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Book Reviews: Monographic Musings

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Reviewed by David Durant (Associate Professor/Federal Documents and Social Sciences Librarian, Joyner Library, East Carolina University) <durantd@ecu.edu>

According to George Stachokas, the question is not whether libraries should transition to a fully-digital model, but simply how and when to do so. In his view, “the cumulative impact of the growth of scientific knowledge, experimentation with new technology, and millions of individual consumer choices has made the shift to the electronic library inevitable.” Of course, libraries have already adapted to the digital age by embracing a hybrid model that combines print collections with spaces and resources that facilitate access to electronic information. For Stachokas, however, the hybrid library is merely “a transitional stage toward a completely electronic library.”

Completing what Stachokas sees as this necessary and inevitable transition will require a major shift in how librarians conceive of themselves, their libraries, and their profession. Librarians, in his view, need to move beyond outdated, print-centric visions of librarian- ship, and focus on how to manage, provide access to, and instruction for, primarily digital collections. The future library will exist as “an organizational unit, not a building or physical facility.” This transition will include a major revamping of LIS education programs to foster the development of highly specialized, digital-specific skills. Finally, librarians will need to transcend the notion held by some that they are “‘a secular priesthood presiding over temples of knowledge’ and understand that ‘what is new is just as important as understanding what is old. Preserving the past is arguably best left to specialists…rather than being the focus of the librarian in the twenty-first century.”

To implement this vision, Stachokas proposes a nine-phase process culminating in the elimination of open-stack print collections and the removal of all remaining print materials to special collections, archives, or remote storage facilities. While he certainly foresees resistance among both library staff and users to this all-digital vision, and concedes that there will still be some need for print materials in the near term, he believes that “this transition could be completed in five to ten years in most academic libraries in North America, the UK, Australia, and New Zealand.” Public libraries and libraries in other parts of the world will need a few years more to complete this transition, but are all fated to travel the same path.

Many of Stachokas’s specific ideas and proposals for adapting to the digital environment, such as those concerning open access and the usefulness of patron-driven acquisitions, are already broadly held within the profession. Others will be controversial. To the extent that many of his proposals are problematic, it is because they are symptomatic of a broader flaw with his argument.

This flaw is that Stachokas’s thesis rests on a crude technological determinism that assumes a priori that the all-digital library is an inevitability, and that the print codex is an outmoded technology doomed to disappear. In fact, Stachokas’s argument is an almost perfect representation of what technology writer Michael Sacasas has termed the “Borg Complex”: a phenomenon “exhibited by writers and pundits who explicitly assert or implicitly assume that resistance to technology is futile.”

While Stachokas confidently asserts that print is soon to be irrelevant, numerous surveys of academic library users show a distinct preference, even among undergraduates, for print books when engaging in extended, in-depth, or immersive reading. These survey results reinforce the substantial scientific and anecdotal evidence showing that the print codex enables in-depth immersive reading in ways that digital texts do not. Stachokas makes no acknowledgement of this evidence.

Contrary to Stachokas’s claims, then, librarians are best advised to think of print monograph collections and electronic information resources as complementary, not interchangeable, with each format facilitating a different way of reading, research, and thinking. The current hybrid model is not simply a transition period, or a waystation on the path to an all-digital future. Rather, whether by design or accident, it reflects the need for libraries to offer access to the full range of information formats in order to support the full range of user information needs. This insight does not preclude further adaptation by libraries to facilitate use of electronic materials, nor does it mandate that print collections need be maintained at the same level they are now. It does, however, mean that most academic and public libraries must maintain open stack print book collections for the foreseeable future. There is nothing inevitable about the digital library. To bring it about via a self-fulfilling prophecy would be to do our users a disservice.


Reviewed by Raymond Walser <raymondwalser@gmail.com>

When I picked up this book, I expected a dry technical discussion on city planning, using the author’s experiences in Abu Dhabi. However, as I read, I discovered a well-written, thoughtful and literary perspective of boom continued on page 31
times in the small Middle Eastern Emirate from 2009 to 2011. Mr. Dempsey shows his skills not only in city planning but also as a writer, capturing varied and often funny experiences in a self-effacing manner.

Dempsey took the position in Abu Dhabi following a tour in Iraq and worked in the Emirate’s Urban Planning Council during a frenetic period of expansion. Castles in the Sand discusses his work challenges and day-to-day experiences, describing a modern city engaged in a massive, reckless attempt to transform itself. He presents an outsider’s view of a country in the midst of an almost unconstrained construction boom and the resultant impacts. Along the way, the author provides various anecdotes of technical failures when he portrays the poor quality of construction through his own housing experiences and attempts to navigate the city’s merciless traffic. He also discusses social issues, particularly in regards to the incredible number of immigrants living in slave-like conditions. Throughout his book, Dempsey draws on news articles, history, and even literature, all copiously footnoted, to provide comparisons and give the reader a clearer understanding. When things seem to get a little dull, he takes a break to describe a funny incident. Of particular note is the almost four-page description starting on page 64 devoted to an epic haircut received while visiting one of the construction labor camps.

By the time I was done, I found myself sad that the book was finished and wanted to know more about the author. In reading his biographical note, I learned of his unfortunate passing. Not satisfied with the book’s explanation, I conducted a Google search and discovered the following article, http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/09/06/a-death-in-the-family/.

After reading Mr. Dempsey’s book, I have no desire to visit Abu Dhabi and feel as if I have been there simply by having read the book. This is a testament to Dempsey’s narrative skills. All too briefly, he mentions visits to Yemen and Damascus prior to taking his position in Afghanistan. It is too bad that we do not have any more of his insights during that time period from this volatile portion of the world. In any case, his book is a pleasure to read and one from which anyone interested in the Middle East can learn.