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The Death of a Bookworm: A Long-Winded Eulogy

by **Mark Sandler** (Novel Solutions Consulting) <mark@novelsolutions.net>

Prognosticating about the future of the book is somewhat akin to taping a “kick me” sign onto one’s own back; it’s an open invitation to be ridiculed and abused. **Google** surfaces dozens of Web (“click-bait”) and magazine articles that recount the worst/dumbest/most shortsighted predictions of all time. Some of the oft-cited examples¹ in the telecommunications sphere include:

1876: “This ‘telephone’ has too many shortcomings to be seriously considered as a means of communication.” — **William Orton**, President of **Western Union**.

1946: “Television won’t be able to hold on to any market it captures after the first six months. People will soon get tired of staring at a plywood box every night.” — **Darryl Zanuck**, **20th Century Fox**.

2007: “There’s no chance that the iPhone is going to get any significant market share.” — **Steve Ballmer**, **Microsoft CEO**.

A personal favorite of mine from the music industry is **Decca Records’** rejection of the **Beatles** after the group’s 1962 audition, saying, “guitar groups are on the way out” and “The **Beatles** have no future in show business.”

All this to say that soothsaying about books — or anything else — should be approached with trepidation. Who wants to go down in history as having said that modern day kids wouldn’t waste two weeks of their lives reading about wizards, vampires, or dystopian death matches?



To the point of the question underlying these thematic essays — “Do books have a future” — I feel on safe ground answering, “totally.” I’m told a lot of people — especially smart people — like books, enjoy reading, and have a real emotional connection to that mode of transmitting information, entertainment, or even emotive sentiments. It sounds to me like a safe bet that books will stick around, especially with supporters like **Mark Zuckerberg**.²

“My challenge for 2015 is to read a new book every other week — with an emphasis on learning about different cultures, beliefs, histories, and technologies.... I’ve found reading books very intellectually fulfilling. Books allow you to fully explore a topic and immerse yourself in a deeper way than most media today. I’m looking forward to shifting more of my media diet towards reading books.”

That’s pretty high praise from a Millennial with better than average tech skills. Books have been front and center in world culture for the past 500 years, and it is highly likely that that “booklike objects” will continue to live amongst us — both the old, extant books and newly written/produced books — for the next 500 years. The harder call is whether we expect they’ll remain, as they have been in the past, “front and center” in our education systems and leisure pursuits. Is it reasonable to expect — to predict — that books will maintain a privileged position in an increasingly cluttered landscape of infotainment options?

Disclaimers

Before wading into the uncertain waters swirling about this question of the fate of books, it should be noted that nothing clouds the vision of a so-called expert like an emotional or fiduciary interest in a particular outcome. What do the **Koch** brothers think about the future of the electric car? What does the **Walton** family think about the prospects for the shop local movement? Be assured that the **Kochs** know more about energy production, and the **Waltons** know more about retail, than those of us writing or reading this article. Nonetheless, we should remain skeptical about the analyses of those with a vested interest in one or another vision of the future. And, for that reason, readers here should be forewarned if placing their bets on book futures based on the predictions of publishers, librarians, aggregators, book jobbers, or other “experts with benefits.”

Our second disclaimer is a more general note about how large social, cultural, or technological shifts are perceived (or not), understood (or not), and ultimately accepted (or not). The march of history is not an orderly procession from then to now; it is, instead, a circuitous, ambling, unpredictable journey with pushing and shoving among competing people, ideas, systems, and technologies. Thesis and antithesis; culture and counter-culture; action and reaction — the

atoms of our created social world are smashing and crashing about in our cultural accelerator — who or what will survive and emerge victorious is anyone’s guess. Thirty years from now, **Google** may control the entirety of the scholarly information space — no more **Elseviers**, **ProQuests**, **Pearsons**, or libraries; conversely, by 2050 **Google** could just as likely be R.I.P. alongside **AskJeeves**, **AltaVista**, **Mosaic**, and **Yahoo** (the walking dead) in a graveyard of superseded search firms.

Back to the Books

Having acknowledged some trepidation about predicting the trajectory of books going forward, I’ll warm to the task by committing some column inches to a recapitulation of the book’s centrality over centuries past. Consider how a 17th-century genius like **Isaac Newton**, working, as he was in Cambridge England, might make a connection with contemporary scholars like **G. W. Leibniz** in Germany or **Blaise Pascal** in France. When **Newton’s Principia Mathematica** was published in 1687, there were no telegraph lines nor telephones; no trains, planes, or automobiles; no film clips nor photographs to “pin”; no radio or television; and no email, social media, or Internet to facilitate real time communications. And yet, these distant scholars became aware of each other and shared ideas through the miracle of the printed book. Since face-to-face connections among contemporary scholars were made scarce by the inconvenience — even perils — of 17th-century travel, and letter writing does not scale, it fell to the book to serve as the primary conveyance of intellectual life. Moreover, the limited options for sharing ideas among contemporaneous scholars were fewer still for sharing ideas across generations. If not for the book, how could 18th-century American intellectuals like **Jefferson** or **Franklin** contemplate the work of **Locke** and **Hobbes** who lived a century earlier and an ocean away? So, for centuries, the book stood as the primary — if not the only — reliable means for conveying intellectual ideas across time and space.

Accordingly, the book, as a very particular technology for transmitting knowledge, opinions, beliefs,³ etc., became the tangible manifestation of the idea of “smart.” Both authors and readers would be deemed “smart” by virtue of their connection to books. Check your **Roget’s** for “bookish” and you’ll find the synonyms “smart,” “brainy,” and “intelligent.” To own books, and better still to read them, has stood for centuries as a status marker by which we measure intellect and competence. **Austen’s** Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice* proclaimed that her attraction to Darcy began with excitement about the size and richness of his library (be that literal or figurative). There are numerous references in literature — fiction, non-fiction, advice books, etc. — about judging men (and sometimes women) by the books with which they associate. All this to say that for a very long

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limited library funds, this will be as essential for the future of books as the **Gutenberg** printing press once was.

But is a disaggregated book still a book? Will the scholarly book only survive if it becomes like a journal, consumed, if at all, by the chapter? Traditional fans of the book need not be alarmed. On the surface much might remain the same, with physical books still being the preferred “long-form” format for HSS scholars to delineate complex arguments, collate and analyse empirical evidence, and develop innovative methodological and theoretical insights. But alongside this familiar territory, there is a quiet revolution happening beneath the surface in a digital sphere where much publishing activity will be guided and influenced by a forensic analysis of incredibly detailed, albeit inherently imperfect, data. 🐼

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time books have been associated with high social status, respect, success and leadership.

This equivalence of “books” and “smart,” or “books” and “education” may go a long way to explaining society’s longstanding love affair with the book. It’s not necessarily the book that people crave but the esteem that its readers garner from their peers. If I were to say to a group of friends that I just finished reading *The Kite Runner*, I would expect their reaction to be different than had I said that I watched 87 hours of television last week. As a pseudo-academic, I might try to sneak the former into casual conversation — or this article — while opting not to reveal the latter. To this same end, we should take note of the pervasive cultural habits of accumulating and displaying books in public spaces and in our homes; or using books as a backdrop for politicians or presumed “experts” being interviewed on TV or otherwise depicted in visual media; and the value that universities place on an acquisitive library. In a simple syllogism, books convey knowledge; I have books, therefore I am knowledgeable. The question before us now, though, is whether some other channel of communication might overtake the book as the primary cultural symbol of “knowledgeable.”

The Exalted Tradition of Books

While a connection to books has for centuries conferred the presumption of intelligence on individuals and societies, there is an interesting dichotomy that began to be floated in the early to mid-1970s between so-called “book smarts” and “street smarts,” the latter usually thought to trump the former. This dichotomy is largely at odds with various educational philosophies built around students reading the canon of great western books, the majority of which (about 75% of Mortimer Adler’s 1990 list⁴) were published before the 20th century (and many before the first millennium). The Great Books curriculum skews decidedly to the classics — the Greeks, the Romans, medieval religious tracts, Shakespeare, authors of the Enlightenment, etc. — reflecting the historicism of western education. This western reverence for early contributions to scholarship is typical of traditional societies that emphasize behavioral norms reinforced by “the collective memory” fixed in printed books. Tradition-based societies and institutions (the church, higher education, politics) rely upon ritual, lionizing founders and ancestors, and glorifying so-called sacred texts as three iconic pillars that bolster allegedly “timeless” values and a conservative worldview; an anachronistic worldview touted as relevant for addressing the challenges of contemporary life. There are clearly other ways to build societal systems of action — and tradition-based ideologies have faced challenges throughout history (e.g., the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, the Sixties) — but there is a certain simplicity to replicating or reproducing ideas from an earlier age with the hope they might produce desired outcomes in modern times. Likewise, there is a certain simplicity or appeal to assuming that the best way to educate a younger generation

is to replicate the experiences — and reading lists — of their elders. Ergo, if Adler and his forebears read Homer in their formative years, so too should the current wave of 18 year olds.

Ignoring, for now, the inherent racism, sexism, jingoism, and classism of the Great Books curriculum, my concern here is with the general lack of currency inherent in book culture. It goes without saying that time invested in reading Homer, Aristotle, Virgil, and Augustine might not be the best preparation for success in Silicon Valley (“street smarts” for the mean streets of Palo Alto). And it’s not just that I’m bothered by too much curriculum focus on the ancients; I question, as well, the “datedness” of a reading list based on this week’s *New York Times* non-fiction best-seller list. Books are a great technology for storing and transmitting old thoughts — those of Aristotle or those of Bill O’Reilly — but are a notably slow technology for a society with the capacity for lightning-fast communication. A “current” printed book is most likely to suffer from a two-year time-lag as it is shipped from the publisher, including the time the idea of the book is conceived, shopped, researched, analyzed, written, edited, produced, marketed, and sold. Add to that the time it takes a reader to identify, acquire, and read a so-called “contemporary” book, and we might timorously suggest that books are no longer the best technology for shedding light on contemporary issues.

On Writers and Readers

Before delving deeper into book authorship and readership, let’s agree to limit our focus hereafter to works of non-fiction — largely trade books and educational texts. I remain optimistic about the future of pleasure reading, primarily, although not exclusively, focused upon works of fiction. While there are now many leisure alternatives to book-length reading, I have a hard time accepting that immersion in a well-crafted story won’t hold its own when weighed against other pursuits. The electronic media revolution has already taken — and will continue to take — a toll on the prevalence of pleasure reading, but there are unique joys that come from engaging over days and weeks with an exciting, complicated, heart-warming, or provocative novel.

But, pleasure reading aside, what to think about the prospects for non-fiction books that are produced with an intention to educate or edify? Readers of non-fiction are more likely to apply a pragmatic standard when deciding upon the best way to educate themselves. What is the fastest, easiest, most convenient, most reliable, most timely way to get to needed information, be that a specific fact or a theoretical context for connecting related facts? For 500 years, give or take, the answer was likely to be, “read a book.” The book was the mainstay and gold standard for communicating facts and ideas across time and space. As such, it served society extremely well in fueling progress in all walks of life. With the advent of modern telecommunications, however, can the book — should the book — maintain its pre-eminent position as the most esteemed mode of scholarly communication and a culturally celebrated symbol of an educated person?

My thesis here is that scholarly book culture — the idea of people writing and reading books

for the purpose of exchanging information — will recede as a norm and value in years to come. By *recede*, I don’t mean *be purged from the face of the earth*. The scholarly monograph will not disappear, but it will become less consequential as other means of conveying knowledge gain traction. Most of you are probably saying, “duh,” hasn’t this already happened? And the answer here is likely to be “yes,” but, as was stated earlier, there are lots of messy conflicting data about such things, and many bookish analysts and experts continue to aver that the book is irreplaceable as a mode of scholarly communication. Those who argue that book culture is alive and well might point to the 27% increase in U.S. independent bookstores between 2009 and 2014;⁵ a general upward trend in output to over 300,000 U.S. books in 2013 and 2.2 million worldwide;⁶ Amazon investing in bricks and mortar bookstores;⁷ and 78% of Americans responding that “libraries are effective at promoting literacy and love of reading.”⁸

But, as with any complex cultural trend, each of these seemingly positive data points can be countered with evidence to the contrary. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that, on average, Americans commit 2 hours and 49 minutes of their daily leisure to watching television, as compared with 19 minutes of reading (4.2 minutes for those aged 15-19 as compared with 52 minutes of “using the computer for fun”);⁹ a 30% decline in bookstore sales between 2008 and 2014;¹⁰ 24% of American adults surveyed in 2013 said they had not read a book in the previous year (the typical American reporting — perhaps honestly or accurately — that they read 5 books);¹¹ and only 46% of adults reported visiting their public library in the previous year.¹²

So Many Books; So Little Time

With book output having more than doubled between 2004 and 2014, it is not surprising that more books than ever are going begging. More people than ever — including academics (broadly defined) — are writing books, and fewer people than ever — including academics (broadly defined) — are reading them. On the one hand, we could argue that an unread book is no book at all, in the way that an unanswered telephone call does not constitute a conversation. Communication — scholarly or otherwise — implies a connection. If we don’t have a speaker AND listener, or a writer AND reader, we’re simply left with solipsistic thought that is functionally unconsummated.

Oscar Wilde once wrote that, “[I]n old days books were written by men of letters and read by the public. Nowadays books are written by the public and read by nobody.”¹³ While that was written in 1894 when U.S. book output was less than 10,000 books per year; it is more apt than ever today. In the current environment, the biggest threat to the book is the overproduction of books. It is the “tragedy of the commons,” or the peril of starvation that is visited upon a healthy or actively reproducing herd. Sooner or later, individual sheep are put at risk by the appetites of others in an accreting herd, and ultimately the survival of the species can be imperiled by the sum of so many individual appetites. An imbalance in the scholarly ecosystem between authors and readers — i.e., producers and

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consumers — should ultimately cull the herd of books, reducing output to the capacity of the environment to absorb content.

This need to balance the supply and demand for books was as true in **Wilde's** time as it is today; books and journals compete with other books and journals for the attention of readers. What's different now, however, is that we're not dealing with a more or less homogeneous body of content — a herd of books, of sorts — that is collectively trying to adapt to its environment. Instead, there is a flood of new and rapacious predators descending upon our academic pastures and competing for sustenance with books and journals at an undersized trough of campus attention. Scholars and students can now graze for information from a multiplicity of sources — e.g., PBS, NPR, documentaries, Ted Talks, Blogs, Twitter, YouTube, Vine, Pinterest, Wikipedia, Webinars, Facebook, Reddit — that are, in many cases, faster, cheaper, easier to access, more fun and more current than the traditional scholarly monograph. So, books are fighting for survival on two fronts: 1) an internecine competition among the glut of books themselves; and 2) a competition to maintain primacy or standing when compared with other conduits of scholarly information.

So, Therefore...

What does all this mean for authors, publishers, and librarians? Academic authors will no doubt continue writing books because available tools make research and writing easier than ever, and institutional rewards continue to incentivize publication, even when the resulting work finds no market or readers. Were it the case — and it is unlikely to be — that promotion and tenure committees were to decide that books without readers should not entitle their authors to additional benefits, these authors would still draw their base salaries and begin researching their next works. Writing a book is respected work in the academy, and not really unpleasant activity for authors to pursue, so academics will likely continue to produce books until failed writing (as in failed to attract an audience) is somehow penalized.

Scholarly publishers of all stripes — commercial, university presses, commercially oriented university presses, library publishers, etc. — are more likely than authors to try to regulate industry production to decrease the risks that are attendant with oversupply (think OPEC). While cooperation to manage supply is a rational response to market imbalance, individual producers do not always act rationally, nor do they trust others to do so. Putting aside the legal questions of whether publishers should be allowed to “cooperate,” “collude,” or “conspire” to regulate or restrict the supply of published books, students of game theory would tell us how difficult it is to optimize mutual benefits for a group by each individual actor accepting a limited degree of personal sacrifice. It may be rational economic behavior, but it is unlikely to come to fruition.

While more traditional trade publishers could theoretically agree to limit the number of books they publish, they have no such oppor-

tunity — in theory or reality — to control the number of books flowing through the burgeoning self-publishing sector or to influence any of a number of alternative modes of scholarly communication supported by telecommunications, time-based and social media. The book publishers will no doubt argue that their vetting process — especially when academic peer review is involved — provides a level of assurance about accuracy that provides value well beyond that offered in newer communication channels. They might also argue — without much evidence — that the slower, more immersive process of long-form reading facilitates deeper learning. On the other side of the ledger, the arguments favoring the introduction of media based communications in all corners of the academy are so numerous that we don't have the time and space to enumerate them here...and so compelling that there should really be no need.

For academic libraries, it is also decision time: do they double down on their longstanding association with the book — hanging more and more celebrity posters that implore youngsters to read — or do they act decisively to diversify their portfolio and support a much broader array of communication channels? Does YouTube include content that might be instructive to students in an introductory anthropology class? If so, should not the campus library be vetting the best of that video content and creating convenient links to it? Likewise, should the library be working with campus faculty to surface useful podcasts, credible blogs, photographic images, curriculum relevant twitter accounts, or other vehicles for transmitting quality scholarly content? Is there any doubt that nearly all students, and the great majority of faculty, spend the bulk of their working and leisure hours online? Libraries should be thinking about how best to interact with their constituents in the places they frequent, and how to organize, validate and preserve the varied forms of scholarly content that can be found there. It should be clear that the value proposition for libraries has shifted from acquiring and preserving once scarcely accessible books, to helping users navigate the broad array of information options available to today's students and scholars.

The Tragic Last Act

S. R. Ranganathan, one of the patron saints of librarianship, famously wrote, “Every book its reader.” Whatever that was intended to mean in 1931,¹⁴ it's pretty clear that it makes little sense in today's environment. Books are easily published, discoverable and accessible worldwide, relatively inexpensive, and yet struggling to find readers. I believe the reasons for this are many and varied, but a few of the gremlins inherent in the technology can be noted:

- Books are long, and slow to digest
- In their print form, it can be hard to know in advance if specific reader needs will be satisfied
- They lack currency
- They are not interactive
- The preferred standard of presentation — for scholarly treatises — tilts to the ponderous
- My friends didn't read it

For these and other reasons, I believe scholars will continue to drift from a reliance on books to more accommodating modes for accessing needed content. It is undeniable that some scholars, on some occasions, need to consume an in-depth, thoroughly researched, thoughtful and edited treatment of a topic of considerable interest. That, however, seems to be the exception rather than the rule. Most students or scholars writing a term paper or article; preparing a course lecture or conference presentation; writing a blog comment, book review or email; peer-reviewing an article; etc., are likely to find what they need in a series of longer or shorter Web snippets, which does not bode well for the future of the scholarly monograph. 🌳

Endnotes

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3. I'm ignoring here that the three best-selling books of all time — the Bible, the Quran, and Quotations from Chairman Mao, likely have a purpose and social impact that differs from most books — fiction or non-fiction. Society is less likely to apply the word “smart” to readers, including obsessive, repetitive readers of these works, and more likely to apply notions like “devout” or “faithful.” While not negative terms in and of themselves, it is not clear that reading the Bible on an airplane is perceived by other passengers in the same way one might react to a traveler reading *War and Peace*.
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