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Book Review ...

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**Book Review: The Case for Books, Past, Present, and Future**

By Professor James B. Levy

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Most people probably don’t think of a book as “technology” but that’s what it is—a once state-of-the-art solution for how best to transmit text. In terms of design, the book almost defies improvement by perfectly melding form and function. Attesting to its stature as a model of great technology design, consider that the book has remained essentially unchanged for more than 500 years going back to Gutenberg, 1,000 years going back to the Chinese invention of movable type, and several thousand years before that if you include the early books of ancient Greece and Rome.¹

Think about that for a moment—a technology thousands of years old so well designed that it is still being used today. Now consider what a historic moment in time this is as we witness the first, fundamental change in book design as it moves from a tangible, paper-based medium to an intangible, digital one. What does this suggest about the future of traditional books, or “p-books” as they are now known? Does it mean they will become a quaint relic of the past like LPs, valued only by collectors and a few decorators? Do books have any relevance in our digital future? Related to that, what will happen to the traditional brick-and-mortar library now that its contents can be stored on a laptop’s hard drive? In an era when the Internet has become the largest repository of information in human history, does the traditional library still matter?²

If you’ve spent any time thinking about these questions, you will likely be interested in a book by Harvard Professor Robert Darnton called *The Case for Books: Past, Present, and Future.*³ It is composed of several essays reflecting Professor Darnton’s thoughts about the history of books and libraries and their place in a digital future. As a scholar, Professor Darnton understands the “digital revolution” in the historical context of previous paradigm-shifting communication technologies. In his role as Director of the Harvard University library system, Professor Darnton is responsible for successfully guiding one of the world’s preeminent libraries into the future.⁴ Thus, he’s done a lot of thinking about the future role of books and libraries, and his insights are valuable to legal educators who are trying to decide how best to prepare the legal researchers of tomorrow.

As subject matter, books are much more interesting than you might think. You probably didn’t know, for example, that a secret alliance between the Library of Congress and the CIA to promote the use of microfiche encouraged librarians nationwide to destroy millions of books and archived newspapers in the misguided belief that they would turn to dust—an “apocalypse of paper”—if action was not

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⁴ Harvard University History Department, *Faculty Profile for Robert Darnton*, [http://history.fas.harvard.edu/people/faculty/darnton.php](http://history.fas.harvard.edu/people/faculty/darnton.php) (last visited July 8, 2011).
taken. Nor do most people likely know that forensic book historians, called “analytical bibliographers,” have determined that a typesetter, known only as “Compositor B,” working in an early print shop is responsible for rewriting several passages attributed to Shakespeare because he thought his revisions improved the originals. You also probably did not know that the first “e-book” predated the Kindle™ by more than sixty years. Invented in 1945, it was named “Memex,” and was, according to Professor Darnton, a “clunking monstrosity.”

While those anecdotes alone make The Case for Books worth a read, this review focuses on Professor’s Darnton’s insights about the future of traditional books and libraries, since those are the issues most important to LRW professors. Given the current state of the newspaper industry and traditional bookstores, it would not be unreasonable to assume that p-books and libraries are close to extinction. But Professor Darnton predicts otherwise, envisioning a future where electronic and print resources coexist, since each has strengths and weaknesses.

With respect to books, Professor Darnton makes two related arguments about their technological and cognitive advantages over e-books. As archive, p-books are technologically superior to e-books, Professor Darnton argues, because they will last hundreds of years if properly cared for. Electrons, on the other hand, are unstable and ephemeral. Websites come and go, URLs suffer from link rot, and Google is a publicly traded company that didn’t exist twenty years ago and may not exist twenty years hence, given the vicissitudes of business. In contrast, books have a tangible permanence.

The book is also a superior technological choice when it comes to “deep reading” because it is a distraction-free medium. Screen reading is fraught with distractions like the constant temptation to check e-mail or surf the Web. Hyperlinks, which are intended to enhance the reading experience, instead pull the reader away from the text. Consequently, the screen as reading technology has been characterized as “discontinuous and fragmented.”

Screen reading is great for skimming lots of text quickly. But books are a better choice when it comes to fostering the kind of deep, immersive experience psychologists refer to as “flow.” Think how easy it is to become so totally engrossed in a good book that the hours pass without notice. It is because the physical characteristics of a book, the font, page layout, white space, and its tactile qualities, are all designed to contribute to that experience. Perhaps this explains why, the digital revolution notwithstanding, p-book sales remain strong. Indeed, more new print titles will be published

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11 Id. at 37; Robert Darnton, 5 Myths of the ‘Information Age,’ The Chron. Higher Educ. (April 17, 2011), http://chronicle.com/article/5-Myths-About-the-Information/127105/ (last visited July 8, 2011) (a study done in 1997 found that the average life of a ‘url’ is 44 days); see also Darnton, supra note 3, at xiv.

12 Darnton, supra note 3, at 40.

13 Terje Hillesund, Digital Reading Spaces: How Expert Readers Handle Books, the Web and Electronic Paper, 15 FirstMonday at 6 (April 5, 2010), http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2762/2504 (last visited April 19, 2011) (digital text is dominated by “shallow forms of reading, such as scanning and skimming”).

14 Id.; Anne Mangen, Hypertext Fiction Reading: Haptics and Immersion 31 J. Research Reading 404, 408, 410 (2008).

15 Hillesund, supra note 13, at 1.

16 Good readers will develop a hybrid style that enables them to switch back and forth from paper to screen as appropriate. See MaryAnne Wolf, Proust and the Squid 228 (Harper Perennial 2008).

17 Hillesund, supra note 13, at 13 (typographers knowledge of fonts, line spacing, and white space have helped them refine book design over the years, creating the perfect reading machine).
this year than at any time in history.\textsuperscript{18} Surveys show that even among digital natives, traditional textbooks are the more popular technology when it comes to serious reading for class.\textsuperscript{19}

Darnton’s second argument in favor of the continued vitality of traditional books is that they have cognitive advantages over e-books. In addition to those already alluded to, Darnton notes that print provides a more pleasing reading experience than the screen.\textsuperscript{20} It is because the human eye was never designed to view direct light sources such as a computer or tablet screen.\textsuperscript{21} Rather, the eye is designed to view reflected light like that from a printed page.

While some e-reader manufacturers have begun using electronic ink to mitigate this problem, reading from a computer or tablet screen causes more eyestrain than a traditional book, which, of course, negatively affects the experience. Thus, studies using eye-tracking technology show that users generally read screens more superficially than the printed page.\textsuperscript{22} As the screen gets smaller, comprehension suffers even more, by as much as 50 percent, according to one researcher.\textsuperscript{23}

Perhaps that explains why one study found student reading scores improved when they used p-books and why even Microsoft’s Bill Gates prefers paper to the screen for difficult material.\textsuperscript{24}

Traditional books also have psycho-ergonomic advantages over e-books that enhance the overall reading experience.\textsuperscript{25} One theory posits that because language likely evolved from physical gestures, more brain circuitry devoted to language might be activated when we hold a p-book in our hands and flip pages versus passively staring at a screen.\textsuperscript{26} Thus, the theory goes, reading comprehension improves.

It should be no surprise that Darnton, in his role as a librarian, also expects traditional libraries to survive the digital revolution. While others believe brick-and-mortar libraries will become superfluous in the wake of Google’s ambitious plan to scan every book in print, Darnton believes the threat is overstated.\textsuperscript{27} Libraries have never been just storehouses for books.\textsuperscript{28} They are instead “citadels of learning” that serve as repositories for all types of resources, including music, films, videos, microfiche, dissertations, and miscellaneous historical documents which the Google book project does not encompass.\textsuperscript{29}

As a practical matter, Darnton also believes it will be impossible for Google to achieve its goal for a few reasons. First, there are so many rare books with only a few surviving copies that Google will never be able to get its hands on all of them.\textsuperscript{30} Likewise, countless books have been published in multiple editions, making it extremely unlikely that Google will scan them all. That should make serious researchers

\textsuperscript{18} Darnton, 5 Myths, supra note 11.


\textsuperscript{20} Darnton, supra note 3, at 68-69.

\textsuperscript{21} Mangen, supra note 14.


\textsuperscript{24} Rakefet Ackerman & Morris Goldsmith, Learning Directly from the Screen? Oh-No, I Must Print It!, Metacognitive Analysis of Digitally Presented Text Learning, Research Center for the Integration of Technology and Education, http://telem-pub.openu.ac.il/users/chais/2008/after_noon/3_1.pdf (last visited July 8, 2011); Darnton, supra note 3 at 69.

\textsuperscript{25} Mangen, supra note 14, at 405.

\textsuperscript{26} Hillesund, supra note 13, at 3; Mangen, supra note 14, at 405.

\textsuperscript{27} Darnton, 5 Myths, supra note 11.

\textsuperscript{28} Id.

\textsuperscript{29} Darnton, supra note 3, at 32-33; 41; 54.

\textsuperscript{30} Id. at 34-35.
wary about relying on Google’s database. Instead, they will need to consult traditional libraries to locate and verify they have the correct editions.

Related to that, Darnton predicts that traditional libraries will survive because, in many cases, there is no substitute for physically handling the books themselves. Books do not merely transmit information; they are historical artifacts that often have to be handled to better understand their significance and meaning.

Darnton fondly tells the story of visiting one of Harvard’s rare book rooms to examine Herman Melville’s personal, annotated copy of Emerson’s *Essays*, which he said enabled him to see “Emerson through Melville’s eyes.” That kind of experience cannot be replicated in cyberspace and helps secure the traditional library’s place as an indispensable research tool.

Given the enormity of Google’s book project, many mistakes have been made scanning books into the database. Pages have been omitted and passages obscured. The security device known as a “Captcha,” often used by websites to authenticate the identity of users by having them transcribe a set of wavy, distorted letters, reflects the enormity of the problem Google faces trying to correct its scanning errors. It reinforces the point that traditional libraries will continue to exist if only as repositories for original source material. It is the reason there are loud protests whenever a university suggests closing, for budgetary reasons, a brick-and-mortar library in favor of a digital one.

Going forward, Darnton envisions that libraries will house both traditional and e-resources. The precise mix will likely vary among institutions, depending on the particular needs of their users. To survive, some libraries may need to form cooperatives to share resources and distribute costs.

But in support of his prediction that traditional libraries will survive, Darnton points to reports showing that user numbers are increasing, not declining, as libraries become information hubs for the communities they serve.

As a final and perhaps prescient observation, Darnton notes that, in general, new technologies are often first met with utopian, overly optimistic expectations that they will transform our lives. Following that is a period of disillusionment as users recognize that some of the original expectations were unrealistic or overstated. Next follows a period of pragmatism in which users accept that the old and new technologies each have their advantages and drawbacks. Indeed, the historical record shows that the transition from one communication technology to the next is never as abrupt as the techno-utopians originally predict. That will likely be true this time as well. At least that’s what Professor Darnton is predicting and, for now, the safe money is on him.

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31 Id. at 38.
32 Id.
33 Id. at 18, 57.
34 Id. at 55-57.
35 Id. at 37.
36 Guy Gugliotta, *Deciphering Old Texts, One Wooky, Curvy Word at a Time*, New York Times (March 28 2011) [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/28/science/28recaptcha.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/28/science/28recaptcha.html) (last visited July 8, 2011) (This system, developed by Carnegie Mellon University, is used to prevent robots from spamming and hacking websites because only humans can read and transcribe the distorted, wavy letters. Captchas are being used by Google as a way to crowdsourse scanning errors made in connection with its book project by asking website visitors to make their best “guess” about which letters of the alphabet the distorted symbols correspond to).

37 Darnton, * supra* note 3, at 57.
40 Id.
41 Id.
42 Id. at xiv; Darnton, *5 Myths*, supra note 11.