reported **Ashlei Gut-tman**, a sophomore. Her roommate, **Madison Leary**, a freshman, also took some time to warm up to the curiosities: "I didn't like them at all at first, but then I realized that the ink was completely dry and wouldn't get on you when you read. So it was a little awkward at first. Sometimes I still get annoyed when I glance to the right and blink but the page doesn't turn! But then I just think "Oh yay, I actually get to use my arm and hand and fingers for something. I've read three or four already."

So far most print books simply mimic the functionality of eBooks, but expect to see more innovations in this area as publishers gain confidence in this new and unproven "physical objects" marketplace.

Some scholars have begun claiming that at some point a long time ago, most or even all reading was done using these objects. However, there is little consensus surrounding this theory, and it remains controversial among cultural historians.

Asked about the challenges these new developments are bringing, one librarian had to think for a bit. "Some of our older readers who are so used to the think-and-blink mode of eBooks have some trouble turning the pages with their fingers, but we always assure them that our traditional eBooks aren't going anywhere. We understand that change can't happen overnight. One of his colleagues agreed: "We need to be sensitive to certain categories of users who might feel threatened by these changes, but we ourselves must not be afraid of the future. It's important for libraries to get out ahead of these developments and be agents of change within the culture."

We asked one librarian what aspect of this trend she least expected. "The smell of the books," she said. "Everyone loves it. They can't stop talking about it." 🍷