

# The Future of the Book in the Digital Age

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## If it isn't on the Internet, it doesn't exist

### How the new generation view books as archaic relics

*Mark Perlman*

In the early 1990s a joke e-mail went around the world that purported to sell a new-fangled device for storing and retrieving information, called 'BOOK 1.0'. The e-mail went on to boast that BOOK 1.0 was environmentally friendly, needing no battery or power source other than one's own hand to turn specialised information storage files called 'PAGES' from one to the next. It also extolled the virtue of being able to use the inexpensive Manual Graphite Input Device, 'PENCIL 2.0', to make notes directly on the BOOK 1.0 itself, right next to the text one wanted to mark or notate.

Back then this joke was so amusing partly because it was still absurd to think that 'books' would be so unfamiliar as to need to be introduced to people, and to be done so with such imitation-hi-tech advertising. Books were the primary medium containing and disseminating detailed information, and everyone knew (or thought they knew) that books would remain indispensable into the foreseeable future. Books are bought, read, and collected throughout much of the world, and huge buildings are built specifically to house them. They are part of everyday life and have been doing the job for over five hundred years. So there seemed no reason to think they would not remain so for a long time to come.

Yet, just a few years later, as I teach philosophy to college undergraduate students in the United States, this old joke is less funny and more alarmingly accurate than I had ever imagined it could be. The majority

of my students not only don't really read books – they do not accept books as a valuable or even valid object to seek out to obtain information. For most of them, if it isn't on the Internet, it doesn't exist.

I do not want to give the impression that I myself am hostile to the Internet – far from it. It is a fantastic tool, great for searching for obscure information and for buying and selling things. (My eBay feedback is 307, and 100 per cent positive!) When I want to find out about someone, I Google them.<sup>1</sup> I buy plane tickets and concert tickets online, and do research online. How could I be hostile to the Internet? But I also recognise that for serious scholarship in many academic areas, the information on the Web is mostly superficial, sketchy, and sometimes bizarre and disastrously mistaken. In my own field of philosophy, serious, detailed, rigorous treatments of complex arguments and subtle views remain firmly rooted in those old-fashioned information-storage devices we old-timers call 'books'.

But now the generation of people who grew up using the internet is rejecting books as irrelevant and inconvenient, and simply ignoring them. The short-attention-span fans of Xbox and MTV simply have no patience for having to actually touch the actual pages of an actual book to find what they need. Actually reading, or even skimming, large numbers of books to find a mention of an elusive idea is too time-consuming to even be considered. The question then becomes: What should we do about it?

## Assigning research

In my classes, I normally have students write term papers every term. These are philosophical argument papers, not research papers *per se*, so in the past I simply left it to the students to do whatever amount of research was needed to write a decent paper. Many did sufficient research, and some did not, but that is just normal behavior among college students. But in the last few years I noticed a trend – instead of having a list of books cited, I began to have works cited lists contain merely a number of supposedly authorless web page URL addresses. Of course, these pages really do have authors, and some authors are even listed at the bottom of the page, but it would be a lot of trouble to scroll *all the way* down to the bottom of the page, especially after having found a tidbit of information a mere four inches down from the top. So the students conceive of all these web pages as just handed to them from the Internet

ether, like manna from heaven. And once they have looked at about six websites, they declare the research finished. At no time need they venture into the stacks of the library and get their hands dirty touching those archaic documents that those dinosaurish professors call 'books'.

So I have changed my assignment. The students are now required to use at least three books and five journal articles relevant to their topics. But that's not all! They are required to bring the books and articles to class in a collegiate show-and-tell.<sup>2</sup> I require that they physically demonstrate to me that they have actually gone to the library and taken books out of it. I can't force them to read the books, but having gone to all the trouble of carrying them out of the library and around the campus, I figure maybe there is a chance that between websurfing sessions they'll crack open a book or two, out of guilt if nothing else.

It is true that many journal articles can now be printed directly from websites, and my students are adept at finding these. (More adept, in fact, than I am.) But I was astonished when one student recently lamented that the articles he needed to look at were not on the Web – like a sad helpless puppy he looked up at me and asked: 'How can I get them if they're not on the Web?'

I was momentarily speechless (a rare event) as it struck me that he was serious – it had simply never occurred to him that one could go to the stacks, find the very physical copy of the *Journal of the History of Philosophy* or other such journal, photocopy the article, and take it home and read it. This is when I knew there was a serious generational and techno-cultural phenomenon in progress.

## Computers and change

We all knew computers would change the world, and they have. They were predicted to create paperless offices and an abundance of information free for the taking. In fact they created more paper than ever, with computers and printers making it easier to revise and revise and print and print and kill more trees than ever before. And while much information is indeed free online, the newest trend (since the dot-com bust of the late 1990s) is to entice websurfers with a few bits and then charge them money for the detailed information they seek.

I am told that one interesting change that the Internet has brought is a distinct slowdown of the market for first-editions and moderately rare books. This is initially puzzling, but becomes less so after a little reflection.

There is only a small number of book collectors who desperately want a copy of any particular first edition book title. In the past their problem always was finding a copy. Those book dealers who had them could patiently hold onto them, and when the desperate collector, having searched for years for a fine specimen of the much-sought first edition, finally grasped his or her prize, the seller could charge a handsome price, and the long-on-the-quest collector would pay it. But then many bookstores started cataloging their stock and putting it for sale to the world via the Internet. Collectors began surfing for the titles they sought, and it became trivially easy to find virtually anything. Collectors could take their pick from many copies in many places. Once the few dedicated searchers had acquired their treasures, the market dried up, and prices fell significantly. The supply hadn't increased, but the technology to link demand to the supply had. So the market for such books was altered forever. I have to admit that this same phenomenon has significantly reduced my own 'thrill of the hunt' in trolling through bookstores. There is not a lot of thrill in clicking the computer mouse on *BUY IT NOW*.

Another technological change was a move to put texts of whole books in so-called 'e-books'. In his 1989 novel *Cyberbooks*,<sup>3</sup> Ben Bova describes the possibility of all books being replaced by data files on digital text pads, eliminating the printing and stocking of books, and making bookstores obsolete. That kind of development has not yet occurred – e-books never really took off. But a lesser successor is that one can sync up one's *Palm Pilot* with the Internet and read the day's newspaper on a 3" LCD screen instead of getting newsprint on one's hands. But have computers and the Internet replaced books? It seems the answer is NO. e-Books faded with the dot-com bust, and I don't know anyone who is reading the latest bestseller novel on their *Palm Pilot* or *Blackberry* or *Clié*. But the danger is that, in the case of my students, the Internet has done far worse than replace books. It has made them irrelevant, and unworthy of being replaced. My students don't have anything comparable to books in their myriad of web pages, and many of them don't know or care. Books are just not part of their lives.

## Education

It was recently widely reported in the US that a certain high school in Arizona was eliminating textbooks from their curriculum, and having their students use notebook computers to read their school material

online.<sup>4</sup> Of course, they are quick to point out that this isn't just an elaborate use of Internet search engines. They have programs and resources specifically designed to present information to their students on their screens. And I am sure that the students will indeed learn things, and that these programs have been carefully designed by people with grant money. Officials at this high school boast that this strategy will allow students to get numerous different sources and points of view on each topic, and this will tie in with a style of information-processing that the students are already familiar with, from websurfing.

But their alleged virtue shows exactly what the main downfall is of this trend toward cyber-everything. The students will indeed get twenty different viewpoints, but each will be one twentieth of the detail and analysis and sustained examination that a topic would have received in a traditional book. Getting multiple viewpoints isn't so difficult. What's difficult is really understanding the details of even one. It is the in-depth sustained pursuit of a line of analysis or argumentation that we often see in books and rarely see on web pages. The result is a growing number of students who cannot engage in serious study and serious scholarship, and whose ideas and writing have become as superficial as the web pages that are their only source of knowledge. They don't *read* texts anymore, they *access* pages and *skim* snapshots on a screen. Such cyber-scanning of words just doesn't convey depth of meaning.

Of course all of these claims are generalizations, and we can all cite examples of students who are as devoted to books as any old-timer could wish for. Even children are still reading – 8 million copies of the latest *Harry Potter* book, and climbing. But even here there is a trend away from past habits. Yes they devour *Harry Potter*, but what else do they read? Bookstores are seeing a trend of buyers toward coming in to the stores already focused on buying exactly the title they have heard about.<sup>5</sup> They get that book, buy it, and leave. Some stores report a trend of customers phoning them to have the desired title sitting at the checkout waiting for them, so that they can double park their cars while they rush in to grab the hit of the month. This way buyers need not have their single-minded pursuit of this month's bestseller or Oprah recommendation impeded by any other pesky titles. The notion of browsing to find a book less advertised and publicised is waning. Most people are in too much of a hurry to browse through the stacks.

## Local or global?

Having begun thinking about this phenomenon, I began to wonder if it is a global issue, or a localised problem specific to mediocre American students. Soon afterwards I traveled to St Petersburg, Russia, and was struck by the prominent place of literature and books there – half the statues in the city are of famous writers like Pushkin and Gogol. Russians with low salaries living in meagre apartments still have an admirable number of books on their shelves at home. Then I visited London for a week, and I enjoyed searching through the great number and variety of bookstores. London is a world center of publishing, and an amazing number of new titles continue to appear every year. And having seen old churches, old monuments, old homes, old buildings, guards with large fuzzy hats, and attended the *Last Night of the Proms* concert, I was struck by the extent to which the British retain their enthusiasm for their traditions. It is difficult to imagine Britons turning their backs on books. Perhaps the place of books is safer in Europe than in short-attention-span America.

However, travelling and thinking about the global scope of the popularity of books has not undone my view that books are in danger of losing a place in modern culture. After all, for all their adherence to tradition, the British also gave us the Beatles and punk rock, and London's historic skyline features many ultramodern buildings, from the irregular egg-shaped new London City Hall to the tall new building resembling a giant cucumber. Technology is changing the UK as much as anywhere else. Russia is vigorously plunging forward into capitalism and technological advancement, as are India and China. Japan is more gadget-crazed and high-tech than anywhere. Cellphones and the Internet are everywhere in the modern world, and those same forces moving my American students toward exclusive reliance on the internet are at work worldwide. In the discussion after my presentation of this idea at the Third International Conference on the Book (in Oxford in 2005), conference attendees from around the world helpfully confirmed my view that this is a worldwide phenomenon, wherever people have access to the Internet.

## Conclusion

It may well be that this kind of grousing is the same as one might have heard 100 years ago from grumpy fans of horse-drawn carriages – 'These newfangled automobiles are too loud and too fast. Everyone is in such a hurry these days.' The refrain 'Kids these days are no damn good' has echoed in every generation. But I think this is different.

The information explosion has made it difficult to wade through the maze and find the bits that are really important, and people are becoming satisfied with a multiplicity of viewpoints even if each view must be made to fit on a hyperlinked web page. I do not deny that electronic texts and the technology of their delivery may soon evolve so as to present information in the same detailed manner that books do. It is just that the Internet as it exists now, snapshots of text read off of computer screens, simply does not yet contain the same level of rich, detailed, and thorough information that we find in books.

So I find myself at a crossroads in pedagogy – should I stick to the traditional ways of teaching, or should I cave in to fad and technology and begin using glitzy new methods of teaching and communicating? Even if those methods are not always as good as what they threaten to replace? If what I have described here is indeed a genuine phenomenon of learning in the internet age, and the Web has created a whole new conception of where to find information and a new mode of reading it, or, rather, accessing it, this doesn't mean that teachers must automatically bow to the new learning style of the students. It might mean that we now have more things to teach our students – how to learn, and where to find detailed information and thorough analysis and arguments. We have to show them the difference between different sources of information, and teach them that books are not archaic relics. Even in the twenty-first century cyber-age, books are still valuable and irreplaceable containers of knowledge.

## Notes

1. For the uninitiated, to 'Google' someone means look for information about that person on the Internet, typically using the website <http://www.google.com>, though it can also mean using any website to do research on someone. Google is simply the best one.

2. 'Show-and-Tell' is an activity in early grades of elementary school in which students bring to class objects of interest, and explain to the other children what they are.
3. Bova, Ben (1989) *Cyberbooks*. New York: Tor Books.
4. <http://www.dailystar.com/dailystar/dailystar/83469.php>. See? Even I am doing it now! I never had a physical copy of this story in my hands. I read the Tucson, Arizona newspaper story in my Monmouth, Oregon office on the internet. The article 'All-laptop high school to open in Vail' was by reporter Daniel Scarpinato in the July 10, 2005 *Arizona Daily Star*, and the story was picked up by The Associated Press and appeared nationally in the United States.
5. Hillel, Italie (2005) Booksellers Seeing Changes in Customers – At Annual Convention, Booksellers Say Customers Are More Focused, Less Interested in Browsing. Associated Press: <http://abcnews.go.com/Business/wireStory?id=821466>.

## Plus ça change.... Print on demand reverts book publishing to its pre-industrial beginnings

Manfred Breede

### Books before the invention of printing

Perhaps nothing illustrates the value of books in the pre-printing era better than the princely sum of 400 to 500 Crowns charged for the manuscript of a Bible in medieval Strasbourg.<sup>1</sup> To put this into perspective, in H.J. Grimmelhausen's 'The Adventurous Simplificissimus', which takes place at about the time of the incunabula period, the protagonist of the story finds himself penniless, save for a gold ring with a diamond worth some 20 Crowns.<sup>2</sup> In other words, in the 1600s a manuscript's value was roughly equivalent to 25 gold rings studded with diamonds. It goes without saying that the majority of the population could not hope to own a book, let alone assemble a very modest library of books. In fact, even a renowned library such as Cambridge in 1442, had only 122 volumes in its collection.<sup>3</sup> It is said 'that it was the dream of Chaucer's Clerk of Oxenford to own 20 (books), but Chaucer certainly does not suggest that his clerk's dream was likely to be fulfilled.'<sup>4</sup>

In keeping with the 'sell and produce vs. produce and sell' thesis of this paper it is likewise quite improbable that books, given their considerable value, would have been commissioned in large stockpile quantities or in any quantity beyond one at a time for that matter. In all likelihood the most probable scenario of book production and transactions would have been the request (sell) and subsequent copying (produce) of a single book. We have some interesting evidence of such a transaction when Cardinal Giuliano della Rovere (later Pope Julius II) requested a