



The rise, fall and rise of the printed book

Hugh Murphy

Introduction

Libraries are diverse in role, use and space and the scope of our profession is equally diverse, spanning public, academic, national, corporate and a variety of other types. As such it can be challenging to see conclusive patterns and make definitive professional statements. That said, it is telling that, across the span of most libraries and beyond, the humble print book has proven to be remarkably resilient in a way that might not have been as recently as 2010 when various technology evangelists were hailing the death of the printed book¹ and Amazon sold more books for its kindle than print.²



1 <https://techcrunch.com/2010/08/06/physical-book-dead>
2 <https://techcrunch.com/2010/07/19/kindle-sales/>

The Resurgence of Print

Today, print sales are rising, with 360 million books sold in the United Kingdom alone in 2016.³ That figure is suggestive of an increasingly robust industry, and comfortingly, this rise is in tandem with an increase in the figure purchased through physical bookshops. Alongside this however, sales of e-books have begun to not only plateau, but to decline.⁴ One of the things which makes this incipient decline more remarkable is that, increasingly the majority of people in the first world are spending more and more time in an online, virtual or digital environment. Research in the USA which examined the amount of time Americans spent reading for personal pleasure or interest over a ten year period (2005-2015) noted a 22% decrease during that period whereas time spent watching TV or playing computer games has increased.⁵ In this context (and assuming similar trends in the UK and Ireland), the survival of the printed book and the bookshop is not only remarkable but can be seen as occurring against almost all the odds.

Cheaper and Better?

While a popular novel on Kindle may be cost effective, the reality for academic libraries is quite different. Where Amazon may discount its electronic titles, with a view to getting a strong market share, promote the kindle and realise economies of scale, academic vendors and publishers tend to price the electronic format more expensively than the print. There may be reasons for this: online hosting, server management and format upgrades are perhaps not cheap. But against this there is the question of whether vendors are actively pushing libraries toward the more traditional medium – or perhaps a combination of the two. Certainly the range of titles can be a challenge - academic titles are not always to be found in electronic format and this is especially the case in the humanities and in the field of text books. E-books can be restricted by a variety of publishing formats and

3 Conor Pope: Rise and Fall of the Kindle: how real books are fighting back, Irish Times May 22, 2017

4 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/mar/14/ebook-sales-continue-to-fall-nielsen-survey-uk-book-sales>

5 <https://www.bls.gov/webapps/legacy/tustab11b.htm>

Digital Rights Management (DRM), thus limiting the potential to maximise the benefits of a digital medium. Moving beyond this, the reality is that as a business model, print is remarkably agnostic – you simply buy it. For e-books each vendor may offer a different model for purchase or subscription, with credits, multiple use options and a plethora of other factors to consider. With academic titles, it is a challenge to provide access via e-book, and even where this can be done, retention of the title is not necessarily guaranteed, depending on vendor, publisher and platform. If one considers the fractured nature of global copyright law relating to this matter then the issue becomes even more byzantine and the following lines from an obituary of Michael Hart (founder of Project Gutenberg) become both prescient and gloomy:

“The joy of e-books, which he invented, was that anyone could read those books anywhere, free, on any device, and every text could be replicated millions of times over. ... If all these upheavals were tardier than he hoped, it was because of the Mickey Mouse copyright laws. Every time men found a speedier way to spread information to each other, government made it illegal.”⁶

Ultimately there is an irony here in that while publishers and vendors may cite understandable business reasons to avoid unrestricted access to their content, these same restrictions are impeding any prospective ‘digital first’ policy for many libraries (irrespective of what the libraries may themselves wish). Moving beyond the academic, public libraries face this challenge too and it is not new. Indeed the concerns expressed by commentators such as Bobbi Newman as far back as 2012 have not really been assuaged:

“When it comes to eBooks, we cannot give them what they want, not really, we cannot give them books from *Simon and Schuster* or *Macmillan* or new books from *Penguin* or *Hachette* and not more than 26 times from *HarperCollins*, and probably not many books from *Random House*... I am no longer convinced that spending ... on the current eBook system is a wise move”⁷

6 “Michael Hart, *Economist*, September 24, 2011, 109.

7 Bobbi Newman, Should Libraries get out of the eBook business, *Librarian by day* blog, March 7 2012



Nostalgia and the Tactile

In this regard the strengthening print market can be seen as with the resurgence of other analogue formats. Most notable in this regard is the recovery of vinyl which has been nothing short of incredible. As a medium vinyl was generally accepted to be moribund ten years ago, consigned to a small group of purists; now the market sees sales at their highest since 1991 and this rise shows no signs of abating.⁸ Many of the reasons for this revival -nostalgia, a desire to engage with a physical, tactile object, an appreciation of the artwork can be transposed to the print book. A print item, with an old treasured inscription more easily elicits a memory, the feel of it in our hand and the sense of immersion we had stays with us long after we have put it down. It was notable last year when reading the praise for Sarah Perry's excellent *'The Essex Serpent'* to note how many reviewers included praise for the beautiful cover art, which surely would not have resonated in such a way had it only been available electronically.

Techno Determinism

Do we crave something because it is new and seems innovative? When it comes to assessing the respective merits of print and electronic, there is always the danger of a mild form of techno determinism – where the possession of new technologies for reading shapes both what we read and (critically) how we read it. With libraries, a key question which should always be asked is: “will the technology benefit the user?” – as opposed to the library and its staff or other stakeholders. And yet the reality, as we know, is that a lot of ‘e-books’ are relatively pedestrian surrogates of print, where the content is

simply mapped to a new medium, with relatively little evolution.

A good counterpoint to this, and perhaps an example of where a ‘digital’ medium can truly innovate in a way that print cannot is in the world of digital comics. While it can be used as a simple surrogate the digital version can also be enabled to allow a more immersive passage through the panel-based narrative, complete with occasional Augmented Reality interaction. Not perhaps to everyone’s taste, but a compelling *Unique Selling Point* for digital.

What they cannot do, of course, is replicate the physical, but also the wonderful interaction which many people have in a bookshop or public library. Recently in the UK, the Booksellers Association petitioned government to “Support Bookshops and a reading Nation” explicitly linking the bookshop with a vibrant community and social cohesion.⁹

The simple reality is that people welcome the face-to-face interaction and personal recommendation of a well-informed staff member, over a virtual, algorithm driven alternative. To many of us, this is hardly revelatory, but in a world where our interactions are being limited (banks, post offices?) it puts a premium on the welcoming bookshop and perhaps serves to explain why smaller independent bookshops are prospering in concert with the larger ‘big name’ versions.

Ultimately the recent positive progress while welcome cannot really be extrapolated into a conclusive trend. Perhaps the key issue is having a choice – engage in content of this type in a way that suits you, the reader. Writing in *The Bookseller* recently, Mads Holmen, founder of content recommendation platform Biblio, suggested one way forward:

8 <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jordanpassman/2017/01/12/vinyl-is-officially-booming-the-new-billion-dollar-music-business/#4daabb044054>

9 <http://www.thebookseller.com/blogs/street-mates-595261>

“We need to make it “cool” to read, write and opt out of the constant social pressure to participate on social media. We need to preach the virtues and impact of long-form over shallow content”¹⁰

However it is important not to conflate social media and social network – one of the things which has kept the print book market going has been the presence a particular type of social network: the book club, managed privately or via public libraries.

The Maynooth Experience

In Maynooth University, we piloted the use of Kindles in 2012 with great success. One of the key advantages it offered for our users was that borrowing the device counted as borrowing only one item, albeit with multiple books on it. For the undergraduate community, who often face the need to maximise their borrowing rights this was invaluable – as was the physical ease of bringing one device, versus several physical books. However the key driver behind the adoption of the kindle in this way had nothing to do with the inherent benefits (or otherwise) of the device itself; it was to do with the endorsement of the academic community. While, in some ways this can be seen as comforting (students listen to their lecturers!) it does not suggest that any great critical evaluation was being made as to the merits of the kindle as a delivery system for content.¹¹ Another piece of analysis undertaken in Maynooth revealed that e-books which also have a print copy available are used more heavily than those which are solely available electronically, which suggests a more fluid use of collections than might otherwise be imagined.

For more ‘traditional’ e-books, it remains challenging to enable a coherent set of collection development principles, largely due to the challenges noted above. If we assume that the provision of books in our libraries has to be

linked with an understanding of how these titles are used, then the ability to chart use of eBooks with metric based reports would seem attractive. But the reality remains more nuanced; even the industry standard Counter BR2 report can only ever show part of the picture and is of limited value in helping us understand how these resources are being used.

Conclusion

The challenge to print is not new. And it can be a complex issue for librarians to navigate as we promote movements such as open access, which in so many ways are predicated on digital and electronic platforms. Perhaps the danger is in viewing our collections in a fractured manner, where we focus on the medium, over the content. And yet, the medium, or the carrier is critical – it is central to the very resurgence under discussion. In this regard, it is interesting to consider that, while the *Book of Kells*, a unique, world renowned artefact, may well be priceless, even a print facsimile is extremely expensive and can realise four and five figure sums at auction. Would a digital surrogate do likewise, and if not why?

It appears that, for now at least, the printed book is here to stay. Perhaps this resurgence in the printed book will prompt a change in the e-book market, with a view to addressing some of the issues. For those who love the printed medium the short to mid-term future at least remains positive. The final word can be left to David Sax, author of *The Revenge of Analog* who has noted

“This is not a digital world. This is a rock spinning eternally in space. We are flesh and blood and occasionally we use digital devices to interact with that world, but 99 percent of the time, we’re real people in the real world. And that will always be analog.”¹²

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¹⁰ <http://www.thebookseller.com/futurebook/were-reaching-peak-attention-how-can-books-survive-585556>

¹¹ For more on this, see Kindles in the library, National University of Ireland Maynooth Kindle Pilot 2011 - *Louise Sauls in M-Libraries 4 From margin to mainstream - mobile technologies transforming lives and libraries*, ed. Ally and Needham

¹² <http://betakit.com/journalist-david-sax-on-the-rise-of-analog-in-a-digital-age/>