

Amy Brunvand

Taking paper seriously

A call for format sensitive collection development

The academic library where I work has an “e-first” collection development policy that reads as follows: “EBooks continue to be our default choice of purchasing, unless print is the only option available please order the eBook.”

A few years ago this policy seemed cutting-edge and was for the most part a minor convenience, but lately it seems like all the recent acquisitions I want to read are ebooks, and instead of feeling happy about how convenient they are, my heart sinks when I find them in the catalog. In order to actually read the book I'm either going to need to waste a lot of time down the rabbit hole of screen reading or request an interlibrary loan and get involved in back and forth quibbling about why the ebook we already had wasn't good enough. Ironically, even though I work at a large research library, I'm spending a lot more time at my public library these days.

At this point I'm supposed to apologize for being a Luddite in order to reassure all the good folks out there that it's okay to love their ereaders. Well, the fact is, I do use ebooks quite a lot, just not for deep reading, and I'm not going to apologize because the science backs me up.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends reading print books to infants from day one but warns against screen time that can result in “negative learning” for children under 2.¹ It's not clear to what extent ebooks count as screen time,² but I've experienced the negative learning effect. A few years ago I noticed that I had lost my ability to read long novels, and as a person who loved *War and Peace* this loss of concentration was dismaying. Self-diagnosed with too much Web surfing I went down to my local independent bookseller and bought a copy of *Infinite Jest*, which is a big complicated brick of a book.

A month or so later I was happily reading tomes like *Moby Dick* again. Turns out I'm part of a trend called “slow reading,” in which people are turning off their computers and re-learning how to immerse themselves in books.³ In *The Slow Book Revolution*, Meagan Lacy argues that slow reading is an essential form of literacy that academic libraries should nurture: “It is not that one technology is better or worse—or that one technology ought to replace another—but simply the fact that a book serves a purpose that no other technology, as of yet, can replace.”⁴

In a review article on how ebooks are used Staiger points out that, “The studies under question agree that students use but do not read e-books, but almost all of them stop short of considering the deeper meaning of this finding.”⁵ Now that ebooks no longer seem like a magical technology-of-the-future, it is time to consider the deeper meaning because, in practice, ereading is turning out to be somewhat less wonderful than futurists predicted. Why? A recent article in *Scientific American*⁶ reviews the current research and reports that essentially screen reading takes longer and it's harder to remember what you read. Aside from human factors like eye-strain (which may eventually have technological solutions), the problem boils down to metacognition: when you read a paper book your brain creates a mental map of the contents which in turn supports all kinds of subtle learning effects. Apparently when people say vague sounding things about how much they love the smell of paper they are not just being obstinate. They are trying to describe

Amy Brunvand is graduate and undergraduate services librarian at the University of Utah J. Willard Marriott Library, email: amy.brunvand@utah.edu

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a real metacognitive experience that's hard to put into words.

Design is also important, and some books don't work well on screens. That includes most poetry,⁷ as well as anything you need to flip between text and illustrations. I can think of plenty of examples off the top of my head where the paper format is essential: *When Women Were Birds* by Terry Tempest Williams has a flip movie in the margins; *The Faraway Nearby* by Rebecca Solnit has a parallel text running along the bottom of each page; *Infinite Jest* by David Foster Wallace has nested footnotes that are integral to the plot⁸; the thickness of *One Million* by Hendrik Hertzberg represents the size of the number; *Book from the Ground: From Point to Point* by Xu Bing is a published artwork that is also a hilarious commentary on the shallowness of digital life; *Cool Tools* by Kevin Kelly is a "blook" reprinted from his blog—the added value is how he organized the print catalog; and *Can Poetry Save the Earth?* by John Felstiner didn't get digital rights for the illustrations, so instead of pictures there are frustrating blank text-boxes that say, "To view this image please refer to the print version of this book." Fine, if the library has the print version.

So there are some books that a hypothetical paperless library would simply not be able to offer, but besides placing artificial limits on collections, an e-first policy undermines Library as Place, which is a basic measure of service quality according to LibQual+. Dead tree detractors like to talk about "book museums," supposedly a dismissive term, but to me a book museum sounds like a splendid place—I'm thinking of something like the Prelinger Library in San Francisco, which offers up the library as post-digital performance art envisioned as "a walk through landscape of ideas."⁹ Surely this is something academic libraries should aspire to.

The big problem with an e-first policy, then, is not that ebooks are bad. It is that e-first is a blunt instrument where a more delicate touch is needed. We librarians think we know what it means to build print collections because for a long time print was the only game in town, but in order to build the print libraries of the future, we need to give more thought to what print means in a digital age. Now that ebooks are a valid option,

we need to be mindfully deliberate about how we curate our paper collections.

We can let publishers make arbitrary format choices for us (e-first) or we can decide what we want to buy in paper and why. It's clear that library stacks and physical displays define a certain kind of public space, that printed books support a particular kind of in-depth reading, and that the book itself is a highly adaptable platform for creative design and innovation. So as odd as this might sound, academic libraries need to write new collection development policies that take print seriously. We need to acknowledge and understand the particular qualities of printed books in order to curate print collections that support library missions and values—things like serendipitous discovery, deep reading, community sharing, and Library as Place.

Notes

1. American Academy of Pediatrics, Council on Communications and Media, "Media use by children younger than 2 years," *Pediatrics* 128, no. 5 (2011): 1040–45.
2. Douglas Quenqua, "Is E-reading to your toddler story time, or simply screen time?" *The New York Times* (October 12, 2014).
3. Michael Rosenwald, "Serious reading takes a hit from online scanning and skimming, researchers say," *The Washington Post* (April 7, 2014).
4. Meagan Lacy, *The Slow Book Revolution: Creating a New Culture of Reading on College Campuses and Beyond*, ABC-CLIO, 2014, 8.
5. Jeff Staiger, "How e-books are used," *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 51, no. 4 (2012): 355–65, 362.
6. Ferris Jabr, "Why the brain prefers paper," *Scientific American* 309, no. 5 (2013): 48–53.
7. Alexandra Alter, "Line by Line, E-books turn Poet-Friendly" *The New York Times* (September 15, 2014).
8. You'd think these hypertext footnotes would actually work better in computerized hypertext, but they don't.
9. Gideon L. Kraus, "A world in three aisles: Browsing the post-digital library." *Harper's Magazine* 314, no. 1884 (2007): 47–57. 