

## **The E-Effect on Libraries: Preservation, Transformation or Eradication?**

We are increasingly becoming a society where “e-everything” is becoming the norm. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the “e-effect” -- the consequences of the emergence and proliferation of electronic information on the college library environment. Significant trends are discussed from an academic librarian’s perspective. How has the e-effect influenced the work of librarians and publishers? What does it portend for the future of the book?

### The E-Train’s A-Comin’

As librarians, we saw this revolution coming. We were initially excited when our libraries offered CD-ROM databases and delighted when those online products provided full-text resources. However, we had second thoughts about them when we observed the effect on our users. Some felt that we *might* be contributing to the “dumbing-down” of the research process if all students could type in a few keywords to get results. Ironically, what seemed to be acceptable results to many users indicated a need for additional user education to increase relevance and accuracy. Librarians also grappled with the plethora of search interfaces, their lack of standardization, and the budgetary impact of acquiring and maintaining these popular resources. While there are those with ambivalent feelings about the e-effect, most librarians would agree that overall it has been a positive force in delivering information to users.

### Traveling Companions

With the popularity of Internet resources, teaching faculty and library faculty have joined ranks to counter the injudicious application of information found on the Internet. The indiscriminate use by students of online resources ironically is accomplishing what academic librarians have desired for years—increased collaboration in the educational process. The teaching role of librarians has been expanded to include “information literacy” and “information fluency.” This denotes the need for not only a basic understanding of how to find, evaluate, and use resources in all formats, and but also to feel competent and comfortable with this process as one might feel after having mastered a foreign language.

### All Aboard! Get Your Webpage Ready!

Six years ago, having a webpage was considered very progressive. Now, it is an essential component in the delivery of information services (another consequence of the e-effect) and has resulted in a new role for librarians. At Furman University, we have a team of seven librarians who are responsible for our webpage maintenance and improvement. While we have discussed the possibility of outsourcing the code writing (which from an outsider’s perspective is tedious), the group is unanimous in their opposition to this idea. In their view, writing HTML is much like painting a portrait or composing a song. They believe that it is inextricably a part of the creative process and a satisfying one at that. From a budgetary standpoint, the cost in staff time is enormous but absolutely necessary.

## Marketplace Madness

Traditional publishers find themselves in an environment where they must give their customers what they want (e-everything) yet must continue to maintain the older information formats. Both the more established and the emerging companies have been guilty of creating and promoting products prematurely, responding to pressure to carve out a niche in the market ahead of their competitors. Without a high-quality product and often lacking a fair, appropriate pricing model, this rush into the marketplace takes its toll on relationships with customers.

While the dot.coms<sup>1</sup> do not have the burden of maintaining older information formats, they may lack the time-tested products, processes, and professional workforce that have made their more senior counterparts trusted partners with librarians. Recently, two library director colleagues and I had the terribly unsatisfying experience of negotiating with a salesperson from a well-known dot.com. After several weeks of correspondence via e-mail and telephone, where we received evasive answers to questions, he pressured us to sign off on the deal “so that the revenue would be credited” for a particular month. His intimidating tactics included threatening to reduce our time frame and flexibility if we delayed. If we had not so badly wanted to provide our patrons with this new e-format, to experiment with it, and to be perceived by our respective university communities as forward thinking, we would have walked away from the deal.

## A Rose by Any Other E-Book...?

Several years ago, I had the opportunity to make a presentation to our Board of Trustees regarding the vision of the library's future. The report focussed on the need to renovate and expand our 44 year-old building. During the question and answer period, one trustee asked me why, since electronic resources would provide for our future needs, we couldn't simply put old books in storage... distributed in basements around campus to create more usable space in the library. Another trustee asked if we could rely more heavily on interlibrary loan and thus not continue to grow our book and journal collection. It was a library director's worst nightmare! The e-effect combined with their limited experiences of accessing electronic business and legal information, and their desire to be good stewards of the university's resources had contributed to their misconceptions.

Now, two years later, the \$25 million library expansion and renovation project is the number one priority for campus building projects and the centerpiece of the university's \$175 million comprehensive campaign. What happened to effect this change in their thinking? The most important factor was the unchanging outspoken conviction by students, faculty, staff and administrators that the library was in the greatest need for updating and additional space. Secondly, Furman is a selective liberal arts college with 94% of the students residing on campus. Distance learning is not now, nor likely will be a part of its future. So, there is agreement that Furman must have a library *with* and *without* walls. Third, many of our peer institutions are either in the planning stages or have recently completed library building projects.<sup>3</sup> Finally, to paraphrase Mark Twain, our trustees recognize that the death of the physical book has been greatly exaggerated. To be sure, the limitations of e-resources and in particular, electronic books have been glossed over.

The e-book, while definitely in our future, is still an emerging new format and technology. For people born in the 1950s and before it is not as user-friendly as the traditional paper book. I was one of the 400,000 people who downloaded Stephen King's Riding the Bullet.<sup>4</sup> After purchasing the book from netLibrary, I spent about forty-five minutes downloading it, and about three hours reading it. Even with a comfortable chair, and a 19-inch monitor ergonomically positioned on a desk, the experience was less than fully satisfying for this reader. I wanted to stretch out on the sofa or lie on the bed with pillows propping up my head, neck and shoulders. After all, this was a pleasure-read!

In contrast, my eleven-year-old stepdaughter lives in a world where the sustained reading on a computer screen is not a novelty. For her, using America Online for e-mail, kid chat rooms and webpages are a part of daily life. Although she reads far more printed matter (books and magazines), she *may* more easily embrace the concept and practice of reading books online since she is growing up in a bimodal environment.

While traveling to California, Ireland and Chicago this summer, I conducted a casual random survey on the use of e-books by fellow airline passengers. My methodology was straightforward. Every time I needed to stretch or use the bathroom, I looked around to see how many people were using e-books. When someone was using a computer, I asked him or her if they were reading an electronic book. If they were using a hand-held device, I repeated the question. My findings were not surprising. Readers used paperback or hardcover books, newspapers, magazines or work-related documents. While I saw the occasional Palm Pilot, the owners were not using it to read a book. Granted, this was not a scientific study, however, it did confirm to me that e-books have years to go before they are as ubiquitous as paperbacks.<sup>5</sup>

At the Society for Scholarly Publishing Conference this year, Bill Hill, Microsoft's key researcher in it's e-book division said, "We are involved with the biggest revolution since Gutenberg. Clearly the transition into digital is not a matter of *if*, but *when*." However, he went on to say that more important than offering more features than traditional print books, the experience has to be effortless.<sup>6</sup> Today's hand-held e-book devices are full of effort. Several hundred dollars is necessary to purchase the hardware. It requires time and effort to download, effort to operate them, and effort to use them. I suffered fatigue much more readily when I used our library's Rocket eBook as opposed to a printed book. Barnes and Noble can rest easy... at least for the next five years.

### Summary and Predictions

The e-effect has not rendered libraries or librarians obsolete. It has transformed our work and our workplaces. This summer at Furman, librarians planned, organized and taught a two-week workshop to our faculty colleagues on how to create content-rich web pages. Not surprisingly, the mystique surrounding the proliferation of e-resources and new developments in the web world has enhanced our image. We are the first to know about new products, we arrange patron trials and solicit feedback, and we impart the secrets of the myriad search interfaces to our users. The e-effect has changed our work, raised our visibility, and increased our credibility on campus.

In addition to transforming our roles as academic librarians, the e-effect will continue to change our environment. We de-emphasized the “warehouse of books” model of service years ago. We expect publishers and vendors to deliver e-products with increasing levels of value-added features. The e-medium encourages this. Our facilities and services reflect new partnerships with campus computing services and with teaching faculty with the shared goal of preparing our students to be leaders and life-long learners. Our library building plans reflect this new paradigm.

However, one pervasive trend that threatens eradication brought about by the e-effect has been the drain on academic library recruitment. Anecdotal evidence derived from the past two years of reports from College Library Directors' Discussion Group<sup>7</sup> indicate that hiring librarians especially for entry-level and mid-level positions has become increasingly difficult. Many library school graduates have chosen to join the more lucrative, exciting, though volatile world of the dot.coms. If we are not able to attract the best and the brightest to academic librarianship, it will be our undoing.

#### References and Notes

1. Dot.coms = the new Internet startup businesses
2. Vision for the Furman University Libraries of the Future, March 1998, at <http://library.furman.edu/building/>.
3. In each December issue of Library Journal you will find an article on library building projects in the United States. In 1999, over \$565 million was spent on library renovations, expansions and new buildings in the United States—a 4% increase over 1998. See Fox, Betty-Lee, “Library Buildings 1999: Structural Ergonomics,” Library Journal, December 1999, p. 57-69 for the latest issue.
4. Carvajal, Doreen, “Long line online for Stephen King E-Novella,” New York Times, March 16, 2000.
5. The majority of passengers were not reading. They were talking, sleeping, listening to music or watching the entertainment video.
6. Library Journal Academic News Wire: June 08, 2000. For information on this online publication send an e-mail to: [chlj@espcomp.com](mailto:chlj@espcomp.com)