Shannon Moran

Professor Phillips

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Ebooks and Libraries: How the Digital Age is Changing the Way We Borrow

Libraries have been a standard institution in many civilizations, providing a variety of literature to its patrons on a borrowing system. The digital age and the increasing popularity of e-books are changing this long-standing institutional practice, as both public and academic libraries begin to make use of this technology. This technology can help provide valuable literature to more students and library patrons; however, the use of such technology has also been questioned for multiple reasons. Some believe the presence of digital books in libraries may result in a lower use of print books and ultimately hurt publishing industries. Despite the support for both sides, digital technology is being used in libraries and will undoubtedly change the way we borrow.

Today, a number of both public and academic libraries are beginning to make use of digital technology to serve their patrons. The University of Virginia was one of the first libraries to do so. In 1992, the University of Virginia founded its own e-book library, dubbed the Etext Center (Striphas 20). According to the University of Virginia Library’s website, the goal of the Etext Center was “to build and maintain an Internet-accessible collection of documents central to teaching and research in the humanities, and to nurture a user community adept at the creation and scholarly use of these materials” (University of Virginia). The university has so far been successful in this endeavor. Between 2000 and 2002, the Etext Center distributed 6.4 million e-books to its campus community (Howard 152). These numbers demonstrate the popularity of digital books in the academic world.

Other libraries have taken cues from the initiatives of the University of Virginia. The New York Public Library has over 3,000 titles available in e-book form, making more books available to more patrons (Howard 153). Like traditional print books, the e-book titles are available to loan for a period of time. After this time has passed, the digital copy is removed from the patron’s device and is available for other patrons to download. This initiative has also been widely successful. Over 1,000 titles were downloaded in the program’s first week. Later this month, digital versions of titles from the publishing company Simon & Schuster will be available to patrons of the New York Public Library, the Brooklyn Public Library, and the Queens Public Library. This one-year pilot program hopes to “ensure that as ebook readership grows our citizens can enjoy access to books akin to what the library has always provided” (Vinjamuri).

Lafayette College has also begun to move towards the digital future with their digital library, or “ebrary.” The ebrary offers books in 20 subjects for students, faculty, and staff to download to e-readers, laptops, and computers. Terese Heidenwolf, the Director for Research and Instructional Services at Lafayette’s Skillman Library, has noted that, while Lafayette’s print collection will continue to grow, the digital collection has expanded exponentially in the past five years. In creating a digital library that coexists with the pre-existing print collection, Lafayette hopes to save money and make more texts available to students. With this initiative, students will be able to use both print and digital texts for their research, thus serving the needs of all students, whose preferred research methods may vary from one another’s.

The Cushing Academy library has made use of the growing digital technology and popularity of ebooks in a slightly different way. Like the University of Virginia, the New York Public Library, and Lafayette College, Cushing Academy has a “learning center,” where all of its digital contents are available for student and faculty use. Unlike these other libraries, the Cushing Academy Library went completely digital. In 2010, the elite Massachusetts boarding school replaced their entire print collection with a digital version. There are no print books in the library. Rather, students can use flat screens, laptops, and Amazon kindles to do their reading and research in the library (Antolini). James Tracy, the headmaster of Cushing Academy, argued that the switch from a print-based to a digital library was a smart move for a number of reasons. Tracy has said of the move, “If I look outside my window and I see my student reading Chaucer under a tree, it is utterly immaterial to me whether they’re doing so by way of a Kindle or by way of a paperback” (Antolini). Student use of the library and its digital contents has increased since the switch.

Many at the time, including students and librarians, criticized the move. Camila Alire, president of the American Library Association, disagreed with the school’s decision. Alire said, “Students learn differently, and some students will take to digital resources and information technology like ducks take to water. And then there are other students who learn by turning the pages, by handling the materials” (Antolini). This criticism is popular among bibliophiles, who prefer print books to digital material. The decision made by Cushing Academy has been a controversial one, with support on both sides of the argument. The example made by Cushing Academy is one example of the possible future of libraries in the growing age of digital books and other technologies.

Google Book Search and Google Library have also used digital technology to make millions of books available to the public for free. Google has been working to digitize pre-existing print books and convert them into digital forms to be read online. In November 2005, Google made over 10,000 digital titles from the public domain available online (Flagg). With this, Google hopes “to make content from millions of books freely available to those with Internet access, and perhaps one day even to realize the promise of a massively cross-referenced universal library accessible to all” (Striphas 20). This goal may one day be achieved, as the digitized books in Google Book Search and Google Library are available to every user of the Internet. With this initiative, Google is changing the space of libraries from physical to digital.

Google’s digital library has, however, been met with some legal conflict. Some of Google’s partners, including McGraw Hill and Penguin USA, have brought a lawsuit to Google. According to these publishers, Google Library is seeking to profit off of these publishers and their authors. Google Library operates separately from Google Book Search and is not covered under Google’s agreement with these and other major publishers. Google’s partner publishers have not authorized Google Library’s digitization of certain titles. Google Library is one example of the negative side effects of ebooks and digital libraries. While more titles can be made available to the public, this may be to the detriment of publishing houses, whose work makes those titles available in the first place.

These libraries demonstrate the direction that digital technology is taking reading, publishing, and borrowing for the future. Each of these libraries is using digital technology in a variety of ways, ranging from the integration of print and text to eradication of print text as a whole. While both support and criticism exist for the integration of digital texts in libraries, the presence and effects of digital technology are undeniable.

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