

# Cites & Insights

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## The Front

### *GOAJ4* and *C&I* for 2019

Thanks to the ongoing support of SPARC, there will be a *GOAJ4: Gold Open Access Journals 2013-2018*, probably out in July (give or take a month). It should be the largest study so far, with more than 12,000 journals (although there are usually some that can't be included).

Here's what that means for *Cites & Insights* volume 19:

- There will be a Volume 19. That wasn't necessarily a given.
- Barring some sort of disaster (personal or otherwise), the websites for *Cites & Insights* and [waltcrawford.name](http://waltcrawford.name) (where most *GOAJ* resources and links live) will be available through at least 2021—it's always been my intention to keep paying for the domains and hosting at least two years after I finally stop adding new material. (I am *not* saying that I'll stop adding new material at the end of 2019!)

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- After the January 2019 issue (written in December), chances are there will be very few issues until *GOAJ* is complete, and issues are likely to be fairly short. No great revelation there: in 2016, there were three issues with 71 pages during the February-June period, and in fact most of the first 46 of those 71 pages were written in December 2015. In 2017, there were two issues in February-April, totaling 62 pages, but I completed the (smallest) *GOAJ* study early. This year, there was only *one* 44-page issue in the February-May period. (It's possible *GOAJ4* will be ready in June. One never knows, do one?)
- The rest of the year will be irregular as usual.

Last year involved lots of interruptions and general angst having to do with health issues (but I don't think I get to call myself a cancer survivor until it's been five years). I'm hoping next year will be less eventful. But this is written (in mid-November) as the state seems to be burning and we've stayed inside for three days because it's so smoky outside, so I make no promises.

Meanwhile, this issue does have a theme of sorts as I take a break from OA coverage: media.

And, in case you're wondering, I am *not* tagging items related to PlanS. Yes, I have opinions—but the sheer volume is overwhelming and I'd just as soon let this one sort itself out.

## Words

# Books, Ebooks and Libraries

It's been a bit more than two years since the last “books, print and e-” discussion—and it's about time for another one. But I've also been, belatedly, cleaning out and cleaning up my Diigo account, and in the process see that it makes sense to do a broader “books” piece and include some old, neglected, but still possibly relevant pieces. That latter category includes a cluster that was tagged for a library-related essay but fits nicely here. Note that, other than the library-related cluster, I'll be making up subtopics as I go along rather than assigning them in advance; that may result in a more haphazard roundup, or it might not. You be the judge.

## Thinking about Books

### *A Bookfuturist Manifesto*

As with some of the other items here, this “futurist” article by Tim Carmody [on August 11, 2010](#) at *The Atlantic* can now seem a bit quaint, starting with the silly neologism in the title.

A futurist (in [Marinetti's original sense](#)) wants to burn down libraries.

A bookfuturist wants to put video games in them. A bookfuturist, in other words, isn't someone who purely embraces the new and consigns the old to the rubbish heap. She's always looking for things that blend her appreciation of the two.

How's that putting videogames into books working out? As for the term itself, [a link](#) slightly later in the article leads to a Twitter list with 34 members, 104 subscribers, and a stream that seems random and, at least in the most recent four or five screens, seems to have little to do with either books or futurism.

Carmody's attempt to further explain what “bookfuturism” is leaves me, if anything, even less convinced that there's anything there. Consider:

Bookfuturism turns out to be not just about books as such, but a kind of aesthetic and culture of reading, literacy, history, in connection with (only rarely in opposition to) other kinds of media culture. And reading here would also obviously include newspapers and magazines, and even things like maps and advertisements and data visualizations, plus whatever's displayed on the different screens most of us look at all day at home or work. What does it mean to live in this hyperliterate world? How do we make sense of it? There I think we need to actually articulate something like Jason Kottke's motto: "[Liberal Arts 2.0.](#)"

Then we're told what bookfuturism *isn't*—"bookfuturists" are "profoundly different" from "technofuturists" and "bookservatives." Umm... and here's a bit that really does sound quaint in 2018:

On the other side of the aisle are technofuturists. They're winning most of the arguments these days when it comes to e-books, so their rhetoric isn't as wild. Technofuturists are technological triumphalists, or at least quasi-utopian optimists. These are the folks who believe that technology can solve our political, educational, and cultural problems. At an extreme, they don't care about books at all: they're just relics of a happily closing age of paper, and we should embrace the future in the form of multimedia and the networked web. They advocate a scorched earth policy when it comes to publishers, newspapers, bookstores, or libraries. Anyone could see the future coming, and those who refused to adapt, who created and perpetuated a broken, exploitative system, should die, and soon.

Remember the inevitable triumph of ebooks and death of print books? Sure, there are still those who are steadfast in that "winning" technofuturism, but perhaps fewer than before.

There's more here, to be sure. Maybe you'll find it inspiring or convincing or coherent. Maybe not.

There was a Bookfuturism website. Well, there still is, but just at a guess, the fact that all recent posts seem to be dating tips for women leads me to believe that the future of Bookfuturism is in the past.

### *Are There Too Many Books?*

That's the question Peter Osnos asked [on August 25, 2011](#) at *The Atlantic*—and it's hard to read his answer as anything but "Yes." The tease:

Traditional publishing is experiencing an upswing, but that doesn't mean the quality of print is increasing as well.

Osnos starts by noting two *New York Times* columns, both suggesting there are Too Damn Many Books (that is, new titles) and continues with a UNESCO estimate for U.S. book titles that seems very low by 2017-2018 terms: 288,355. Which is a lot of new titles and editions, to be sure.

In fact, among the various forms of information and entertainment, books are distinctive because there are so many of them. Every movie, television program, news organization, and the top tiers of websites combined represent a relatively small number compared to the books being published. Books do fall into categories, such as fiction, nonfiction, and textbooks, and subcategories like politics, economics, history, romance, science-fiction and so on; yet, most books have to be considered separate entities with their own strategy for reaching an audience.

Remember when there were a manageable number of TV series?

Too many new titles?

I guess it has to be considered a plus for publishing that so many people want to write books and that, based on the *BookStats* results, more people are buying them. There is no way to limit the output of books. But the sense that there may be too many of them is a message to authors, agents, and publishers that they would do well to exercise judgment in choosing which books actually deserve to be written and supported. At the moment, however, the process is moving in the other direction: self-publishing as a business is booming, and Amazon, Apple, and Google, with their various devices and imprints, seem to be lowering the entry bar because these corporate behemoths see new publishing ventures as a source of revenue, pretty much regardless of quality.

Are there too many books? Ultimately, that is an unreasonable question, because the process of winnowing them is so unappealing. But I'll agree with Keller and Burroughs that, among the many hundreds of thousands of books released each year, the quality of the few tends to be overwhelmed by the dross of many.

Somehow, I don't believe that either Apple or Google is a major factor in generating thousands of new book titles.

### *Book Publishing, Not Fact-Checking*

This article by Kate Newman, published [September 3, 2014](#) in *The Atlantic*, seems just as relevant now as then. The tease:

Readers might think nonfiction books are the most reliable media sources there are. But accuracy scandals haven't reformed an industry that faces no big repercussions for errors.

Starting with one case—where the author of a memoir was found to have fabricated much of her supposed past—we get some reactions and the note that finger-pointing about the book rarely pointed at the publisher, and the comment from a columnist that “We journalists often rely to a considerable extent on people to tell the truth, especially when they have written unchallenged autobiographies.” Leading to this:

There's a basic problem with this line of logic, though: Most books are never fact-checked.

"When I was working on my book, I did an anecdotal survey asking people: Between books, magazines, and newspapers, which do you think has the most fact-checking?" explained Craig Silverman, author of *Regret the Error*; a book on media accuracy, and founder of a blog by the same name. Almost inevitably, the people Silverman spoke with guessed books.

"A lot of readers have the perception that when something arrives as a book, it's gone through a more rigorous fact-checking process than a magazine or a newspaper or a website, and that's simply not that case," Silverman said. He attributes this in part to the physical nature of a book: Its ink and weight imbue it with a sense of significance unlike that of other mediums.

Fact-checking dates back to the founding of *Time* in 1923, and has a strong tradition at places like *Mother Jones* and *The New Yorker*. (*The Atlantic* checks every article in print.)

Many magazines are apparently reducing or eliminating fact-checking, but this appears to still be true:

What many readers don't realize is that fact-checking has never been standard practice in the book-publishing world at all.

And reliance on books creates a weak link in the chain of media accuracy, says Scott Rosenberg, founder of the now defunct [MediaBugs.org](http://MediaBugs.org). "Magazine fact-checkers typically treat reference to a fact in a published book as confirmation of the fact," Rosenberg said, "yet too often, the books themselves have undergone no such rigorous process."

You're probably aware of some of the blatant falsehoods—the memoir from a Holocaust survivor who wasn't one, James Frey's fact problems and more. Newman notes that publishers say they can't afford to do full fact-checking—but they'll find the time and money to have lawyers scour a manuscript for possible liability issues.

It's a good article, worth reading. Newman quotes Scott Rosenberg:

"They don't pay a price when the book is exposed," Rosenberg pointed out. "No one looks at the publishing house's name on the book they bought four years ago when *Newsweek* exposes it as inaccurate and says, 'I'll never buy a book published by them again!' So why should the publisher care?"

## Thinking about Bookstores

*More books, more choices: why America needs its indies*

This essay by Rachel Meier, published [December 16, 2011](#) in the *Christian Science Monitor*, begins as a reply of sorts to a *Slate* essay by Farhad Manjoo

entitled “[Don’t Support Your Local Bookseller](#).” Manjoo was in turn responding to a [Richard Russo op-ed](#) in the *New York Times*, so we’re talking opinions all the way down.

That Manjoo favors the more technological solution is, of course, no surprise—but his antipathy toward independent bookstores is a bit surprising: “some of the least efficient, least user-friendly, and most mistakenly mythologized local establishments you can find: independent bookstores.” Whew. In the next sentence he calls them “cultish, moldering institutions.” And, of course, they’re “inefficient,” what with employees and buildings and all. Finally, he doesn’t believe they’re really local:

There is little that’s “local” about most local bookstores. Unlike a farmers’ market, which connects you with the people who are seasonally and sustainably tending crops within driving distance of your house, an independent bookstore’s shelves don’t have much to do with your community. Sure, every local bookstore promotes local authors, but its bread and butter is the same stuff that Amazon sells—mass-manufactured goods whose intellectual property was produced by one of the major publishing houses in Manhattan.

But that’s Manjoo’s rant. Portions of Meier’s response:

Part of the value of independent bookstores as a whole is that there is a multitude of people controlling what’s bought, what’s promoted, and what’s displayed. Of course Walter Isaacson’s “Steve Jobs” is the same book everywhere. What’s different is what’s sitting on the display table next to “Steve Jobs.” It absolutely matters where you buy your copy, not because of the book itself but because of what you’re exposed to while you’re shopping...

Farhad Manjoo’s assertion that there is “little that is ‘local’ about most local bookstores” is inaccurate: what makes a local bookstore “local,” and also relevant, is its reflection of the tastes, eccentricities, fads, and buying habits of the community it serves.

The bestsellers at a store in [San Francisco](#) are not going to be the same as the bestsellers in Dayton, [Ohio](#). Moreover, the best-selling sections at one store in San Francisco may vary wildly from those at another. I ran a bookstore in the [Haight-Ashbury](#) neighborhood, and one of the best performing categories there was counterculture. I don’t know many stores that even have a counterculture section, let alone a robust one. And though the community we served had a lot of artists, writers, and “creative types,” poetry was not in high demand with our customers. By contrast, City Lights Books sees a huge demand for poetry books and houses one of the most well-stocked poetry sections in the country. Booksmith, in the Haight, and City Lights, in North Beach, are located 4.2 miles apart...

What makes excellent booksellers excellent is that they read a ton, they are surrounded by and have at their disposal people who do the same,

and that they are skilled at the practice of giving recommendations. Make no mistake, giving recommendations is a skill. Just ask any master sommelier (or customer who has had the misfortune of interacting with a lousy bookseller). You have to listen to what a customer says about their tastes, interests, and desires and discern from that what it is they're looking for, what will most satisfy them right now. It is a delicate process of matchmaking.

There's more, and it's well-argued. Meier is not attacking Amazon; she sees room for both. She closes:

Anyone who claims to value literary culture should be advocating for more: more books, more readers, more access, more services, more exposure, more formats. More choices. Anyone who advocates for the opposite either doesn't really care or is just posturing. That includes you, Mr. Manjoo.

Perhaps worth noting: Borders went under (apparently because of corporate incompetence) and some other chains have foundered or had problems—but the number of independent bookstores is apparently growing: from 1,651 locations in 2009 to 2,321 in 2017, [according to one source](#). (Link not guaranteed: it's a freebie from a fee-based statistical portal.)

## Avast, Ye Mateys!

### *Book Piracy: A Non-Issue*

I can't tell you who wrote this [August 23, 2011 piece](#) at *TechCrunch* because the byline just says "Contributor," but some evidence suggests that it's Paul Carr. The gist may be clear just from the title.

The person was looking back at predictions from eight years earlier:

Inevitably, with industries as fast moving as media and technology, my 23-year-old self made a whole load of terrible predictions. I dismissed the fad of "cameraphones", for example, but was bullish on red-button Interactive TV.

One prediction I'm happy to stand by, though, is that [the way to solve media piracy](#) would not be through legislation but through making it easier and cheaper for customers to buy legitimate versions of movies, music and books. Yeah, I know, today that sounds obvious. But back then it remained a "theory" in the way that evolution still does [to Ron Paul](#).

The writer talks about *why* books weren't hit with mass "piracy" early on, quotes an alarmist study of book "piracy" that doesn't seem all that alarming, identifies themselves as a piracy hardliner, then says:

When it comes to peer-to-peer file sharing, however, I'm calm to the point of apathy. The reason: books have *always* been free to those who don't want

to pay for them. Since as far back as the 17th century, people too poor, or too cheap, to buy a book could walk into a public library and borrow it...

To all intents and purposes, books borrowed from libraries mean authors receive no compensation. Meanwhile, every day, millions of people around the world loan books to their friends, or donate books to charities, or leave them on public transport or otherwise share them in ways that negate the need for the recipient to buy their own copy. None of this constitutes stealing from authors, and you won't hear a peep of objection from the publishing industry or authors.

Then there's discussion of ebooks and why it's a pain to "pirate" an ebook—and why pirated copies probably don't represent lost sales anyway. And Tim O'Reilly's attitude:

"Let's say my goal is to sell 10,000 copies of something. And let's say that if by putting DRM in it I sell 10,000 copies and I make my money, and if by having no DRM 100,000 copies go into circulation and I still sell 10,000 copies. Which of those is the better outcome?"

I think having 100,000 [books] in circulation and selling 10,000 is way better than having just the 10,000 that are paid for and nobody else benefits. People who don't pay you generally wouldn't have paid you anyway. We're delighted when people who can't afford our books don't pay us for them, if they go out and do something useful with that information."

The writer closes:

O'Reilly's words might sound revolutionary, especially when compared to the lock-it-down-and-sue-the-bastards attitude of the music and film industry. But when it comes to publishing, the notion that a rising tide of reading raises all publishing ships has been the reality for centuries. Pirate ebooks are just the 21st century equivalent of the lending library or of real-world book sharing, and — in all but the most egregious cases — can be safely ignored.

Of course, the real 21<sup>st</sup> century equivalent of the lending library...is the public library. But never mind. Also missing here: the increasingly strong suggestion that, just as library borrowing can lead to book purchases, so can ebook reading of any sort. Which is probably why Amazon so often has freebie ebooks or absurdly cheap ebooks: to encourage people to buy more from the same authors.

## Book Humor (or Not)

*Over It: Bookish Conversations We Never Want to Have Again*

This piece by Jeff O'Neal and Rebecca Joines Schinsky appeared [November 7, 2012](#) at *BookRiot*—and it's worth reading even six years later, even though #1 seems just a little dated in 2018.

It's a classic top-ten countdown. The ten, with excerpts where I can't resist:

➤ #10: Save Our Bookstore

➤ #9 Celebrity X Got A Book Deal, Publishing is Dooooooooomed

I think this dead horse gets reanimated and beaten up for a couple reasons. It gives writers who have been rejected by publishers a convenient way to explain their failure (and, you know, rejected writers owe their adoring publics an explanation about why they're not published yet), and it's an easy repository for all the free-floating anxiety in the publishing industry. Scared about the future of books? Blame a Kardashian!

➤ #8 Literary Hashtag Games

➤ #7 Why Aren't There More Women on This List?

➤ #6 Are Bloggers Killing Literary Criticism?

➤ #5: Books Every Person Of a Certain Age/Race/Gender/Nationality Should Read

➤ #4 Authors Responding to Book Reviews is a Very Bad Idea

We get it. Some authors can't handle criticism, and some feel entitled to a positive review just because they sent a reviewer a "free" book, and some are just assholes. Can we stop talking about this already?

➤ #3 Who is Qualified to Review Books?

➤ #2 Self-Publishing is the End of Everything

➤ #1 Print is Dead/Ebooks Rule

Ah, but here are the two reasoned comments as to why that conversation shouldn't happen any more:

JSO: Here it is, the most unkillable talking point in today's book world. As a recent all-digital convert, it is clear to me that the difference between a print book and an ebook is both miniscule and immaterial. As romantic as print is, digital has so many advantages that I have a hard time seeing how it won't be the dominant form, and soon at that. But print may well remain important. I don't know, and neither does anyone else. And more importantly, it doesn't matter.

RJS: With you there. I haven't made the full conversion to digital reading that you have—I'm at about 50% paper still, mostly because that's the how galleys show up at my house—but I can see it coming, and I'm fine with it. We've talked a lot about the notion of books as containers, and I think that's right. As I wrote here recently, [books are not sacred objects](#). It's the stories that we're really connected to, and as long as we

continue to have stories—which we’ve had for a hell of a lot longer than we’ve had printed books—we’re all going to be okay.

That “as romantic as...” line is a bit too typical of the “ebooks ROOL” view, and too dismissive of legitimate preferences for print books.

On the whole, though, an interesting discussion.

There are supposedly 32 comments, which might be interesting, but I can’t see them: it invites me to be “the first to comment.”

### *How eBooks lost their shine: ‘Kindles now look clunky and unhip’*

I could equally well put this Paula Coccozza article from [April 27, 2017](#) at *The Guardian* in a couple of other sections—it combines statistics and comments as to why ebook sales have slowed, in the UK as in the US, but I’m charmed by the opening paragraph:

Here are some things that you can’t do with a Kindle. You can’t turn down a corner, tuck a flap in a chapter, crack a spine (brutal, but sometimes pleasurable) or flick the pages to see how far you have come and how far you have to go. You can’t remember something potent and find it again with reference to where it appeared on a right- or left-hand page. You often can’t remember much at all. You can’t tell whether the end is really the end, or whether the end equals 93% followed by 7% of index and/or questions for book clubs. You can’t pass it on to a friend or post it through your neighbour’s door.

The rest is more serious and well worth reading—with this close:

“It’s not about the death of ebooks,” Daunt says. “It’s about ebooks finding their natural level. Even in the years when ebook sales were rising greatly – and clearly cannibalising physical book sales – it was always very clear that we would have a correction and reach an equilibrium.” The UK, he says, has “adopted” ebooks and they will remain a substantial market (while in France, for instance, ebooks are only 3% of the overall market). The last thing he – or any seller or publisher of physical books – wants is the death of the ebook. “We want people to read. We don’t mind how they read,” he stresses. He knows that people who read, sooner or later, will buy books.

## Books and Libraries

### *Why libraries should collect books*

Dale Askey posted this on [February 21, 2012](#) at *Bibilibrary*. It’s a followup to [a post](#) on why Askey no longer collects books (personally), and I won’t comment on that post. (Askey “has no particular affection for the book as object, [but] texts do have great value for me.”)

Here Askey is arguing that libraries—all libraries—really should try to collect and keep books, and to do so responsibly.

What I did not address in that post, but will do here, is describe my views on the obligations of libraries to collect books, or, as I [commented on one of those German blogs](#), *nearly* all books. My view is that this is a collective obligation of libraries, an obligation that transcends both borders and library type. In other words, major research libraries do not bear this burden alone, since even with their broad reach there will be myriad titles that never land in their collections. In nations that have the capital and technical means to build and maintain libraries, there are collectively hundreds of thousands of libraries, ranging from a [Canadian prairie town public library](#) to the Harvards of the world. There are special libraries with highly specialized profiles collecting items that the rest of us would find mind-numbingly uninteresting. All of this is good.

Responsibly? That is, collecting and managing properly:

This starts with having a clear collection policy, a document that should permit a library to block a gift before it ever comes in the door. For example, no academic library I've worked for would consider collecting mass-market paperbacks, or only in rare circumstances, so having a policy that such gifts will not be accepted only makes sense. Mass-market paperbacks should go to a used-book dealer, or be put on the shelf at the bed and breakfast for people to take, etc. Fiction generally finds a home.

Once a gift has been accepted, however, it's incumbent upon the library to process the gift carefully, as I outlined in my previous post. This entails both having procedures and actually following them, something that turns out to be harder to do than one would suppose. In particular, before discarding any book, they should pass through at least several levels of consideration: adding to the collection, selling to used-book dealers, selling to the public, giving them to another appropriate library (appropriate being the operative word, not blindly dumping them on some library too unwise to say no), or as many have suggested, just giving them away to anyone who wants them. One does, as I outlined as well, have to exercise sensible judgment. Given the mass that can accumulate, wasting time finding homes for books such as, say, math textbooks from the 1960s or for a cheap edition of a novel that practically every library owns, is simply not a luxury most can afford. Disposal must remain an option.

There are, to be sure, cases where *some* libraries do and should collect mass-market paperbacks—for example, some genre fiction *only* appears (or appeared) in these editions. As a rule, though, no argument here.

There's considerably more to the post about the difficulties in assuring that all books that *should* be collected *are* collected—but read that in the original.

## Challenging Conventional Wisdom

This Barbara Fister “Library Babel Fish” column from [December 17, 2015](#) at *Inside Higher Ed* is primarily about academic libraries, as may be obvious from the tease:

Everybody knows that a large percentage of our books never leave the shelf. Or do we?

Fister begins with one of the classic truisms—“information doubles every five years”—and Martin Raish’s finding that the truism was never based on hard facts. But getting back to libraries:

Another thing that everybody knows is that most books in academic libraries are never taken off the shelf. Or that 40 percent of them never circulate. Or that a tiny fraction of books get used while the rest get dusty. That librarians are terrible at guessing what people want and should stop trying.

Turns out that when Amy Fry tried to find the evidence for those claims, it wasn’t quite that simple. For example:

- many of the articles making this claim rely on extrapolating from a single study conducted at one institution between 1969 and 1975.
- studies that have different findings have been overlooked in most of the literature on this topic. These underreported studies complicate the picture considerably...
- a handful of influential people speaking at the right events can persuade a lot of librarians that something is obvious and true...
- some people in the publishing industry would prefer to license ebooks rather than sell printed books because they can limit sharing among libraries and control how books are used; likewise, there are administrators who feel shifting to ebooks will save money on staff and space. Besides, everyone’s doing it.
- librarians are highly influenced by consultants’ presentations and informal communications and don’t necessarily ask to see the data underlying what “everybody knows.”

There’s more, and it’s still relevant.

Comments are interesting, including one citing a study that *seems* to support the common wisdom—but that only counted actual circulation (I know that when I was using academic libraries, most books I consulted never left the stacks, and several commenters say the same). There’s also a research study of two health science libraries that showed that less than 10% of monographs had *not* been used in the first decade after acquisition—and here again, the figures may be off because only circulation counted.

## Books are Doing Just Fine

This section has nothing to do with ebooks *versus* print books: it's about the health of books in general in a time when “nobody has time to read books.”

### *Books Don't Want to Be Free*

This piece by Evan Hughes, which appeared [October 8, 2013](#) in *The New Republic*, has a quaint whiff of “it's all going digital” about it—especially in one infographic—but it still stands up well.

After starting with a hints-of-doom paragraph and the graphic in question (headed “Here's Why E-books will be King,” it makes sense only if you believe that the *increase* in ebook sales from 2008 to 2012 was sustainable—and even then, the *non-decrease* (2% and 6% respectively) in hard-cover and trade paperback makes “king” a bit premature), we get to the real discussion.

If you're in the business of selling journalism, moving images, or music, you have seen your work stripped of value by the digital revolution. Translate anything into ones and zeroes, and it gets easier to steal and harder to sell at a sustainable price. Yet people remain willing to fork over a decent sum for books, whether in print or in electronic form. “I can buy songs for 99 cents, I can read most newspapers for free, I can rent a \$100 million movie tonight for \$2.99,” Russ Grandinetti, Amazon's vice president of Kindle content, told me in January. “Paying \$9.99 for a best-selling book—paying \$10 for bits?—is in many respects a very strong accomplishment for the business.” At the individual level, everyone in the trade—whether executive, editor, agent, author, or bookseller—faces threats to his or her livelihood: self-publishing, mergers and “efficiencies,” and, yes, the suspicious motives of Amazon executives. But the book itself is hanging on and even thriving. More than any major cultural product, it has retained its essential worth.

There's some thoughtful discussion of why this appears to be true, including considerations of disaggregation and other factors. Perhaps worth reading even at this late date.

### *Rumors of the Demise of Books Greatly Exaggerated*

That's the title for this Art Swift and Steve Ander piece on [January 6, 2017](#) at the Gallup news site, based on a December 7-11 2016 poll of 1,028 adults—a random poll involving both cellphone and landline respondents in all 50 states and DC.

Maybe I should lead off with the conclusions rather than the specific figures:

Despite Americans' ability to access more information, social networks, games and media than ever before, as well as the lingering rumors of the book's demise, Americans still say they are reading books.

Additionally, while some have alleged that technology would displace printed books, this shift has not been as swift as expected. In fact, recent industry data show that sales of printed books have been increasing. While it is unclear if Americans are reading books only partially, reading shorter books or reading lower-quality books than they used to, the fact that they are reading just as many books as they were 15 years ago could signify welcome news to aspiring authors and publishers.

This suggests that book reading is a classic tradition that has remained a constant in a faster-paced world, especially in comparison to the slump of other printed media such as newspapers and magazines.

The first part has specific numbers, and they're interesting. For example, of those who read at least one book within the previous year, 73% mostly read print books, 19% ebooks and 6% audiobooks.

A table on *number of books read by age group*, comparing 2002 results to 2016 results, is fascinating. 12% of us geezers, 65 and over, read *more than 50* books a year—essentially unchanged from 11% in 2002. Among the younger generation, those aged 18 to 29, 34% read 11 to 50 books—up from 32% in 2002. “No books”? The worst number is 20% for ages 50-64—but the most striking change is for the geezers: down from 29% in 2002 to 14% in 2016.

### *Book Reading 2016*

A slightly earlier poll-based piece, this one by Andrew Perrin on [September 1, 2016](#) at the Pew Research Center site. This time, the poll was done by Pew; it involved 1,520 adults and was taken March 7-April 4, 2016.

There's no tidy closing section, but the tease has the keys:

A growing share of Americans are reading e-books on tablets and smartphones rather than dedicated e-readers, but print books remain much more popular than books in digital formats

Some key numbers:

- 73% of respondents had read at least one book in the previous 12 months—including 65% reading print books, 28% reading ebooks and 14% listing to audiobooks.
- Mean was 12 books per year; median four books. Those figures have been largely unchanged since 2011.
- There are remarkably few ebook purists: only 6%, as compared to 38% who read only print books in the past year.

- The percentage of respondents who've read an ebook on an ebook reader is essentially unchanged, from 7% in 2011 to 8% in 2016, while tablets have gone from 4% to 15% and cellphones have gone from 5% to 13%. (Computers have gone from 7% to 11%.) My question: are Kindle Fires ebook readers or tablets?
- Asking about *why* people read, 80% read for pleasure in 2011, while in 2016 the figure was...80%.

### *What's Right With Publishing*

Maybe this column, by Barbara Fister on [June 14, 2012](#) in the “Library Babel Fish” blog at *Insider Higher Ed*, belongs elsewhere, but it's too charming to ignore, and it still sounds about right. I'll just quote the first three paragraphs; you can read the more hopeful items yourself.

When it comes to publishing, Charles Dickens was half right. It's the worst of times, and it always has been.

Ten years ago, when preparing for a panel on the future of book publishing, I jotted down some quotes from *Publishers Weekly* that still sound fresh, a decade and a technology revolution later. “Too few children are raised in houses with books,” one worried publishing professional declared. “The emphasis on bestsellers,” another wrote, “has lately been carried too far” and harmed the chances for other books to find an audience.

I should point out these *Publishers Weekly* articles were published in 1927 and 1929. The publishing sky has had almost more practice falling than night.

Go read it. It's good.

## Why Printed Books Matter

### *Books Matter*

This essay by Timothy Young appeared [February 2, 2015](#) at *DesignObserver*—and given the design orientation of the site, I can't help but note that the text of the essay is set flush left to the very edge of the screen, with no margin at all. But that design observation isn't relevant to the essay itself, which is based on a talk Young gave to a library group “about why the printed book still matters.” He offers “Ten Good Reasons the Book is Important.”

The ten, without the paragraph discussing each one:

1. It is a piece of technology that lasts.
2. It needs very little, if any, extra technology to be accessed.
3. The book retains evidence.
4. Books are true to form.

5. Each copy of a book is potentially unique ...
6. Printed items are consumable goods ...
7. A book is an object fixed in time.
8. A book can be an object of beauty and human craftsmanship.
9. When you are reading a book in a public place, other people can see what you are reading.
10. The Internet will never contain every book.

Worth reading the whole thing (it's short—literally *one* paragraph per numbered point). I'll quote point 4's discussion, which I find personally interesting because my wife is working on a book layout project where two-page spreads are fundamental:

Books are meant to be seen and read in specific ways. Many early books had sections that were intended to be viewed as two-page spreads—[not isolated from each other](#), as often happens in online viewers. The same observation can be made about scrolls; their presentation was key to how they were interpreted. We can't forget that reading can have a ceremonial function.

### *A Thousand Hands Will Grasp You with Warm Desire: On the Persistence of Physical Books*

This lovely essay by Alix Christie appeared [March 2, 2015](#) at *The Millions*. It's such a pleasure to read that I'm tempted to just say "Go read it" and stop there—and, notably, Christie is *not* saying "nobody should read ebooks," as should be clear from the final paragraph:

I feel confident that there will always be a place for books we touch and hold. Some of us will read on phones or tablets; others will keep reaching for the real thing, the same way the great medieval printer **Anton Koberger** imagined his customers doing in 1493, when he sent out his *Nuremberg Chronicle* with this printed wish:

*Speed now, Book...*

*A thousand hands will grasp you with warm desire*

*And read you with great attention.*

Christie begins with a personal experience leafing through Princeton's copy of the Gutenberg Bible (without gloves: "Linen rag is not disturbed by finger oils, while calfskin in fact thanks them"). After 560 years, this book is still fully readable and in excellent condition. Then...

By now most of us are heartily sick of the print versus e-book debate. It was framed wrong from the start: as a Manichean proposition, one or the other, either-or. Fortunately, we have our own experience now to instruct us — as well as the long history of the book. The evolution of reading technologies is both "broken and continuous," in the words of the book

historian **John Pettegree**; each successive form coexists with the one it replaces for some time. Most of us read some things on screen, other things in print; seven years after the invention of the Kindle, readers are answering this question for themselves. We need only look back to the first age of print to see that this is how technologies evolve. The hand copying of manuscripts by scribes did not vanish in 1454, when **Johann Gutenberg** and his colleagues unveiled the new system of printing with movable type. Nor did it die out completely when **Aldus Manutius** invented the killer app for print in 1500 in Venice, the handheld personal book — nor even in 1517, when **Martin Luther's** 95 printed theses sounded the death knell for clerical rule. Hand copying persisted well into the 16th century, for special texts desired by wealthy rulers and clergy. Even today, fine letterpress printing and calligraphy are used for luxury editions of the classics for a similar clientele. For a time, and for a particular purpose, old technology persists. Where then, in 2015, do we stand with the printed book?

As most of us know by now, while mass-market paperbacks were diminished by ebooks, hardcovers and trade paperbacks are doing just fine, and independent bookstores are coming back. After discussing these facts, Christie recounts an experience at a booksellers' convention:

With a gaggle of other authors, I was flogging my book in a massive speed-dating exercise that consisted of telling table after table of retailers what my novel was about. As I brandished my own beautiful hardback (of which more in a moment), we got to talking about the surprising appeal of hardbacks in this digital day and age. Over the past five years, they all agreed, hardbacks have not only held their own, they have gotten *more beautiful*. It's almost as if, one bookseller mused, publishers understood that if one went to the trouble of producing or buying a printed book anymore, it had better be for a darned good reason. The very printness of print, it seemed, was its USP — its unique selling point. If a print book can't offer something more than a cheaply produced paperback, the e-book wins the day. There's simply no reason to buy it.

Much of what follows is about the “printness” of print books. Again, well worth reading in the original.

Thirteen comments, including this clunker:

A wonderful job of romancing the codex. Of course, it's all nonsense.

The ebook is only about eight years old and already it has over a third of the book market. That has to be the quickest takeover in the history of publishing.

The ebook/tablet is lighter, easier to hold, easier to read, has higher type resolution and graphic resolution, easier to see in the dark, more convenient with which to travel, and it holds hundreds of books. And many tablets are elegant.

The codex is a dead man walking.

Right. (Tablets have “higher type resolution” than printed books? What could that even mean?) Four years later, “over a third” seemed to have become around a quarter.

## Print Books are [Still] Doomed?

*A coming new obsession: how to handle a smaller print-book business*

Mike Shatzkin, “widely-acknowledged thought leader about digital change in the book publishing industry” (according to Mike Shatzkin), offered this set of sure-fire predictions and musings on October 24, 2009 on “The Shatzkin Files” at *The Idea Logical Company*.

Here’s a prediction that has almost no chance of being wrong. Every major player in the trade book industry is about to develop a new obsession: how must our business model change when we reach a level of ebook sales that is dynamically disruptive to the print book ecosystem?

It can be argued that he was right: people in the book industry are surely *aware* of ebooks these days and probably producing them. “Disruptive” to the “print book ecosystem”? I’m uncertain.

He refers to rapid growth in ebooks, true enough in 2009. He talks about how much better Barnes & Noble’s Nook will be than Amazon’s Kindle. And he seems pretty confident that, not only would print sales keep declining, but the print book *selection* would shrink:

The brick-and-mortar bookstores, led by Barnes & Noble, are going to have to figure out how to keep their stores enticing with might be a smaller selection of print books. Nothing can grow the market for print books in the years to come, but keeping the number of points of purchase as high as possible and the traffic as high as possible are in the industry’s interests.

While the total volume of trade print books in the U.S.—which actually *peaked* in 2008—declined through 2012, it has since returned, enough so that *unit* sales in 2017 are less than 11% lower than in 2009. Somehow, from 2012 on, “nothing” managed to result in steady year-to-year *volume* growth: 687 million books in 2017, compared to 591 million in 2012. ([Here’s the graph.](#)) Revenues have also been growing, if slowly. Ad for choice...well, [the most recent post](#) in Shatzkin’s blog says just how accurate he was:

That number — the number of individual book titles available to any consumer, bookstore, or library — has exploded in my working lifetime. As recently as 25 years ago, the potential titles available — in print and on a warehouse shelf ready to be ordered, or even to be backordered until a next printing — was numbered in the hundreds of

thousands. So it has grown by 20 or 30 or 40 times. That's between 2000 percent and 4000 percent in the last quarter century.

But never mind. This early post is curious in other ways as Shatzkin seems to assume that the Kindle (remember when there was *the* Kindle?) wouldn't hold its spot as the premiere ebook device. He says of Amazon "Making hardware is not a core competency for them."

Which may be why a November 2018 "BestReviews" set of "Best E-readers" has a mere four different Kindle models as compared to a vast array of...well, *one* Nook. Fact is, when people buy dedicated ereaders—which most probably don't these days—they're likely to buy Kindles. (Or Kindle Fires, which in my experience—we own two, plus a Paperwhite—are much better e-readers than they are tablets. [Full disclosure: I do 95% or more of my *book* reading in print book form—but I read the equivalent of two or three books a week on my Kindle Fire 8.9 HD in the form of daily newspapers. Not that I might not prefer the physical paper, but expense, recycling bulk and inconsistent deliveries got me out of the printed-news-paper habit years ago.]

## ...Or They're Doing Just Fine

Some of this was covered in "Books are Doing Just Fine," but these items deal more specifically with *print* books and why they're sticking around.

### *Books (Still) in Print*

Barbara Fister's "Library Babel Fish" column on [January 10, 2017](#) at *Inside Higher Ed*—and it relates to her "Challenging Conventional Wisdom" column discussed earlier, but covers different territory.

People have a lot of odd beliefs about books. Nobody reads books anymore – [except they do](#), overwhelmingly. Well, maybe old folks still read books, but not kids – though actually kids are much more likely to read books than people over 65. Well, but that's because they're reading ebooks. Nope. People of all ages still prefer print. The Gallup poll making the rounds is just the latest in a long string of surveys and studies that never can quite put an end to the commonly-held belief that "people don't read books anymore."

Much of the column concerns reading patterns in academic libraries, and as always it's worth reading, and here's the close:

Meanwhile, every December an English teacher at a rural high school about an hour's drive away from my college brings a group of students to our campus to spend a morning at our library doing research for a paper. They don't have much of a library at their school, and they haven't had a librarian in years, ever since an entrepreneurial principal got all the students iPads and enough favorable notice for his innovation that he was able to move onto better things. It has been interesting

to see what grabs these students, year after year. When full-text databases were new, they ran through reams of paper, printing things off. In the past five years or so the thing they want the most is books. Minnesota libraries are pretty well networked so we are able to check our books out to these students, who return them through their local public library. If those books were electronic, they couldn't take them home. They couldn't access them across the internet. They would only be able to use them while physically in the library.

There's something very satisfying about seeing high school students stream out of our library with books in their arms. I'm glad we can still do that.

No comment required.

### *Silicon Valley Won't Save Books*

The title of this Alex Shephard article, posted [December 28, 2017](#) at *The New Republic*, suggests it belong elsewhere—but the tease may make it a bit clearer:

The Amazon Kindle didn't change books ten years ago, and it won't change them in the next ten years, either.

Never mind that it takes a pretty grandiose definition of “Silicon Valley” to include Seattle. This piece mostly seems to be a response to a *Wired* article that seems like yet another round of “books really *should* be movies,” and as unconvincing now as it was a decade ago. Quoting Shephard, quoting from and commenting on that piece:

Pierce argues that the only place for Amazon to turn is to [change the nature of reading](#) itself. “The next phase for the digital book seems likely to not resemble print at all,” he wrote. “Instead, the next step is for authors, publishers, and readers to take advantage of all the tools now at their disposal and figure out how to reinvent longform reading.” It's high time, Pierce argued, for a new kind of book to emerge, one that accurately embodies the complex audio and visual possibilities technology offers. That's an exciting possibility: the book, after hundreds of years, is finally on the verge of entering the twenty-first century. But it's not going to happen.

Pierce clearly regards this lack of song and dance as a bug, and I sense that Shephard tends to agree. I regard it as a *feature* of print books, and I'd guess so do most other book readers. At this point, moom pictures (whether as movies or TV/Netflix/etc. shows) are effectively cheaper for most Americans than books not borrowed from the library—and yet, we (two-thirds of us) still read books. Maybe because we *like* the interplay of our minds with linear text. Pierce's strategy for reinventing “longform reading” strikes me as a way to destroy it—longform viewing (or binge-watching) just ain't the same thing.

To some extent, that is what Shephard is saying (at length). For example:

Others have tried to push the book into the twenty-first century. Pierce proposed that readers be able to “participate in the book by texting with characters, going to important locations, and even helping write the narrative.” [Sony’s Wonderbook](#) “turned a hardback book into an augmented-reality surface,” while Google’s [Visual Editions](#) has explored the possibility of “unprintable books.” But only Amazon, with its practically unlimited resources and deep experience in publishing—it is both the largest retailer and, if you count its [gigantic self-publishing operation](#), the largest publisher in the country—can accomplish the goal. By focusing its energies on experimenting with literary production, Pierce wrote, Amazon can inaugurate a new literary era. “Only Amazon has the clout to really drive what could and should come next,” Pierce concludes. “Not by making pixels just like paper, but by embracing the difference.”

The problem with this analysis, which Pierce never really seems to consider, is that this book of the future—a participatory, augmented-reality experience that blends a number of different kinds of media—is not a book. It is certainly a different narrative-based experience, but it’s closer to an app or even a game.

OK, so it’s an interactive game rather than a movie—but, y’know, when I read a Mary Robinette Kowal book I want *her* idea of what should happen, not mine.

Print books are doing fine these days. Shephard seems to think that won’t last—that, in effect, books are doomed in the long run. Here’s his closing paragraph:

It’s unlikely that this relatively peaceful period will last. But that doesn’t mean that books are going anywhere soon. Yes, the written word has been in decline since the advent of film and then television, though recent technological change has undoubtedly hastened its fall. But this has led many to assume that the problem is one of form, that if the book could adapt to our multi-screen age, its cultural retreat would end. This optimistically assumes that the decline is reversible, which it isn’t. Books were overtaken by other media decades ago. The problem isn’t that books don’t have enough television in them, or enough internet in them; it’s that they are just one form of readily available cultural consumption among so many.

And yet, and yet, *most adults still read books* and most libraries are busier than ever. I spend a *lot* more time staring at this damn notebook than I do reading books (and, in my case, probably roughly the same time with books as with video)—but that doesn’t mean I’ve stopped reading, and pretty much every available study shows that younger generations haven’t given up long-form text, usually in print book form, either. It doesn’t have to be one or the other; it never did and it probably never will.

## It's Gotta Be E

The “ebooks are *the future*” group hasn't gone away...

### *Why you should quit reading paper books*

Not much ambiguity in the title of this Andy Sparks item on [June 30, 2017](#) at *Medium*. His opening logic is...well...

According to Pew Internet, 65% of American adults read a print book in the previous twelve months, while only 28% had read an e-book (Kindle, etc.). I believe everyone should quit reading print books almost entirely. The smell, the feel, and the touch of a print book is something I adore, but what I can't stand is to spend countless hours reading only to have it slowly leak away into irretrievable oblivion.

Huh? That's right: his claim that *everybody* should switch entirely to ebooks boils down to this:

When you read on Kindle and highlight passages that you find beautiful, interesting, or challenging, you're sending your future self a hell of a gift, but it doesn't feel that way until way later.

Sparks cites a few of the “thousands of highlights” he has and periodically reviews. That's basically it.

### *The Scientific Reason Actual Books Are So Much More Memorable Than E-Books*

This Drake Baer article, on July 12, 2017 at *Thrive Global*, obviously doesn't belong in this section—except that it's a direct response to Sparks' post.

We all know the cycle: If you want to get clicks on the Internet, take something people love and tell them they're doing it [wrong](#). It'll prompt reads from people worried they're doing it wrong, shares from early adopters who agree with you, hate-reads from people who disagree, and maybe a counter-take or two from people who were so flummoxed by your argument they had to publish a reply, like this one.

After summarizing Sparks' post, and before noting some of the statistics, Baer comments:

There's a saccharine sweetness to the sentiment: while smacking of Silicon Valley exceptionalism, the post manages to not only swing and miss on what science says about how memory actually works, but it also misreads what our literary tradition says reading is for, and what the current trend in the book market is.

Baer offers a fairly substantial discussion of the “scientific reason”s for preferring print books—and reasons why, in general, memory does better with tactile experiences than with data stuffed on a computer.

The thing about human brains is that, primed by evolution, they tend to only remember the things they've been taught [through experience](#) to be important. If you only use GPS to navigate a place, you'll learn your way around less quickly; rather than mental maps, it's Google Maps. Jason Chein, who runs Temple University's Neurocognition Lab, told me that if I've just moved to a new neighborhood, I should get around by way of landmarks, so that spatial memory is lodged in my noggin rather than my smartphone.

Worth noting: Baer isn't anti-ebook.

## ...Or Not So Much

The coherent view has always been that there's room for both, that different people will find different formats more or less useful for different purposes, and that there was no good way to predict the eventual percentages of ebook and print book usage (and whether or not it's a zero-sum game: if ebook sales boom and print book sales stay flat or rise, how is that a bad thing?). That said, sometimes deflating the exaggerated claims of inevitable ebook dominance is fun—and necessary.

### *The Bad News About E-books*

This report, by Jim Milliot on [January 20, 2017](#) at *Publishers Weekly*, is interesting for a couple of details, apart from the overall figures that ebook unit sales *for 30 traditional publishers* were down 16% in 2016 compared to 2015. Note two important qualifiers: that's *unit* sales, not revenue—and it includes major traditional publishers but doesn't include, for example, all the stuff from Kindle Direct Publishing/CreateSpace. (Of course, it equally doesn't include loads of print books through Lulu, CreateSpace and other nontraditional publishers.)

A couple of unit percentages for 2016: ebooks were 27% overall—but only 12% of adult nonfiction and 10% of juvenile fiction. (49% of adult fiction; 1% of juvenile nonfiction.)

One claimed factor for the drop in unit sales: publishers regained “agency pricing” and raised prices by about \$3 an ebook, to about \$8. (For self-pub ebooks, *average* price was \$3.)

A second factor in the decline in e-book sales is the increasing use by book buyers of tablets and smartphones to read e-books and the decline in use of dedicated e-book readers. Consumers who use dedicated e-book readers have consistently been found to purchase more e-books than consumers who use other devices to read. In the first quarter of 2011, more than 70% of e-book buyers said they used dedicated e-book devices to read, a percentage that fell to 24% in the second quarter of 2016.

That's the item that interested me the most—and maybe it's no surprise: dedicated ebook reader owners are more likely to buy lots of ebooks.

One other surprising figure: for the first time since 2012, more *hard-cover* books were sold than ebooks.

*New (but not surprising) AAP findings this week: paperback, hardcover, and audio sales grow; ebook sales decline*

This post, by the editor at *No Shelf Required* on [February 24, 2017](#) is related to the previous item—but with a very different perspective. To wit:

As always, when such reports are released, NSR zooms in on ebook numbers. They continue to go down (not up), as we can clearly see, but as we've noted previously on this issue, this may actually be a good thing. At least for those who advocate for more affordable access to books online, and especially for those whose advocate free access to books online (beyond libraries). Although disappointing, numbers like this do not confirm that people don't want to read and access content in digital format. Instead, they confirm that they simply do not want to pay for ebooks, or at least not as much they've had to pay thusfar.

Readers are already used to consuming massive amounts of information for free in digital format, and their expectations continue to gravitate in the direction of 'free' even when it comes to books (including fiction and all types of nonfiction).

This is an interesting argument: people are perfectly happy to read ebooks as long as they're free, but if they have to *pay* they'll go with print. Authors, editors and publishers might not find this argument wholly satisfying, however. There's a little more discussion, and a fairly detailed set of charts and figures from the 2016 results.

[Several other "analyses" of the AAP figures for 2016 omitted as adding nothing new or interesting.]

*Why the Much-Hyped "Netflix of Books" Model Ended Up Flopping*

Adam Row published this on [February 22, 2017](#) at *Net.Co*. As one of three million holdouts for Netflix/DVD, I should clarify that the reference is to streaming Netflix and its "all-you-can-watch model." As noted, the same model appears to be working for Spotify—but two 2013 attempts to offer an all-you-can-eat/monthly-fee ebook service, Scribd and Oyster, didn't do so well.

Flash back to 2013. Our two heroes battling for the "Netflix of books" title are Scribd and Oyster, although Amazon is also butting in with its Kindle Unlimited service. But since Amazon Prime has 50 million members, Amazon is kinda cheating here.

Launched in 2012, Oyster offered [one million books](#) and had cut a deal with the Big Five book publishers (or the Big Six, back then) — Simon and Schuster, HarperCollins, Penguin Random House, Macmillan, and

Hachette. Scribd was founded in 2007 as a place to host and share documents, but [launched its unlimited subscription service](#) in 2013, also cutting a deal with the Big Five. The New York Times [profiled them](#).

Then, in November 2015, [Oyster shut down](#), after being bought out by Google. Scribd also [majorly pivoted](#) in February 2016, getting rid of the all-you-can-read model in favor of a less user-friendly rotating roster of available books. What happened?

What happened? For Scribd, one hint was when they dropped almost all of their romance title, apparently because romance readers read a *lot* and that undermined Scribd's profits. A couple of other reasons are offered.

What's *not* noted is that there already is a "Netflix for books," one that offers print *and* ebooks. It's called the public library. People use it a *lot*, and it also serves many other functions.

### *Sorry, Ebooks. These 9 Studies Show Why Print Is Better*

This article by Maddie Crum appeared [February 27, 2015](#) at *Huffington Post*, and is mostly a listicle pointing to various studies. The subheadings without the discussions:

Younger people are more likely to believe that there's useful information that's only available offline.

Students are more likely to buy physical textbooks.

Students opt for physical copies of humanities books, even when digital versions are available for free.

This isn't just true of textbooks. Teens prefer print books for personal use, too.

Students don't connect emotionally with on-screen texts.

... And they comprehend less of the information presented in digital books.

It's not just students opting for print. Parents and kids prefer to read physical books together, too.

Which makes sense, because ebooks can negatively impact your sleep.

... And it's hard to avoid multitasking while reading digital books.

It's an interesting study of studies...

## Media

# Media Notes

To some extent, this is just catching up—and it's effectively two smaller essays, Magazine Notes and Other Media.

## Magazine Notes

This essay combines some items about magazines that I've tagged and a few of my own notes on how some print magazines change over time. The latter are my own observations based on my own experience; every magazine is different, and there are a staggering number of magazines. I say "print magazine" advisedly: a print magazine is a package in a way that online sites—whether they call themselves magazines or not—really aren't. That's something I discussed years ago in March 2014, partially repeated in July 2016—and I won't spend a few pages on it again.

### *Personal Changes*

Looking at my own situation, there are the gross changes and the subtler changes. In 2016, I subscribed to 16 magazines (one "weekly," one 20x/year, two bimonthly, the rest more-or-less monthly), and got nine more due to memberships and donations: two monthly, the rest either bimonthly or quarterly. The same was true in 2014.

In 2018, that's down to 12 and ten. Of the 12, one is "weekly" to the tune of 26 "special double issues" per year; three moved from monthly to bimonthly (as did one that I cancelled); one moved from 20 issues per year to monthly; one is bimonthly; and six are still more-or-less monthly (usually 10 issues per year). Of the ten, two are monthly, three are bimonthly, and five are quarterly.

How did I get from 16 to 12? We dropped *Porthole* because it continued to be glossy emptiness and we got tired of it; I discussed the sad changes to *Condé Nast Traveler* in 2016 (changes that haven't improved); I dropped one *Serious Magazine* because it was just too depressing; and I finally dropped *Analog Science Fact & Fiction* both because I was finding it hard to keep up with three science fiction magazines (all three have gone from twelve to six issues per year, but the six issues are all book-length, with—as far as I can tell—*more* fiction per year, since there are fewer columns and book reviews) and because the new editor seems to have forgotten that science fiction should, first and foremost, be good *stories*.

Magazines aren't dying—as far as I can tell, there are still more new ones being born than old ones ceasing—but they're always changing. It makes sense that general-interest magazines would decline, given the sheer time-sinks of social media and other online sites, but specialized magazines—always most of the titles out there—keep popping up. Magazines may reduce frequency because postage is a burden. But magazines can also change for the worse for a variety of reasons, many having to do with the move of advertising to digital sources, even though the claims of such sources to be *effective* ad media are beginning to unravel (one major site admitted to boosting actual visit numbers). Let me offer a couple of examples of sad changes in magazines I've cared about—and that won't include *Asimov's* and *F&SF*, since I'm not sure their frequency change is sad.

## *Fortune*

I've subscribed to this magazine for some time; although it's business-oriented, it's well-written and seems to view business from a broad perspective (that's also true of *The Economist* and possibly *Bloomberg BusinessWeek*). In recent years, as with so many magazines, most issues were getting thinner (the *Fortune 500* being a huge exception), but with 20 issues a year, it was still substantial.

This year, Time Inc's magazines were sold to Meredith, which is now the nation's largest magazine publisher. Not too long thereafter, in small print, *Fortune's* frequency went from 20 issues per year to monthly. But the subscription rate, at least for automatic renewals, didn't change. I got my notice of autorenewal a few weeks ago—and, at \$49.50 for 12 mostly smallish issues, it no longer makes sense for someone who's not *in* business. Canceled.

## *Sound & Vision*

This is the near-end of a long story of mainstream stereo (or just high fidelity) and home theater magazines. *Stereo Review* was the home of measurements, for good and for bad: their equipment reviews were backed up by careful measurements, which they were famous (or, for some high-end folks) notorious for. They had a number of midrange competitors, and at some point there were also two or three video/home theater magazines.

Little by little, the others disappeared or were merged into *Stereo Review*—and with the merger of the publisher's video/home theater magazine, the name became *Sound & Vision*.

Still monthly, it was never as substantial or well-written as its predecessors. It dwindled to the usual ten issues per year (I believe), and what measurements there were, were perfunctory, as were the reviews in general. A new editor seemed to come out of the automotive magazine tradition of editors who fight with their readers—and wasn't very good at it. And then it (and its high-end corporate partner *Stereophile*) were sold to a new publisher...

New editor (too early to judge). Bimonthly: from ten down to six issues per year, and very thin issues they are. But they found a way to save some space: actual testing (as opposed to reviewing) seems to have disappeared entirely. A long legacy has disappeared.

## *Consumer Reports*

The good news: it's still monthly and still ad-free.

The bad news: for *product* reviews (other than automobiles), as opposed to essays on health, nutrition, fraud and whatever, the print magazine has largely turned into a preview of the online space, which requires a separate subscription. An issue (I'm pretty sure they're now considerably thinner than before) may now have a two-page spread showing three options each for six (or so) different product categories just tested. Want to know the rest

or have details? Off you go to online, if you've paid. More one-page discussions of product categories with a few examples—and off it is to digital. Oh, there will be a few roundups with more models shown, but fewer and briefer than before—and even the car reports are more perfunctory.

### Why?

In most of these cases, and many others, the culprits are some combination of rising postage and paper costs (although *CR* seems to be an editorial shift toward more Essays and fewer Reviews), in some cases fewer subscribers and in some cases fewer ads. Such is life.

One classic case has been going downhill for so long that it's barely worth a mention—and it may be inevitable in a TV landscape with too many channels and more original streaming shows than you could possibly watch. I speak of *TV Guide*, and I'm old enough to remember when it was a thick digest-size weekly with a couple dozen color pages of stuff *about* TV shows—followed by a long, long regional listing summarizing every show on every local network or station, from day start to day finish. That model was no doubt unsustainable, and began to change a *long* time ago. So now we have a “weekly” that appears 26 times per year, is standard magazine-size, appears in one edition per time zone, and consists of about 20 pages of *People*-style articles (and ads and front matter), for each of two one-week periods eight pages of “what's worth watching” and 14 pages of network grids covering prime time only (plus ad pages, of course), and in the middle “Scream it!,” an eight-page collection of stuff from Netflix and others. The original model is, of course, totally impossible for a print magazine given today's wealth of choices and probably useless as well. Times do change.

Many other magazines have similar sad stories—and many others are thriving or holding their own. It's tempting to build a spreadsheet with the USPS-required circulation figures and track changes over a couple of years, but that might be sad in too many cases.

Now for a few tagged items from others...well, actually, since *MediaLife* now locks me out (403), they're all from *Mr. Magazine*.

### *Magazine Launches First Half 2016 Vs. 2015: More Specials, Less Frequency*

Since *Media Life* shut down or went pay-only, *Mr. Magazine* is the best source of data on magazines—but he only covers newsstand magazines. This [July 1, 2016](#) item basically says that in the first half of 2016, 99 new magazines (quarterly or more frequent) with newsstand presence began, and 297 “specials” (one-shots) came out. That compares to 115 and 294, respectively, in the first half of 2015.

For the full year, as noted in this [January 3, 2017](#) article, the figures are 222 and 623.

## *New Magazines Are Here To Stay: Mr. Magazine's Study Shows An Increase In Survival Rates Of Magazine Launches 2006 – 2015.*

Same source, this time on [August 16, 2016](#), and it's a more interesting story: four-year and ten-year survival rates for new magazines are both up somewhat.

It's also sobering, because new print magazines are like restaurants: most fail. Of 2,235 newsstand print magazines started between 2006 and 2015 (doesn't it seem astonishing that *more than two thousand* new print magazines, quarterly or more frequent and sold on newsstands, started during those ten years?) 616 were still publishing in August 2016—but that includes 57 from 2006 and 56 from 2007.

### *Launch Monitor*

At some point, Samir Husni (Mr. Magazine) split off a separate [Launch Monitor](#), with monthly posts noting the number of new newsstand magazines. So, for example, October 2018 had 15 new magazines. I'm not seeing annual wrapups, and I'm too lazy to add things up. Let's just say that most months see at least 10 and sometimes 20 or more new *newsstand* magazines—and, of course, many specialized magazines never appear on newsstands.

Husni has been tracking magazines for 40 years. He says that over time there are roughly four new magazines born for each one that shuts down—and that there are at least four times as many print newsstand magazines now as there were when he started studying them.

### *The Mr. Magazine™ 2017 Manifesto: Make Magazines Great Again...\**

Husni has taken to doing annual “manifestos,” such as this one from [January 4, 2017](#).

Here's the text for that unfortunate first topic:

Magazines are much more than content. Magazines are created and curated journalism. They are integrated and collaborative experiences among editor, publisher, advertiser, printer, distributor and reader. To make magazines great again, make the magazine experience great again.

I won't quote the rest, but it's worth reading. Some key points: print magazines need good paper these days (I'd argue that genre fiction magazines may be exceptions); magazines have life cycles—most have “times to die”; print should coexist with digitals—but digital magazines tend to become something other than magazines.

## **Other Media**

It's amusing to see how many items no longer seem worth noting a few years later—even after I'd done a preliminary pass. But a few remain...

## *Samsung-funded study finds certain 3D video causes extra eye strain, fatigue*

An oldie but a goodie, this Casey Johnston article on [July 22, 2011](#) at *ars technica* considers a UC Berkeley study with 24 participants watching 3D and 2D video clips.

The participants responded that they experienced more eye strain and fatigue from the video with different vergence and focal distances, a feature of 3D that has long been supposed to cause eye strain (particularly when the two distances did not mimic a realistic portrayal of three dimensions). The self-reported differences were not drastic, but they were significant.

Seems to me 2011 was still a time when we were assured that our next TV would be 3D, as would all new video, whether we liked it or not. Apparently we didn't like it. Seen many new 3D TVs lately?

## *Why BuzzFeed is the Most Important News Organization in the World*

If that seems like a startling and possibly improbable headline, I can only say that Ben Thompson's [March 3, 2015](#) story at *Stratechery* is, at least, interesting. Persuasive? I'm less certain. It may depend in part on what "important" and "news" mean to you.

Before deciding what I think about this claim, I went to BuzzFeed.com's home page, something I rarely do. So what's the news on Tuesday, November 21 at 2:15 p.m. PST?

"Kim Kardashian West Said Kanye's Sometimes Bothered By Her Sexy Instagram Photos." That's *clearly* the most important current news, as it takes up half of the screen. The only other items in the primary column on the first page are "32 Pieces Of Clothing Under \$25 That You'll Actually Want To Wear" and "This Girl Found Out She Was Being Adopted, And It Was The Greatest Gift." The only two other stories before a morass of ads and other stuff are "12 Things I Learned On 'Adam Ruins Everything' That Made Me Want To Punch A Wall" and "Here's The Science Of Why You Get A Tummy Ache From Overeating On Turkey Day"—but wait, that last story has a "BuzzFeed.News" heading over it.

And, if I look at the top right, there's a narrow column also headed "BuzzFeed.News" with three stories:

"SCOTUS Chief Justice John Roberts issued a rare statement to defend the judiciary against Trump," "At least 164 people got sick in a salmonella outbreak linked to raw turkey. Make sure you follow these steps to keep your Thanksgiving safe," and "The creator of 'Game of Thrones' says the upcoming HBO prequel won't have any Targaryens or dragons or even the Iron Throne." So *that's* the most important news for today?

Oh, but there's also a "News" tab—and clicking on that gets the *real* news—the Big Story being "Instagrammers Use California Fires To Sell Stuff, Post Nudes."

Enough. BuzzFeed may be many things, but to call it an important news organization is to redefine “news” in a way I find unpalatable. So what is Thompson actually getting at?

Perhaps the single most powerful implication of an organization operating with Internet assumptions is that iteration – and its associated learning – is doable in a way that just wasn’t possible with print. BuzzFeed as an organization has been figuring out what works online for over eight years now, and while “The Dress” may have been unusual in its scale, its existence was no accident.

What’s especially exciting about BuzzFeed, though, is how it uses that knowledge to make money. The company sells its ability to grok—and shape – what works on social to brands; what they don’t do is sell ads directly...

[B]y not making money from display ads, and by extension deprioritizing page views, BuzzFeed incentivizes its writers to fully embrace Internet assumptions, and just as importantly disincentivizes pure sensationalism. There is no self-editing or consideration of whether or not a particular post will make money, or if it will play well on the home page, or dishonestly writing a headline just to drive clicks. The only goal is to create – or find – something that resonates.

There’s more to the argument, and maybe you’ll buy it, but what I see is an attempt to define news—and later in the story, “great journalism”—as whatever people click on and link to. Maybe he’s right; I hope not.

*The brief, wondrous life of the DVD*

Alex McLeevy posted this on [June 11, 2015](#) at *AVClub*, and it’s...strange. Consider the second paragraph, after a first that concludes that “DVD” officially stands for nothing:

It’s a fitting acronym, then, for a technology so quickly fading into insignificance. DVD is on its way out. Twenty years after its invention, it’s rare to find new releases of DVDs that aren’t bundled with a Blu-ray of the same content. While new machines—PlayStations, Xboxes, etc.—will still play DVDs, thanks solely to the Blu-ray innovation of using the same equipment to maintain playability for the outdated format, it’s a disappearing medium, already halfway to the same graveyard that has claimed Betamax, VHS, Laserdisc, and HD-DVDs.

Yabbut...sound and visual media *typically* last about 20 to 25 years before a new version comes along—and, of course, DVDs will continue to be playable (as will CDs) on every single Blu-ray and UHD Blu-ray player.

Typically? Cylinders became moderately widespread around 1891. Discs emerged around 1901 (no backward compatibility there!), with the first Victrola in 1906. *Electrical* recording became commercial in 1925. LPs didn’t emerge until 1948. Stereo LPs happened much faster, becoming dominant in the early 1960s. While there were other, earlier digital audio

formats, the first widely-successful one, CDs, emerged in...the early 1980s. Sense a theme here? (For various reasons, the logical successor to CDs—SACDs and DVD-Audio—never really took off, although SACDs also haven't disappeared.)

Ah, but video is different! That's why VHS emerged in 1976 and DVD emerged in 1995. That it's starting to fade in 2015, with Blu-ray and streaming becoming more popular, is no great surprise—but in this case it's an odd sort of fading, given backward compatibility. And of course it is a speedup, since Blu-ray emerged in 2006 (and wiped out its competitor, HD DVD, in 2008) and UHD Blu-ray in 2016.

It's an odd article in many ways—but not that unusual. Consider:

Digital storage technology is rendering hard copies of software and content obsolete. Being able to keep your music, movies, games, and books in your hardware system—or better yet, the cloud—is creating a concomitant desire to be done with yet another bulky material object. Obviously, fetishists for material goods will maintain the survival, however minimal, of the format. Just as there are those who celebrate the retro pleasures of vinyl or the cassette tape, there will be a home for DVD, even as Blu-ray eventually follows it to oblivion in the popular marketplace.

I don't believe I've ever been called a fetishist before!

And this:

When the World Wide Web started its march to ubiquity in the late '80s and early '90s, it allowed vast amounts of content to be available in the home of anyone who could afford a computer and a phone line.

Let's talk about the growing ubiquity of the web in the late 1980s. It was an unusual form of ubiquity, since no browser was available to the public before 1991 and the first server outside Europe went online in either December 1991 or early 1992. Google wasn't started until 1998; Facebook didn't become available outside academia until 2006; Internet Explorer didn't become a standard part of Windows until 1995—and Netscape emerged in 1994. In other words, the article's history is just plain wrong, in a way that should be implausible for a hip digital-savvy “everything ~~on somebody else's computer~~ in the cloud” journalist.

Much of the article seems to be a tribute to bonus content (and an almost certainly specious claim that the internet caused bonus content to happen), and you can read that on your own. I mostly found this piece dismissive, ahistorical, and just plain sad. And, to be sure, *wrong*—as you can see in the final paragraph:

Now the DVD breathes its last, with more and more people purchasing online copies of mainstream entertainment, while film aficionados choose the superior quality Blu-ray as **the last guard of the old hard-copy formats**. It's worth remembering that the scientific innovation and subsequent cultural landscape that is burying the medium is the same

one that spawned its defining quality—the something extra. If anything, the DVD will stand as perhaps the first example of a mass format created, nurtured, and ultimately rendered obsolete by the digital transformation of culture. Those who in the future treat the discs the way current fans of outdated mediums treat 8-tracks and reel-to-reel players may have different, more sentimental or fetishistic reasons for adapting it. As capitalism responds to the crisis of finite resources in a finite world by literally creating new space in which to produce and store content, the DVD will mark the passing of an era. Call it the “blow into the cartridge” generation: a tangible format that still required tangible care. [Emphasis added.]

This article appeared on June 11, 2015. Final specifications for UHD Blu-ray were revealed on May 12, 2015, and the first UHD Blu-ray discs emerged March 1, 2016. A journalist writing the elegy for “the last guard of the old hard-copy formats” should have known better.

Oh, sigh, here’s an item saying that magazines have all died as have print newspapers and what we all need to do is...never mind. Deleted.
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### *Print is dead. Long live print.*

Set aside the horrendously clichéd title of this Michael Rosenwald essay from the [Fall/Winter 2016 Columbia Journalism Review](#). It’s an interesting piece, beginning with Roger Fidler’s semi-conversion:

**Roger Fidler is a forefather** of digital journalism. In the early 1980s, he wrote and illustrated an essay on the future of news...

In Fidler’s vision of the future, news and information were headed to the nascent internet, where stories would be instantly published from one computer to millions more, eliminating the need to operate an expensive press run by expensive workers. A tablet, he thought, was the perfect device to replace paper...

Now, Fidler wonders if he was wrong. “I have come to realize that replicating print in a digital device is much more difficult than what anybody, including me, imagined,” he told me this summer, and he wasn’t just referring to tablets. Fidler is equally concerned about the reading experience and economics of all forms of digital news. Now retired from teaching journalism at the University of Missouri, he has watched newspapers struggle to move their content and business online. The idea of interactive advertising has clearly not panned out, he says. Readers are annoyed and distracted by it, so many block it with browser extensions. He and others have observed that print offers a limited amount of ad space, which is infinite online, driving down ad prices and sending publishers racing around a hamster wheel. To make money, they need more content to advertise against. Some of this content is—how to put this?—lousy, giving readers another reason not to pay for news.

Fidler loves his iPad—and retains subscriptions to three *print* newspapers. Rosenwald calls himself a “tech dork” and has been an enthusiastic supporter of digital news at *The Washington Post*, “so much so that my colleagues and bosses might be surprised I’m even posing the following question: What if everything we’ve been led to believe about the future of journalism is wrong?”

The problem, in a nutshell, is that no digital-news strategy has equaled print newspapers in revenue or readership—and it’s increasingly questionable that The Millennials are really All Digital, All the Time.

Iris Chyi, a new-media researcher at the University of Texas, has concluded that “the digital shift has been a disaster for media organizations, and that there is no evidence online news will ever be economically or culturally viable. ‘They have killed print, their core product, with all of their focus online,’ Chyi told me in an interview.”

The numbers are a bit startling: “the (supposedly dying) print edition still outperforms the (supposedly hopeful) digital product by almost every standard, be it readership, engagement, advertising revenue,” or willingness to pay. As to *The Kids These Days*:

Chyi’s findings show that among 18- to 24-year-old news readers, 19.9 percent had read the print edition of a newspaper during the past week.

Less than 8 percent read it digitally.

The article notes that there’s broader context: print book sales are rising while ebooks have leveled off or declined; university students prefer printed textbooks over digital ones; independent and used bookstores are on the rise. And, apparently, newspaper publishers are so committed to their oh-so-successful strategy of shutting down print editions, firing most reporters, and Raking It In from digital that they’re simply ignoring evidence to the contrary—indeed, one newspaper association asked Chyi to write a research synopsis, then refused to distribute it because it would tell publishers what they didn’t want to hear.

There’s more; it’s an interesting essay.

### *What If the Newspaper Industry Made a Colossal Mistake?*

This essay by Jack Shafer on [October 17, 2016](#) is very much a companion piece to the essay just discussed, based on some of the same research. The first two paragraphs:

What if almost the entire newspaper industry got it wrong?

What if, in the mad dash two decades ago to repurpose and extend editorial content onto the Web, editors and publishers made a colossal business blunder that wasted hundreds of millions of dollars? What if the industry should have stuck with its strengths—the print editions

where the vast majority of their readers still reside and where the overwhelming majority of advertising and subscription revenue come from—instead of chasing the online chimera?

Shafer believes in newspapers:

These findings matter because conventional newspapers, for all their shortcomings, remain the best source of information about the workings of our government, of industry, and of the major institutions that dominate our lives. They still publish a disproportionate amount of the accountability journalism available, a function that's not being fully replaced by online newcomers or the nonprofit entities that have popped up. If we give up the print newspaper for dead, accepting its demise without a fight, we stand to lose one of the vital bulwarks that protect and sustain our culture.

Without rehashing the same findings, it's worth noting that, despite plunging from \$22.8 billion in 2010 to \$16.4 billion in 2014, print-newspaper revenue still represented 82% of total newspaper revenue. (The peak was probably around 2007, with \$55.6 billion revenue.)

It's easy to forget that it wasn't just Craigslist destroying classified-ads revenue that hurt print newspapers. A lot of it was that daily papers were such cash cows, with 25% to 35% profit margins, that companies paid way too much, frequently debt-leveraged, to buy them—and those companies appeared and, with a few exceptions, appear more likely to gut the actual news operations and go digital whether it makes sense or not than to accept the 5% profit margin that's typical of major companies.

Another good piece, worth reading.

### *Small-market newspapers in the digital age*

This *long* report by Christopher Ali and Damian Radcliffe appeared [November 15, 2017](#) at the *Columbia Journalism Review*, and I won't attempt to discuss the whole thing—all 23,700-odd words of it. It's the result of an extensive study of local newspapers with circulations under 50,000, and while there are more than 1,200 such *daily* papers and more than 5,600 such weeklies, they tend to be ignored in most newspaper research.

To give a taste, here are the first couple of sentences from each of the key findings:

1. We need to talk about the experience of local newspapers in a more nuanced manner. There is a plurality of experience across the newspaper industry, not to mention across small-market newspapers operating in different towns across the United States...
2. Local newspapers may be in a stronger position than their metro cousins...
3. Change is coming to smaller papers, but at a slower pace...

4. The consolidation of main street is changing local advertising markets. Although local businesses may be more likely to retain traditional analogue advertising habits, the increasing homogeneity of our consumer experience (manifest, for example, in the rise of Amazon and Walmart) is reshaping local advertising markets...

5. Financial survival is dependent on income diversification. The evolution of local advertising markets and, in particular, the consumer retail experience makes it increasingly important that local newspapers continue to explore opportunities to broaden their revenue and income base...

6. There is no cookie-cutter model for success in local journalism. Each outlet needs to define the right financial and content mix for itself...

7. The newspaper industry needs to change the “doom and gloom” narrative that surrounds it. While acknowledging that the future for small-market newspapers will continue to mirror the rockiness of the industry sector at large, our research shows that there is cause for optimism...

And perhaps that optimistic note (backed up by considerable research) is a good place to conclude this roundup.

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## Masthead

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