Why Books Still Matter

JOHN DONATICH

Bibliophiles and publishers are treated with a fair amount of suspicion. While the defence of the book does not require the trashing of digital culture, many members of the new media infotopia claim the destruction of book culture as a good and inevitable thing. Why? And what is at risk? Does the book still matter in the intellectual and cognitive evolution as a species? Is a bookless world in which people learn to read and research by virtue of snippets, tags, annotations, and wiki-research a world of people who not only won’t be able to read books but won’t be able to write them? And then does the record of human experience, several thousand years evolved, irrevocably change?

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I

Books have a lot of explaining to do these days. Bibliophiles and even publishers are treated with a fair amount of suspicion. Most of us deserve it, as we are apt to carry on like fetishists. You can often hear us gushing over the beautiful object of the book, that 700-year-old feat of perfect engineering. You might see us in raptures over the grain of paper, the pacing of illustrations, the complement of typeface and design. We will bore you with the sensual pleasure of the book: its smell and feel, the way in which a fine book ages. We will study marginalia for its human record, for the physical manifestation of that desire to enter a book, to literally work our way into or impress ourselves onto another’s mind.

What could be more human than a book? We speak of its body intimately, name its parts as joints and hinges. How many of us have winced when someone bends a book’s covers back sadistically? We call this horrendous act ‘breaking the spine.’ Yet all of this object love is starting to sound a bit quaint, the sentimental mumblings of Luddites who, on their off hours, argue for the rein-
stitution of the lyceum, the debating society, and the lecture platform, acting like that certain horse who in 1911 turns his head slowly as he feels the rumbling heat of the Model T Ford bearing down upon him.

But there are more sinister charges against defenders of the book as well. Copyright holders are accused of being enemies of progress and democracy. Libraries groan under the weight of our production; some look forward to the day when we can etherize books online and commit what the director of the Beinecke Library, Frank Turner, calls ‘bibliographic euthanasia.’

Those who hate and fear the book have populated its history from the beginning. The banning of books is still a national headline as well as a recent presidential campaign issue. But who would have guessed that the latest prediction of the book’s demise comes from enthusiasts of the Internet? One has to wonder why the rhetoric against books has turned so hostile. (Is it because books still matter?) My own personal library does not seek revenge against the Internet, but am I alone in detecting the aggressive tone of those who celebrate the virtual library at the expense of the physical book? Does one technology necessarily obliterate another? Did the television destroy the radio?

It is difficult not to sound threatened when defending the book – especially when the enemies of the book assume that the war is already won. Steve Jobs of Apple recently said that he wasn’t even bothering to enter the e-book reader market, because that isn’t what the world wants. ‘No one reads anymore,’ he said. ‘It’s over.’1 Several months ago, a Los Angeles Times article quoted Markos Moulitsas Zuniga, founder of the political Web site ‘The Daily Kos’ who said about those who feared the Google book project, ‘like natural selection, there are species that adapt to the changing environment around them and thrive, and others die off.’2 The article also quotes Stephen Dubner, co-author of the best-selling Freakonomics, as saying that

the crabbiness that emanates from a certain breed of thinker/writer … about how the Internet’s cornucopia of information is destroying book culture is based on fear of change more than anything. Most people don’t even like to change the part in their hair; asking them to accept a change in the way words are disbursed through culture is a bit much.3
Zúñiga adds, ‘We no longer have to depend on so-called or self-appointed experts to tell us what we should think.’

So it has really come to this: the day when the self-appointed experts who write books are finally taken down by the self-appointed experts who write blogs. And whom should we trust: the career experts who write books and deliberate over their content while researching for years, or the temporary experts who form the chattering class of the blogosphere? Now, I don’t hate blogs or Internet writing. I love them. I read them. I recognize that what goes on in them is different from what goes on in books, and I don’t believe that the expansion and growth of the Internet has to mean the death of books.

A true confession: I love books more. I always have. As a child, I befuddled and even alarmed my immigrant parents by my affection for books. I took any chance to lose myself in books, though I have always regarded reading as more a kind of engagement than escapism. ‘Go outside,’ my father would yell at me. During grade school I would sometimes forgo lunch, asking my parents for the twenty-five cents to buy a hot meal while telling the school cafeteria I was going home for lunch. Then I would wait in the woods behind the school during the lunch break, hoarding my change until I had enough to buy a book. When I had collected enough to have a little library, I challenged my sister to blindfold me and test my ability to name a book and its publisher by touch and smell alone. I was right more times than not. A bit obsessive, I agree. Nonetheless, these books awakened in me a tension as a reader: I spent as much time trying to suspend my awareness of the book as a medium and getting lost in the dream of the narrative. I’ve devoted my entire adult life in publishing, and, despite that, I still think books matter. Or ought to.

II

However, there is much evidence that points to a troubled future for the book. Here are some statistics:

• The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study reports that reading, writing, and comprehension tests taken by ten-year-old children around the world revealed declining literacy levels. Both
the United States and the United Kingdom lost six points in the last five years, ranking respectively number 18 and number 19 globally. An NEA report made national headlines when it revealed that literary reading in America is not only declining rapidly among all groups but the rate of decline has accelerated especially among the young. and further complained that educators and publishers contribute to a ‘general culture which does not encourage or reinforce reading.’

A much-publicized Ithaka Report, University Publishing in a Digital Age, reviews the ‘seeming[ly] limitless range of opportunities for a faculty member to distribute his or her work, from setting up a web page or blog, to posting an article to a working paper website or institutional repository, to including it in a peer-reviewed journal or book…. consequently nearly all intellectual effort results in some form of “publishing.”’

What to do? Telling us that reading books is good for us is not persuasive. No one enjoys their leisure behaviour’s being judged. That’s a losing battle. If it proves true that we prefer getting our news and our entertainment from streaming media, television, and hyperlinked texts, what does that mean for us as human beings? Does the book still matter in our evolution as a species? Will it lose out to content that is born digital?

It’s not just information: entire generations of people are said to be ‘born digital’ as well. What does it mean to call a group the ‘digital generation’? First, it presumes access to computers and the Web, and all that this implies. Second, it’s simply not true that the current college generation does not read books; they read books when that assignment works for them. The National Association of College Stores has reported that only 30 per cent of their stores are equipped to deliver textbooks as e-books. And at those stores, only 15 per cent of students prefer e-books to printed textbooks.

III

If the United States is a nation built on ideas rather than manufacturing, publishing is the industry where the two meet. Technology
is where the expression of desire meets the undertow of fear. Knowledge requires tools that can make our lives smarter, easier, better, and more pleasurable. That is all certainly to the good. But our zeal for new technology needs to be tempered with a sceptical awareness of its implications. As a culture, we are usually better at gauging what there is to gain than at seeing what there is to lose.

Google, of course, is the elephant in the room, the big engine of change. Having scanned the giant libraries of Harvard, Stanford, Michigan, and Oxford and the New York Public Library, Google has made available millions of works that were orphaned by their out-of-print and out-of-copyright status. The stated goal of the Google Books Library Project is to ‘is to work with publishers and libraries to create a comprehensive, searchable, virtual card catalog of all books in all languages that helps users discover new books and publishers discover new readers,’ a virtual Alexandria. Publishers, while wary, have profited from the disinterment of their deep backlist into the light of day by Google searches. ‘The long tail,’ made famous by Chris Anderson, shows that only about 2 per cent of the nearly 200,000 books published each year sell more than 5000 copies. The rest are born directly into the long tail, or the remainder bin, the publishing industry’s equivalent of ‘direct to DVD.’

Writing about the idea of the universal library excites some people to a state of utopian hysteria. Kevin Kelly is the self-appointed ‘Senior Maverick’ of Wired magazine – you’ve got to love that title. ‘Senior’ implies authority; ‘maverick’ implies iconoclast; together, they grant him the power to call anyone he disagrees with a useless and obstructive dinosaur. (And didn’t the last presidential election prove that, given a choice, we don’t always prefer a senior maverick?) At any rate, Kelly writes that plans like Google’s will allow

all the books in the world [to] become a single liquid fabric of interconnected words and ideas … The universal library and its ‘books’ will be unlike any library or books we have known. Pushing us rapidly toward that Eden of everything, and away from the paradigm of the physical paper tome, is the hot technology of the search-engine.
What these great digital libraries will accomplish, it is hoped, is a conversation among themselves, sharing patterns of use and user-created metadata, recording the behaviours and interests of readers. Books will refer to other books and drill down to source materials, engineered to assist the reader/user rather than merely record the author. In a sense, these digital libraries will breathe life into the countless numbers of footnotes accumulated over centuries. But even then, they will never be complete. By Google’s own estimate, more than 100 million books have been published. Only about 5 or 10 per cent of them are in print. Twenty per cent, printed between the fifteenth century and 1923, are out of copyright; the rest – some 75 per cent of all books ever printed – are ‘orphans,’ in copyright but out of print. Books are only a part – often a selective synthesis – of the record of human experience. Any claim to an exhaustive and encyclopaedic human record is merely a pipe dream.

Nonetheless, the Google Library project is a great boon to scholars. In ‘The Bookless Future,’ David A. Bell, a scholar of European history and politics, writes the following fantasy as he is doing research for a book on the culture of war in Napoleonic Europe:

I am in a coffee shop on my university campus, writing a conference paper. A passage from Edmund Burke’s *Letters on a Regicide Peace* comes to mind, but I can’t remember the exact wording. Finding the passage, as little as five years ago, would have required going to the library, locating the book on the shelf (or not!), and paging through the text in search of the half-remembered material. Instead, on my laptop, I open Internet Explorer, connect to the wireless campus network…. Seconds later, I have found the entire text online. I search for the words ‘armed doctrine’ and up comes the quote…. Total time elapsed: less than one minute.11

A pretty cool description (right?) of a brave, new, and hyper-convenient world: scholarship in the humanities and social sciences revolutionized by the new information technology that has put so much primary and secondary source material online. But the great irony, if not blind spot, in this description is that all this hyper-linked research in a world collapsed of time and travel is in service of nothing less than the writing of his next *book*. 
To Professor Bell’s credit, he quickly darkens his fantasy into dystopian shadows. Will the Internet change ‘not only what scholars read but also how they read’? Does reading online tire us more quickly, encourage us to skim, and diminish our actual critical engagement with the text?

IV

These are important questions and bear some reflection. First, I’d like to try to get at the experience or character of reading a book online. From the tablet to the scroll to the codex to the printed book, we have been looking for the optimal device for recording information since reading developed. Portability and usability distinguished the book from its inception, which explains why it has lasted some 700 years. Technology did not destroy the concept of the book; it enhanced its nature and quickened its production.

The rise of computers did not, at first, threaten the book. The screens of PCs were friendlier to spreadsheets and information that needed to be scrolled through rather than read through. Users of PCs prefer to toggle between applications rather than proceed sequentially through a linear document. Sustained reading on a large screen makes the eyes glaze over and the back ache. Most troublingly, the concentration fails. Attention wanders. It wants to scan and skim, toggle and hyperlink. Reading onscreen makes you want to do what is easy to do there: search and discover, strategize how to get at the information you need. You are not forced to surrender to the organizing principles established by the author, or to painstakingly follow the path of argumentation she has laid down for you. You won’t necessarily have to make marginal notes of themes to trace through the text or circle footnotes whose sources you want to check. Online, it’s all a click away.

But you are also missing something important. Searching around in an electronic text, you can skim, cut, and paste, but you will read things out of a deliberate context and sequence. You will get to the ‘nut’ more quickly, but you will miss learning how the author arrived at her conclusions. Maryanne Wolf, in *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain* writes that ‘We are how we read’: e-mail, blogs, hyperlinks, pop-up ads, news alerts, and so
on require a very different intelligence than that needed for a sustained and deep reading experience. We may become ‘mere decoders of information.’\textsuperscript{13}

Whether the book can be enhanced by becoming a hypertext online is a very important question for publishers and editors. We need to anticipate the new skills required for preparing texts that will spawn real-time discussions online. Writers will negotiate collaborative development of content that is never static, always expanding. Readers will personalize their books with annotations and hyperlinks to personal journals. The beginning and ending of texts will be porous and shifting; they will lead the reader to discussion forums, social bookmarking sites, and reader reviews and then further open those venues to e-mail lists and social networks. To my mind, all these benefits enhance the experience of deep reading in a book; to some extent, this is what should happen \textit{after} a group of people read a book – whether in a book group or in a classroom that spills over into a café or online.

Is there a downside to this exciting prospect? Only insofar as the futuristic fantasy rejects the centrality of the book. Or sees the book outside the universal library as a fish out of its aquarium, gasping for air. The Institute for the Future of the Book talks about the emergence of the ‘networked book’: ‘the book as a place, as social software . . . , a sustained intellectual experience, a mover of ideas reinvented in a peer to peer ecology . . . . A good future of the book is one that combines the best qualities of physical books with the best qualities of the network.’\textsuperscript{14} There will be certain kinds of writers who will want to conduct their research and development in a public way, online, engaged in an open, interdependent model whereby peer review and feedback are reflected in the finished book.

At last, a reasonable, nuanced vision of the future of the book that protects an intellectual legacy and physical craftsmanship while ushering it into a partnership with new technology. Books still matter, in this universe, and will not be replaced by the blogosphere. Even Kevin Kelly admits that ‘most of the world’s expertise still resides in books.’\textsuperscript{15} And, as Alberto Manguel writes, ‘It is interesting to note how often a technological development – such as Gutenberg’s – promotes rather than eliminates that which it is supposed to supersede.’\textsuperscript{16}
One has to wonder whether there will be a cognitive cost to the migration of scholarship away from books. I think of my own behaviour online versus browsing the stacks of a library. When I first came to Yale six years ago, I spent a Saturday wandering the stacks of Sterling Library and wanted nothing more than never to leave the building and to order take-out for the rest of my life. Leave me here; I’ll be just fine. Browsing the stacks was an invitation to serendipity; I was excited by the distractions I would find on the way to what I was looking for. Researching online, I feel more as if I were playing a video game, dodging pop-up ads as if fighting asteroids with a joystick. The kinds of things that come my way are impositions rather than accidents, thrown at me by mysterious and possibly venal algorithms rather than discovered by curiosity.

Another discomfiting aspect of the search imperative is that the very agency that allows you to collect information is collecting information about you. Not to sound the Big Brother alarm, it is important to note that, to date, our content providers and search engines are for-profit corporations whose motives are, at best, not transparent. To use the ‘collaborative filtering’ of some search engines is to dance with a partner who has ‘long hands,’ as my mother used to warn my sister. Online marketing strategies want to disguise themselves as a service, customized to your needs, rather than a tool to manipulate your desires in a medium too new to learn defences against.

A public annotation of a digital text is called a ‘tag,’ and I often feel as though I’m playing tag when reading or responding on a blog, strategizing how to outrun, hide from, or make contact with whoever is ‘it.’ Unlike that singular attention on which the printed book relies, the Internet needs a multiplicity of users who believe in it, like an audience clapping for Tinkerbell to survive. Even as Web indexing proves our online writing to be less original than we thought, we shout louder to be recognized within the din. The question becomes not so much who can be heard as just who ought to be listened to. The democratic ideal guarantees that every voice can be heard. But it does not insist that every voice must be heard. Who decides which voice should rise above the noise of the blogosphere, the noise of democracy?
Traditionally, that has been the job of the publisher: to select, develop, and edit; to equip with bibliographic back matter; to design and manufacture. In the Age of Information in which research and information are not only accessible but ubiquitous, it is imperative that we ask ourselves the big question: What needs to be a book? Now more than ever. It is no secret that university presses have experienced a crisis in the last decade. Constriction of library budgets, continued specialization, and the professionalization of academic disciplines have diminished the readership of scholarly monographs. Production costs have increased; used books cut into backlist sales. Course packs cannibalize the adoption market for textbooks. We rely more and more on outside subsidies from authors and institutions.

The marketplace demands we ask ourselves the question, What needs to be a book? In particular, what needs to be a scholarly monograph? Aside from tenure and career advancement issues, what does a university press have to publish? And what is a monograph, anyway? Webster’s has an inelegant definition: ‘a written account of a single thing.’ The chair of our Publications Committee, David Bromwich, once defined it as ‘a work of scholarship that will not sell many copies until it does, at which point it becomes a gem of scholarship.’ While there was certainly a twinkle in his eye, his distinction has actually become a useful one, and even prompted a spirited conversation at a recent agenda-less Publications Committee meeting.

We started by thinking about what qualities the scholarly monograph and the gem of scholarship might share:

- original primary research
- blindness to fashion; a love of the ignored and the arcane; providing the culture a way of keeping its neglected history ‘warm’
- rigorous methodology
- compound argument, capable of advancing a dozen or more layers of argument
- scholarly apparatus that not only amplifies the text but enables the reader to reconstruct and replicate the original research, to test the author’s conclusions, or to use the same material to different ends
Where, then, might the two part company? How could a monograph be cut to reveal its lapidary and gemlike qualities?

- The research demonstrates a passionate commitment, an almost athletic joy in uncovering and managing masses of material.
- The structure invents a new model of managing complexity.
- The prose contributes terminology to the lingua franca of the discipline. It challenges yet can be understood by educated non-specialists. As Einstein is supposed to have said, ‘Everything should be as simple as possible, but no simpler.’
- The book crosses disciplines with ease; it listens to its own internal echoes.
- While perhaps narrow in scope, the book feels close. You can feel the breath of the intellect on the page.

You all know what I’m talking about. I’m sure of it. You have all been entranced by the seamlessness of a narrative and dazzled by the marshalling of dozens of arguments in service of a grand theory. You have been transformed within the alchemy of literature. You have been moved by a book.

VI

I hope I have made clear that the defence of the book does not require the trashing of digital culture. Books want to enter a relationship in which the best qualities in both print and digital content can be amplified and mutually aggrandized. The e-reader, for instance, knows that technology does not need to destroy the innovation whose shoulders it stands on. What the Sony Reader and the Amazon Kindle try to do is to simulate the book, to replicate the experience of reading a single book while travelling with the portability of an entire bookshelf of content. So far, sales of these items have been encouraging. Preparing for a long flight to China recently, I myself downloaded some fifty books, ranging from the complete works of Shakespeare to a couple of dozen manuscripts Yale will publish in the next year. I thought I would be the picture of minimalist cool, travelling with a discreet black shoulder bag that housed my Kindle, my BlackBerry, and my iPod. Net weight: four
pounds. As I was leaving the house, though, I panicked and shoved six books into my bag. Just in case.

But I may be able to retrain myself here, get used to reading an entire book on a device, like watching a film on a cell phone or shuffling an opera recording on my iPod or eating dinner on a paperless plate every night. But, jokes aside, the prospect of a hyperlinked device that will allow a reader to plug into a portable library of books and related content may be the best argument for why books will still matter.

And if book publishers and digital content providers take each other’s counsel, the marriage should work. Publishers will commission, select, edit, peer-review, design, and publish (both in print and electronically) new books. The better the books and the more creative the dissemination, the healthier the university press. And the book is a hardy object; it has survived flood and fire, the Spanish Inquisition, even the US Postal Service. Even if the Internet wanted to kill it, it’s got its work cut out.

A word on the business model. It is not a law of nature that the book, a product of human intelligence and creativity, belongs in the public commons. To argue that books should be given away free is to deny a scholar or writer the right to engage in an act of gainful employment. In order to be morally consistent, those who protest in the public commons that information wants to be free should also advocate that tuitions want to be waived and that professors want to teach without salaries.

That pill is a hard one for the infotopians to swallow. They relish a future in which the universal library is up and running – free of cost and free of books. The question I have for them is, Then what? A bookless world in which people learn to read and research by virtue of snippets and tags and annotations and wiki-research will be a world of people who not only won’t be able to read books but won’t be able to write them. And the record of human experience, several thousand years evolved, will be irrevocably changed.

**Conclusion**

To my mind, there are two dominant fantasies of reading, each of which is valid, and which cannot help but embody religious tropes, because of the natural affinities that literature and faith have: a
deliberate interiority, prolonged concentration, a daily engagement with seriousness of purpose, the working out of a philosophy of how to live one’s life.

The first is to look at the Internet as a great big religious metaphor of the cosmic consciousness, the planet’s 6 billion minds connected together into the Edenic dream of the universal library. Walter Benjamin in a letter to Adorno, well before either of them could even conceive of a computer, much less an e-book, wrote: ‘The great work of the future will consist of fragments torn from the body of other work; it is a reassembly, a patchwork quilt of meanings already accomplished.’

The second is the image of the individual reader before the universal library. Personally, I collect more books than I need or can possibly read in my lifetime. Visitors to my home sometimes ask, ‘Have you really read all of these?’ and the answer, of course, is no. That isn’t the point. The collector always wants to own more than he can experience all at once. It needs to be enough to overwhelm. Possibility must always overtake satisfaction. A collection is one of the only ways to have too much and not enough at the same time, to be consoled by what cannot be known completely. This is another way in which reading books serve some as a kind of religion.

While immersed in a book, I always feel that that book was meant to be read one reader at a time, written precisely for his or her particular attention, an object waiting to be lit by a singular imagination. The interaction between reader and writer is as intimate as a penitent in prayer. If it is well done, a book will allow you to suspend your awareness of the medium; it wants to be fed to the fires of your attention, to atomize and dematerialize like the Gnostic soul. The other fantasy of reading is the melding of multiple consciousnesses into one giant text, exploding into levels of apprehension enabled by radical technologies. Either apprehension is lit from within by a single and deliberate mind at work to reach another mind.

This is why the book still matters.

JOHN DONATICCH is Director of Yale University Press, a leading scholarly, art, and trade publisher based in New Haven, Connecticut, and London. He was Vice President and Publisher of Basic Books, where he published such authors as Iris Chang, Niall
Ferguson, Christopher Hitchens, Douglas Hofstadter, and Samantha Power. His articles and essays have appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly, Harper's, The Village Voice*, and many other periodicals. In 2005 he published a book titled *Ambivalence, A Love Story*. He is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations and a fellow of the Whitney Center for the Humanities, and was recently awarded a fellowship by the Corporation of Yaddo. He lives in New Haven.

1 Quoted in Randall Stross, 'Freed From the Page, But a Book Nonetheless,' *New York Times* (27 January 2008)
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14 The quoted passages are based on the author’s notes from a conference address by B. Stein.
15 Kelly, ‘Scan This Book,’ 48
18 In Jay Parini, *Benjamin’s Crossing* (New York: Henry Holt 1997), 192