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Long Live the Library: The Place of Print in an Age of Electronic Information

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THE PLACE OF PRINT IN AN AGE OF ELECTRONIC INFORMATION

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AMERICANS tend to embrace new technologies and assume they are revolutionary. We believe that any new technology may be a silver bullet that renders obsolete our previous ways of doing things. We sometimes cling to those beliefs in the face of contradictory evidence.

A current example of this kind of thinking is the notion that libraries are no longer necessary.

Why do we have a perception that all information is becoming electronic? A library colleague, Michael Gorman, wrote that "the digital world (stems) from the pervasive notion ... that the ubiquity of computers is changing society, life and learning to a degree not seen since Herr Gutenberg. There is no evidence that this is so, despite all the pundits and prognosticators who have asserted it in thousands of books and articles - all printed on paper."

In fact, print (as well as other formats) is alive and well. Clearly, technology has influenced the publishing industry, but not in the way the computer industry might have us believe. Digital technology has reduced production costs and almost eliminated international distribution costs, thereby making it less expensive to produce ... print!

Like the impact of television on radio, there has been an effect, but it's not the one futurists predicted.

This is not to say that libraries should not acquire materials in nonprint formats. In fact, libraries actively seek electronic products for certain types of resources. Arguably the most desirable to our patrons are electronic reference materials.

Libraries use the Internet to gain access to a growing number of resources. Because the information contained in reference materials is often transient (citations to new journal articles, lists of government statistical data, etc.), it used to be obsolete by the time it was gathered, compiled, typeset and printed for distribution. In electronic formats, information and citations are updated in real time, not weeks or months later.

One of the challenges for librarians is helping patrons realize that you get what you pay for. In an exercise we have used at Hollins University, we ask students to identify which is the more reliable news source, *The New York Times* or the *National Enquirer*. They quickly answer that it's *The Times.*

When we look at Web sites, however, our powers of discernment seem to vanish: If it's electronic, it's good. At Hollins, we work hard to show our students that the sources we have decided to purchase are superior to and more reliable than the free sources they find when Web surfing.

Those superior sources are not cheap. Anthony Ferguson, a library administrator at Columbia University, has observed that "everything digital costs more money than its print equivalent." In some instances, the price of digital sources exceeds their value, so libraries prefer to buy the print version.

Libraries constantly balance the need to provide access to new electronic resources against the need to make our budgets go as far as possible.

So, what about the "virtual library" - the ballyhooed library without walls? Arguably, it is the least substantial, largely because of copyright law. The only full-text books that have made it into digital format are either public-domain materials, such as those found in the Project Gutenberg file, or those available at very high cost under tightly controlled access.

The bottom line: It is much less expensive for the library to purchase a book than it is for the individual reader to obtain it through this on-demand process.

For decades, libraries have juggled a multitude of formats: print, microforms, audio (including LP records, cassette tapes and CDs), video (including 16mm film, videos and now DVDs), slides and educational kits.

We have progressed through the various types of machinery needed to use all these formats and periodically conclude that we will no longer support one format or another. (If you remember microcards or eight-track tapes, you'll understand why we make these decisions.)

Each format presents its own challenges in terms of preservation, access, circulation, durability and cost-benefit ratio. When one considers these factors in the acquisition of library materials, something else becomes obvious: Print is an old and durable technology.

Those who work in libraries understand that they serve a range of patron needs. Public libraries in particular serve a uniquely Jeffersonian ideal: to foster an educated electorate. Public libraries provide access to print, audio-visual and electronic resources that would be unavailable to those who cannot afford a trip to Barnes & Noble, much less a state-of-the-art PC with access to the Internet.

Far from obsolete, libraries have become dynamic, interesting and more complex. No longer the dusty, silent places they were when all they housed was print, today's library has a wonderful capacity to inspire citizens to climb the ladder from simple information toward wisdom.