

The Case for Libraries

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It is clear that more and more academic research is being conducted online. Access to academic journals through databases like JSTOR makes essays instantly available to anyone who needs them. Portals in the vein of Google Scholar render the network of quotations and references both clear and easily maneuverable. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin have described the contemporary digital culture as following the double logic of remediation, one of immediacy and hypermediacy (Bolter and Grusin 5). Both aspects apply to the experience of online research: the texts are more directly available than in the past, while at the same time the intertextual character of academic publications is emphasized more than ever before. In spite of all that, it is hard to imagine the disappearance of departmental libraries. Certain books are still impossible to find legally without payment, therefore libraries remain institutions of economic support for students and young scholars. The experience of reading a printed book is still favored by many over having to endure going through a long PDF or EPUB file on a laptop. Yet perhaps the social and symbolic roles of departmental libraries are the most essential since both transcend the pragmatic character of the library as a provider of books. As proven by this author's own department, the students and the faculty of which use its library as an ideal, quiet workplace, but also a site of repose, the purpose of these rooms is much broader than that of a simple book repository. All of this suggests that calling the departmental libraries obsolete is premature.

Students need libraries, because access to electronic books is limited. Course instructors indeed distribute the overwhelming majority of readings by sending out scans of texts through e-mail. Yet whenever a student wants to search for a book on her or his own, she or he is often faced with a dilemma: either pay for a legal electronic copy, or download the file illegally, if only it is available. A good, well-equipped departmental library provides a student with a third option: keep your actions legal, without spending all your resources on books you are not even sure you will use. Film and music industries seem to have conceded to the fact that most of their business was moving online only after the emergence of huge services such as Netflix or Spotify, which allow the user to access their extensive

resources after paying a flat monthly fee. Until a similar service is introduced in the area of academic research, dealing with e-books will be a costly proposition. Of course it would be naïve to assume that students do not look for pirated scans of the books they need, but in this case the library plays the role of discouraging the Internet piracy. A student who finds a legally purchased book in her or his library will not seek it any further. Without the libraries, students would feel even more justified in downloading the illegal PDFs.

Moreover, despite the fact that today's students have already grown up in the era of widespread access to the Internet, there is a strong preference among many of them for reading the texts in print. This author's unofficial and unstructured observation of his or her department's students reveals that a significant number of those who come to the classes with an assigned reading, choose a printed version instead of reading it out of a tablet or a laptop. Remarks that they cannot bring themselves to focus on a text displayed on a computer screen are frequent. Caroline Myrberg and Ninna Wiberg quote a study conducted in Norway by Anne Mangen, Bente R. Walgermo, and Kolbjørn Brønnick that randomly divided the students into two groups, of which each had to read two texts (Myrberg and Wiberg 50). One of the groups was given the texts in print, the other had to read them from a PDF file on a computer screen. The group which read the texts in print scored significantly better in reading comprehension tests than the other one (Mangen et. al. 61–68). The study shows that keeping as many printed books in the academia as it is possible may increase the effectiveness of teaching. From this point of view, any university would do well ensuring that their libraries are getting steady support. Obviously a text may be printed out of an electronic file—but it becomes quite inconvenient whenever a text at hand is that of a longer variety. No literature student will want to print out the whole novel when they have the possibility of checking it out of a library.

Furthermore, the role of the library as a social site in a university department cannot be overemphasized. Corridors can be crowded, loud, and full of acquaintances who will surely interfere with any attempt to get some work done between classes. The convention of keeping quiet in a library ensures that anyone who comes there is guaranteed peaceful, uninterrupted work time, or can simply relax in an unthreatening atmosphere. One could argue that the disappearance of libraries would not have to mean that some other social sphere did not appear, but such a scenario is doubtful. Libraries carry a long tradition of being a safe, peaceful space and quietness does not have to be enforced in them, save in some rare cases. Costs of enforcement of quietness in such a new site would be much higher than those in libraries, where it is usually self-enforced. When they need to, students

crave calm spaces, since they are not likely to find peace in the dormitories or student apartments, therefore libraries prove particularly popular during the examination session or at the time when essay deadlines approach.

All of the preceding arguments have some degree of pragmatism to them. After all, the question of obsolescence has to prompt consideration of the libraries' "usefulness" either within or beyond its role as a provider of books. Yet much of this reflection is framed by the economically determined ideology of practicality and exchange value, which is arguably damaging to the sphere of the higher education today and which pulls our attention away from the very important, symbolic role of the library as the signifier of the departments' status and its ambitions as an institution of education. Martha Nussbaum, in her already seminal 2010 book *Not for Profit. Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* argues that the logic of the university as a provider of workforce for the market has lost sight of the higher education's more important goals, such as that of teaching students to think critically and act consciously as citizens of liberal democracies. Nussbaum suggests that the logic of calculated profit makes us forget other purposes of university education (Nussbaum 1–8). In a way, the call to close the libraries is not too far away from the cyclically recurring call to close the Philosophy Departments in different Polish universities. The argument is often economic: there are not enough students or not enough books checked out, therefore the endeavor does not pay for its own existence. But both calls ignore the fact that Philosophy Departments and libraries alike have tremendous symbolic value. Each of departments makes a certain statement with its library: it states its own autonomy and asserts its ambition to become a space of intellectual pursuit and accumulation of knowledge, some of it abstract and without much use to the market. The disappearance of departmental libraries would be a small step towards acknowledging the fact that higher education is supposed to produce white-collar workers. From this perspective, libraries do not seem relevant, readings can be provided in any possible way, what really matters are the results. But the act of supporting the library is a statement against the logic of calculation and, according to Nussbaum and a number of contemporary thinkers, such statements are sorely needed nowadays.

All in all, in spite of the fact that electronic books have dramatically altered the experience of academic research and distribution of assigned readings at the universities, there are numerous reasons for the departmental libraries to keep existing. On the one hand, they make the access to books more convenient and broader, relieve students from the necessity to pay for the texts they need for research purposes, discourage piracy, and ensure that literature in print remains

available for anyone who needs it in this form. On the other hand, the libraries play several roles which are not directly connected to dissemination of books: they offer a convenient and peaceful working space, serve as a status symbol for their departments, embodying the traditional cultural role of universities as devoted to the pursuit of knowledge. The arrival of new media is often accompanied by the anxiety about the obsolescence of the old ones. Television was to kill both radio and cinema, yet both old media remained strong, even if not unaltered. The Internet was supposed to replace television, yet what is seen is the merging of the two media into a hybrid of online VOD services such as Netflix, Hulu, or Amazon Prime. Printed books and libraries will be fine. They may have to adapt to the new reality shaped by the proliferation of e-books, but they are too important to disappear.

Works Cited

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