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by Richard Maxwell, Ph.D. and Toby Miller, Ph.D.

Don't Be Mislead about Paper Versus Electronic Books

Debating paper vs electronic reading ignores problems that affect everyone
Published on September 5, 2013 by Richard Maxwell, Ph.D. and Toby Miller, Ph.D. in Greening the Media

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People often ask us whether consumers do more environmental harm reading on paper or electronic devices. While the question has become increasingly important for progressive consumers as well as the publishing and electronics sectors, it neglects a more important problem: how to encourage a broader debate about the distribution of education, culture, and entertainment in the digital age. Let's look at the mainstream arguments first.

It's easy to recommend avoidance of paper. After all, paper and pulp is the country's leading commercial user of water, the fourth biggest emitter of toxins into our waterways, and the third largest industrial consumer of energy, which helps make it the third worst emitter of greenhouse gases on the planet. Add to this the toxic problems of dumping paper waste into landfills, carbon emissions from the transportation of printed material, and the industry's reliance on ecologically questionable monoculture plantation forestry for virgin fiber, and you get a pretty stark picture of the book's negative environmental impact.¹

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Publishers argue that they're addressing the issue: paper producers have increased recycling from 5 percent of all fiber in 2004 to 24 percent in 2010, reduced carbon emissions by 25 percent between 2006 and 2010, and are saving 5 million trees annually. They stand by the plantation program because youthful trees absorb carbon more readily than elderly ones. However, only about 10 percent of the paper used by publishers currently comes from recycled fiber.²

By contrast, we've all heard about the benefits that e-readers provide to consumers and the environment. The convenience of downloads saves transportation costs and reduces carbon emissions from book distribution and consumer travel to and from bookstores. We're told that if we read a hundred titles on an e-reader we've basically paid back the planet for the damage we caused through the manufacture, use, and disposal of the device—mining, energy-intensive production, recharging, and end-of-life toxic waste. A widely cited study of the Kindle says that once we've read 22.5 books, all its carbon emissions have been offset, though Amazon's secrecy about its production practices makes this more guesswork than fact.³

But according to a 2012 study by the Pew Research Center, half the US population read less than six books a year; the average is somewhere around 15 books, with school-age teens and retirees reading slightly more. 89



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percent of reading is done on paper, 30 percent via e-books, and 17 percent listening to audio.⁴ So the current rate of e-book consumption suggests that it could take up to five years for readers to offset their devices' carbon emissions.⁵

The reading experience offers another angle on the debate. For those who like to review different parts of a book—to go back and forth in search of a missed clue, or connect references—paper has an advantage. Some of us have tired eyes and like to read larger fonts, which favors electronic devices (also easier for some arthritic hands to operate). Academics like to mark up margins with comments to engage with texts as they read—e-books can do this, but it's not as easy or intuitive as with paper. All told, paper books have a slight advantage.

And that's where mainstream commentary stops: with our attention focused on consumer experiences or flawed designs.

As a consequence, we are left with solutions that are meaningful for the commercial book market but hardly satisfactory for making reading a social good that is freely available to all. And isn't that the model our society has long endorsed?

Of course: it's called the public library. If we focus our attention on public libraries, debates about electronic versus paper distribution are transformed. These technologies become mere tools to support a model that is a proven facilitator of reading, thinking, research, conversation, and social mobility.

James Truslow Adams, a Latino who coined the expression the "American Dream" seventy years ago, said the US Library of Congress "exemplifies the dream," because it comes "straight from the heart of democracy" to serve the population through freely-available knowledge. He cited an indigent migrant, Mary Antin, who wrote while perched on the steps of the Boston Public Library, that it offered her a "shining future" to go with the "majestic past" of its treasures. That must be our dream, too.

Today public libraries have become contested areas of public policy. Commercial interests—publishers, electronics companies, and real estate moguls—dominate debates over reading, learning, and communicating.⁶ Political leaders are allowing these interests to set the agenda for the future of libraries, insisting that society should privatize these public goods as far as possible. In the UK, government cuts have forced restricted hours and closures of libraries, leading to spirited resistance movements by citizens opposed to the loss of public culture.⁷ If privatization wins out, you might find a toll booth or a demolition crew at the door of your local library.

Along with fighting to save our environment, we must recognize that what and how we read is best understood in social rather than market terms. As we assess the value of paper versus electronic books we do well to consider this crucial issue.

1. <http://papercutz.planetark.org/paper/impact.cfm>
2. www.greenpressinitiative.org/documents/TrendsReport2013.pdf
3. http://www.tkearth.com/downloads/thoughts_ereaders.pdf
4. <http://libraries.pewinternet.org/2012/12/27/e-book-reading-jumps-print-book-reading-declines/>
5. <http://www.themillions.com/2012/05/are-ereaders->



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6. <http://www.thenation.com/article/175966/hidden-history-new-york-citys-central-library-plan>

7. <http://occupylondon.org.uk/occupied-friern-barnet-library-in-court-monday-faces-potential-closure/>

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