

The power of print

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One of the privileges of being involved with UKSG publications, is that I'm exposed to lots of excellent writing and features about communications and information. As an information professional myself and also a student of the information society, this has become a wonderful professional and scholarly resource over the years and one for which I am very grateful. The online nature of our publications, *UKSG eNews* and *Insights*, means that this wealth of information and scholarship is freely available at our fingertips to make use of anytime and anyplace. "So what?" I hear you say, "that's the nature of our work" and indeed, as publishers and information professionals that is the exactly the nature of our work. We work online and we publish online. However, a thought occurred to me recently about how easily and seamlessly our respective sectors have made the moves from print only, to print and electronic and now to electronic only. The old favourite '[medieval helpdesk](#)' video sprang to mind, which as you probably know presents a parody on how used we have all quickly become to working online and working with digital information. But this got me thinking. As academic libraries and academic publishers, online publishing and online access to scholarly communications is now normal everyday practice and we would not expect anything different, but do our users and institutions feel the same? The answer to this lies with the institution and the audience.

As an academic librarian I have worked in arts and social science dominated institutions over the last few years having moved into this environment from a more polytechnic STEM oriented institution. Consequently I am conscious that the demand for all scholarly communications to be digital is not consistent throughout the whole university sector. On moving to an arts university I became very aware of a reliance on print resources that I had not previously encountered. A previous [UKSG eNews editorial](#) written by a colleague of mine illustrates this appetite for print media in arts education. In such an environment books are desired and consumed by students not just for the information they contain, but also as the physical objects that they are and therefore print media is still thriving, even in a 'digital-first' library world.

Outside academic publishing, print monographs, and print media in general, are also surviving (and thriving) in the public library sector. Interestingly the digital information explosion is largely responsible for this. Within our modern day information society, [information and data production increases exponentially each day](#), resulting in a potentially unmanageable amount of information being produced and disseminated every day. The average member of the public is overwhelmed by this mass information production and struggles to consume it effectively and efficiently as a result. The traditional primary role of public libraries has always been an epistemic one, where citizens could access knowledge and information (in multiple formats) in order to learn and develop themselves and the information society and digital age in which we live requires libraries to maintain this role. Public libraries are in an ideal position to do this and to support the public in navigating and consuming information in the digital world, and this is where print media is making a comeback.

The [recent public library crisis in the United Kingdom](#) has also played a part in the resilience of print. Sadly many public libraries have closed during recent years, due to local authorities being unable to justify their expense when setting budgets. Part of the justification for such extreme decisions is the ill-informed rhetoric that "*all information is available on the internet anyway*". Whilst it cannot be denied that digital information has had a massive impact on the production of print, the concept of complete replacement of print is still as far away (and as far-fetched) as it has ever been.

It took a long time to for government and external action to be realised, but the closure of so many libraries in the United Kingdom has ultimately led to some positive interventions by well-meaning advisors such as the [independent review of public libraries in England](#) conducted in 2014. Following this, public libraries were implored to shift their service models to deliver more digital services and to put digital citizenship and digital inclusion at the heart of their offer. Consequently the current [Libraries Deliver](#) manifesto, the Scottish Library and Information Council [National Strategy for Public Libraries](#) and [guidance from the CarnegieUK Trust](#) have all helped to get public libraries to re-position themselves in the hearts of their communities. In doing so, public libraries now promote themselves differently and whilst the [number of library visits and book issues have decreased during recent years](#) (because there are fewer libraries) people are still making lots of use of libraries and accessing their digital and community services, as well consuming the information and knowledge made available to them.

There is still a misconception that most people consume this information through digital platforms and channels and that now public libraries provide gateways for this. However, during my own [doctoral research](#) I have found that print media is as important to public library users as digital information resources, if not more important. Even amongst the new and diverse range of services that libraries now offer (eg access to computers, digital citizenship support, community groups, mental-health and wellbeing initiatives, etc) library users still regard the provision of printed books as a primary function of the library. My research findings suggests that rather than a simple sentimental attachment to print books (another ill-advised misconception) library users actually relate the use of printed books to learning and literacy and to educational development.

This role of public libraries has never disappeared and children's librarianship is as important as ever in respect of reading and literacy. Contrary to popular belief, children are not learning to read by accessing computers, but by accessing books. Similarly the overwhelming amount of information being produced online, means that public library users expect their libraries to help them navigate this by making printed digests of this information available through textbooks, newspapers, monographs and printed reference collections. This in turn allows library users to participate as citizens in their societies and communities, and it is this societal function which public libraries now tend to focus on. But the provision of printed information resources lies at the centre of this.

In summary, the external environment and the recent public library crisis has meant a renaissance for print monographs and printed media in this public library sphere. Information production and development is perpetual and digital information is continual and ubiquitous, but we must never underestimate the role of print in this environment. Print allows us to learn to read, to develop and participate. Print continues to be resilient in the information society, and in doing so has become an even more powerful format for information dissemination and consumption.

These views are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the views of UKSG.



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