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### The Superiority of the Printed Word

As we stand at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century we find our lives becoming more integrated with technology. This is especially true when it comes to the way we consume mass media. One of the more popular mediums is books. We've heard that old phrase "technology is the wave of the future," but this is not yet the case when it comes to books and the role libraries play in our lives.

There appears to be a common misconception that technology, and more specifically communication technology, is somehow a form of interpersonal communication.

*Interpersonal communication*, as Watson and Hill (2000) point out, is "that which occurs between two or more people" and is contrasted with intrapersonal communication, or "what you say within or to yourself." While technology has affected the way we communicate, it's still only a tool at our disposal to facilitate communication and is clearly not a form of communication itself. At its very basic level communication is the transmission of a message from a source to a receiver (Baran, 2004). This whole communication process happens when a source sends a message through a medium to one or more receivers. Technology provides the medium with which the message is sent. This is where we can find technology's role in our society.

We are an information society and as such we rely on technology as a vital tool to disseminate information rapidly. An example of interpersonal communication employing technology as the medium could be using one of the popular "instant messaging" services

such as America Online's AIM or MSN's messenger. Moreover, technology is widely used to disseminate mass media, such as a consumer reading the news on CNN.com or downloading the latest Stephen King novel.

The particular aspect of electronic books versus more traditional printed books is an example of how society is responding to new communications technology. Currently in society reading an e-book seems to be more of a fad or something for the elite rather than a viable form of communication technology for the masses. It does, however, prompt debate among many librarians and patrons about which is superior. This is not to say that traditional books and e-books do not share similar features.

In order to understand the similarities better, the term "e-book" must first be defined. In an article published in the *Serials Librarian*, Susan Cleyle (2002, p. 281-292) quotes David Dorman's definition of an e-book: "What we now call e-books are actually electronic versions of printed books." Cleyle also states that the book still remains a book no matter its medium. She concludes by saying, "It will only be how we read it that has changed." Cleyle's statement points out the major similarities between electronic and printed books. For example, if you read the latest John Grisham novel in print format, the book has a cover with a picture and pages with words. Similarly, the electronic format of the same book still would have its cover with the picture as well as the words contained in the book. Thus, the printed books and the e-book contain images and words displayed on a surface, be it paper or computer screen or on the screen of your PDA.

According to NetLibrary, a distributor of e-books to libraries, e-books are much more powerful than traditional books ("FAQ," 2004). The major advantage of e-books over their print counterparts is that e-books can take advantage of the computer's features. They can contain not just words and static images but also audio (especially good for the blind) and video components, bringing the book you are reading to life. Moreover, the print of e-books

can be enlarged to the specifications of the reader, opening the door for the visually impaired. For example, the Adobe Acrobat Reader, which uses the Internet PDF standard, contains such a zoom feature. Also because the e-book is electronic, your only page limit is by the space on your hard drive. And if you have an Internet connection the e-book can contain links to outside sources for more information on the book's topic. As an example, if you were reading this essay as an electronic text the links contained herein would actually be "live" and could be connected to the Internet and directly to the sources.

E-books are, however, on equal footing with their print counterparts in some respects. Just as books come in all shapes and sizes, electronic resources are not all created equal. One might, for instance, get the impression that if a resource is on the Internet it is accessible to everyone at the same time. For example, EBSCOHost is an open resource to everyone on the DMACC campus. In theory an entire class on campus could be able to view an article on EBSCOHost at the same time, each on their own individual terminals. This is not necessarily the case with e-books. According to NetLibrary, only one person may view an e-book volume at a time. Just like a regular book, if a library finds a demand for an e-book it must purchase additional copies of it ("FAQ," 2004). Additionally, the "live" links in an e-book require the computer or PDA to have Internet access, so if you are reading your e-book in the park you better hope that the park has wireless Internet access or otherwise the e-book's links are useless.

In still other respects the printed book is superior to its electronic counterpart. First, there is only one "platform" for the printed book, which is paper, and the only software needed for a printed book would lie with the publisher and the actual printing of the book itself. The e-book, on the other hand has had over 15 different formats and readers, ranging from ASCII text to PDF to Microsoft's Reader (Slowinski, 2003). Having multiple platforms and formats creates a logistical problem for the user since the majority of the file

formats are not interchangeable. For example if you downloaded a book for the Microsoft Reader, you cannot take that same e-book and expect it to work using Adobe Acrobat's reader.

Printed books are one of the most popular gifts to buy. This is because they are usually relatively inexpensive and there are no accessories required. Now try this with an e-book. While buying the e-book itself may not stop you, don't forget that you may have to provide the person with the hardware as well which could potentially cost you well over \$100 depending on what type of device you get the person. Moreover, you might also have to figure out how to transfer the e-book from your computer to the person's reader.

Another advantage of the printed book is its tangibility. You can feel the pages in your hand and bend the corners if you choose. You can also make notes in the margins of a book and highlight your favorite sections, which college students often do. If you need to, you may also make a photocopy of a page or chapter for a class and future reference. But it's a monumental task to do the exact same thing with an e-book. According to NetLibrary, e-book users may print out a few pages but extensive printing is not permitted. ("FAQ," 2004) While you may be able to make marginal notes with an e-book, your notes may not be there the next time you view the page depending the intelligence of your reader. Another popular thing for college students to do is utilize "post-it" notes in books. This would be rather hard to do in an e-book. Even though the technology is there to do so, using "digital post-its" can be cumbersome, blocking important text depending upon the screen size.

With the rapid proliferation of technology companies, the e-book readers and various formats are always in a state of flux, and so what works now may not work at this time next year. Their printed counterparts, however, have lasted throughout history. Today you can still find and read copies of the Guttenberg Bible, which was printed in 1456 and was the first book ever published.

Still another advantage of a printed book is its portability. Imagine taking your favorite John Grisham e-book to the beach. Suddenly the batteries die in the reader and the screen flickers off. Unless you brought batteries with you, now you're stuck at the beach staring at blank screen. Not so with printed books. You can take them anywhere at anytime. Since they don't require power you can go to the most remote area on earth and still be able to read and enjoy them. Something some people like to do is read while they take a bath. You may think twice before taking your reader in with you. At the very least, dropping your electronic reader in the water could prove to be expensive, if not fatal.

While there are distinct advantages to the electronic book, until there is further advancements with the technology, such as electronic ink being developed by E-INK, which will eventually allow any hard surface to become an LCD like screen (Weiss, 2004) the printed book will remain the norm for the foreseeable future.

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