

Print book bibliographies on the Web

Implications for academic libraries

by R. W. Bivens-Tatum

What are we to think of scholarly books without bibliographies in them? The *New York Times* reported a new trend in the publishing industry that has serious implications for academic libraries—publishing the notes and bibliographies of books online instead of inside the book. Publishers experimenting with online bibliographies include Oxford University Press, MIT University Press, and Princeton University Press.

A look at three books

I first discovered this when examining a new book in my library: *Law's Order: What Economics has to do with Law and Why it Matters*.¹ The *Times* article focused on *The Nothing That Is: A Natural History of Zero*² and *The Monk in the Garden: The Lost and Found Genius of Gregor Mendel, the Father of Genetics*.³ Examining the differences between these books will give us an idea of the scope of this new trend.

Law's Order has no notes or bibliography. The page margins contain little symbols resembling hypertext. One looks like an open book and signifies a normal citation. Other symbols signify citations for books on the Web, law cases, mathematical equations, and additional comments. The book's Web site⁴ contains page images of the entire book, and is relatively easy to browse with a side frame giving chapter links and a top frame giving

links to page numbers within the chapters. If I want to see the case cited on page 150 of the book, I need to click chapter 12 on the side and page 150 on the top, and there is an image with the same symbol as in the book. Clicking on this brings up a page with the citation. (If only pressing the symbol in the actual book could do the same thing.)

Even more barren of scholarly apparatus is *The Nothing That Is*. It has 78 pages of notes and bibliographic references online in pdf format,⁵ but no indication they exist except for a very brief "Note to the Reader" at the beginning of the book. The notes are the sort that list a page number followed by a few words from the page (e.g., "2: [that O without a figure] *King Lear* I.iv.212."). Reading the actual book without beginning at the front cover and moving through every page, one might never know that this book even has notes.

The Monk in the Garden has a selected bibliography, but the bulk of the bibliography is online.⁶ The notes in the book are in discursive form (e.g., the account about so-and-so is in thus-and-such book), and none are online.

What are the implications for libraries?

Are books like these a problem for libraries or for anyone else? They certainly can

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be, and if they are a problem, I have no solutions. But I think it is important that we consider the implications for libraries.

One problem that even the *Times* highlighted is preservation of materials. A quoted library science professor rightly notes that while acid-free paper can last for hundreds of years, no one knows how long digital information will last. Some naysayers highlight the previous incarnations of information storage that remain frozen in that format—microfilm, microfiche, even microcards (my library owns a microcard reader, but how many others do?).

Digital information these days is format-free in many ways. If it is in electronic form, then the information can move from machine to machine and from format to format. And I might even be willing to concede that because it can migrate from format to format, digital information may indeed be preservable as long as we have electricity.

Who will preserve it?

The issue still remains of who will be doing the preserving, and this is the most troubling issue regarding electronic information for many people. There's always the position that if we buy it in print, then we own it, and we don't have to keep renting access to it.

The issue is complicated, and I don't need to address it here. But books split between print and the Web bring a new complication. If a normal e-book disappears, well, then a normal e-book disappears, and we've usually just been renting access to it anyway. But if we buy a print book and add it to our collection, it may cease to be useful, or at least as useful to scholars and students if its bibliography and notes are not accessible, especially in fields such as history.

If libraries do not own the bibliographies, they cannot guarantee their preservation. The bibliography for *Law's Order* is maintained by author David Friedman, and *The Nothing That Is* by Oxford University Press. The *Times* article wonders what might happen if the author dies or the publisher goes defunct.

I also wonder what will happen when the books go out of print. How likely is it that a publisher will maintain a bibliography online for 20 to 30 years after the book has gone out of print?

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Another issue concerns scholars and the transmission of knowledge. The "scholarly apparatus" of notes and bibliographies is essential support for scholarly research for reasons all too obvious. Scholarly books deprived of their apparatus can be quite useless. Books that may be the most important because they reinterpret scholarly arguments or provide fresh perspectives on old controversies rely on notes and bibliographies to make points, sometimes as much as the text itself. And what would a discipline such as history be without the footnote?

Publishers have compelling reasons to place notes and bibliographies online instead of in the books: it makes the book smaller and cheaper, it aims the book at a more popular audience, and it allows bibliographies to become dynamic. But this benefit to popular readers may be a burden to scholars. This trend seems inevitable and irresistible, a harbinger of the future of books.

Librarians may not be able to do anything about it, but we should consider the issue. If it turns out disastrous for libraries, and we're rushed along with torrent, at least we don't have to sing hallelujah to the river god.

Notes

1. David D. Friedman, *Law's Order: What Economics Has to Do with Law and Why It Matters* (Princeton University Press, 2000).

2. Robert Kaplan, *The Nothing That Is: A Natural History of Zero* (Oxford University Press, 1999).

3. Robert Marantz Henig, *The Monk in the Garden: The Lost and Found Genius of Gregor Mendel, the Father of Genetics* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000).

4. *Law's Order*, http://www.best.com/~ddfr/laws_order/.

5. *The Nothing That Is*, <http://www.oup-usa.org/sc/0195128427/>.

6. *The Monk in the Garden*, <http://www.monkinthegarden.com>. ■