

Departmental Libraries and Electronic Books: Unlikely Allies in Times of Transition

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The Information Age brought about by the rise of the Internet has placed a vast repository of human knowledge at our fingertips. This development has been increasingly allowing us to bypass libraries, the long-time gatekeepers of knowledge, and conveniently access information condensed into many diverse forms. Among these are electronic books, or e-books, combining the familiar functionality of traditional books with the flexibility of the digital medium. Their evident utility has been appreciated in various contexts, including the academia, where their increasing adoption among students and researchers alike has left many wondering whether specialist departmental libraries with their long rows of shelves will soon be rendered obsolete.

Personally, I have been pondering this question for several years, particularly upon experiencing (somehow unsettling) relief whenever online resources proved more than satisfactory for my academic needs, effectively sparing me from a trip to the library. At times, this relief was made even more aggravating, as it was precisely the membership in the departmental library that allowed me to access extensive online collections of academic books and journals from the comfort of my own desk.

This unprecedented convenience is often cited as an indicator of superiority of digital books, which for many it might well be. However, the fact that it is so often held up as the conclusive argument when weighing in on the future of academic libraries seems to reduce the switch to the digital medium to a matter of personal preference or catering to laziness. Proponents of traditional books tend to counter this point at a similar level, appealing to the unique experience of handling a well-made book. In this, both sides seem to be focusing on their subjective evaluation of the immediate characteristics of the two media, while failing to address the “big picture” in this debate: the implications of physicality and digitality in the context of library economy.

For centuries, libraries were seen as an embodiment of the intellectual achievements of humanity. Soon after the advent of writing, they became centers of learning and innovation. The written word stored in the world's libraries provided a readily available foundation for further intellectual progress, as thick volumes lining library shelves were gradually populated with knowledge spanning many diverse disciplines. Scholars from each new generation contributed their unique ideas and discoveries, enabling the subsequent generations to “stand on the shoulders of giants” and make even more impressive progress.

Yet today, many people are increasingly turning to the Internet in their intellectual pursuits, which has successfully established itself as the “global library” among academics and non-academics alike. To the dismay of many, and the delight of some, libraries appear to be gradually losing their importance as gateways to knowledge, having dominated the dissemination of ideas for several millennia.

It is not difficult to see why libraries have historically been so indispensable to scientific progress—the physicality of books made centralization desirable, if not inevitable. As long as the achievements of intellectual giants were mostly contained in rather unwieldy physical objects, sharing them with the public entailed the creation of vast spaces that would store and distribute them accordingly. Naturally, books themselves have also benefited from the innovation they enabled. The invention of the printing press has profoundly changed the production and distribution of written texts, as books ceased to be viewed as luxury goods and could since then be afforded by a much larger section of the society. However, compared to the quantum leap from oral tradition to the written word, which made it possible for previously elusive thoughts and ideas to be preserved in an enduring physical form, printing was a quantitative improvement, rather than a qualitative one.

The crucial breakthrough has only come about very recently, when information began to be stored within electronic circuits. As the progressing miniaturization of these circuits allowed a library's worth of data to be contained in a digital storage medium, humanity has come as close to the transcendence of the physical limitations of the written word as it has ever been. In the development of knowledge distribution, the shift from physical to digital appears to be the next monumental step following the transition from oral culture to manuscript culture.

In this landscape, libraries seem to be in a precarious position. Within the academia, this is especially true of relatively small departmental libraries, which might find themselves under pressure to justify their own existence. The prevailing reliance on physical books might force them to compromise in many respects. On

the one hand, providing a sufficient number of copies of the essential titles that are in most demand among students remains a major logistical challenge, with its negative impact often extending to the classroom. On the other hand, supplying the library with individual copies of highly specialized paper-based publications, which, although invaluable in certain contexts, might only be used once over a period of several years, raises the issue of cost-effectiveness. Thus, economies of scale seem to strongly favor large multi-departmental libraries.

Paradoxically, it is precisely greater adoption of electronic books that might help departmental libraries reverse this predicament. The adaptability of the digital medium can allow them to better adjust their collections to the needs of the department while simultaneously saving time and resources. More and more specialist titles, monographs, and cutting-edge research reports are published in the digital form each year, enabling libraries to provide their patrons with relevant positions without regard to restrictions such as a limited number of available copies or a finite amount of shelf space. By acquiring digital publications, they can respond to the demand much faster and gradually build collections that are better suited to accommodate the ever-expanding body of scholarly knowledge in the relevant disciplines.

This should also make it possible to prevent inflation of costs, as increasing the amount of digital resources does not entail a considerable increase in the costs of shelving and maintenance, as is the case with paper books. A similar non-linear relationship holds true for the cost of purchasing access to new digital resources, which can be acquired in large collections spanning thousands of titles at a fraction of the cost of equivalent physical publications. Moreover, e-books can be easily indexed and integrated into library databases, without the need to painstakingly catalog them and track their physical location throughout their entire life cycle. All these benefits translate into much greater economic viability, which might contribute to halting the trend of absorbing departmental libraries into larger entities.

This is not to say that paper books should be banished from academic libraries to make room for the economically superior electronic books. The inherent disparity between resources stored in a physical and digital form makes it possible for the two to coexist and satisfy a wide range of needs. Strangely enough, this striking qualitative difference is often overlooked by those who liken the future of printed books to the condition of manuscripts following the invention of the printing press¹. However, as long as there are publishing houses willing to print

¹ The two have actually existed side-by-side for many decades. In some areas, manuscript is used to this day (Buringh 119–122).

traditional books and patrons who are inclined to use them, there is no reason to believe that the medium will—or should—disappear from the academia or the public life.

As of 2013, only half of the titles acquired by academic libraries were available in the electronic form, suggesting that the universal availability of digital resources is still a long way off (Walters 202–203). When it is ultimately achieved, it is unlikely that e-books will be able to effectively replace paper books in all contexts, even accounting for their widespread digitization. After all, the very physicality of historically or otherwise important resources is often a valuable subject of academic inquiry.

On the other hand, it is important to note that the potential for improvement presented by the electronic medium is almost unlimited, and we will almost certainly see numerous ingenious functionalities that will make our interaction with e-books even more natural and seamless. While few similar advances can be expected to happen in the area of traditional publishing, it does not warrant dismissing the role that paper books have played in the development of human knowledge throughout the millennia leading up to the rise of the digital medium.

In order to avoid being perceived as mere storehouses of printed resources or entirely vanishing, departmental libraries should continue focusing on providing one of the most valuable services in the academia: helping their patrons access specialist knowledge and utilize it to its full potential. If their mission is to be fulfilled, they must stay responsive to the preferences of the readers, as well as the technological and societal developments taking place outside their walls. This would most likely to mean a greater—though not hurried—adoption of electronic books and adjusting their operations to the requirements of digital distribution. The development of online services that make it easier to find and access digital as well as physical resources is in the best interest of not just the patrons, but also libraries themselves.

Contrary to what some proponents of traditional books might claim, using digital books does not have to be an exercise in isolation. There seems to be no compelling reason why those for whom e-books are the medium of choice would have to be excluded from spaces intended for quiet reading or academic discussions centered around the library. Quite contrary, it might even be necessary to emphasize that electronic books are perfectly welcome in the library environment, preferably by encouraging students to bring their own devices or even lending properly adapted e-readers. If the sense of intellectual community is to be maintained, it should stem from the free exchange of ideas, not the format in which these ideas are expressed.

For many public institutions, the increasing role of the Internet and the digital media in our everyday lives is a reason for major concern, as it might even jeopardize their very existence. However, I would argue that this is not the case for departmental libraries, as the remedy for this problem—which is clearly within their reach—might also prove to be the panacea for many of their other ills. Electronic books release the written word from the restrictions of physicality, offering unparalleled flexibility and enabling libraries to meet diverse academic needs. The strategic adoption of this medium does not have to occur at the expense of paper-based resources, whose unquestionable merits largely derive from the physical form that is lacking in e-books. The harmonious coexistence of the two media presents a chance to ensure the present viability of specialist departmental libraries, while at the same time preparing them for the unpredictable future.

Works Cited

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