



The printed book is a very persistent thing

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Karen Carden, University of the Arts London

The printed book is a very persistent thing. It seems determined to evade obsolescence and survive, despite the continual predictions of its imminent demise. And sometimes it is important for what it *is*, not just what it contains.

I am a librarian with more than twenty years' experience of listening to people inside and outside the profession discuss print in doom-laden terms, and reading about the demise of the printed book. Back in April 2009 I was at an international conference of publishers, librarians and scholars in Oxford (Second Exploring Acquisitions Conference, 15 – 17 April 2009) where we had a very lively debate in the Oxford Union on the subject 'The house believes the book is dead'. This was tremendous fun and fervently argued on both sides – there was exuberance, emotion and passion and quite a lot of laughter. I think the proposers won narrowly according to the technical rules of the game, but it was a debate that really lit up the room and made me think differently. I particularly remember the French-Canadian academic Jean-Claude Guédon shouting from the gallery "The book is dead, long live the book!" and everyone cheering.

There isn't much easily discoverable record from this event but I eventually found an article in *Against the Grain*, ['The Great Debate: An Introduction to the 2nd Exploring Acquisitions Conference'](#), by Robin Champieux and Steven Carrico. This has a couple of great quotations from the debate itself, one of which – credited to Bryan Ward-Perkins, a historian and archaeologist from Trinity College Oxford – I absolutely love:

“Books are durable, you can skim through them, go back and forth, which is how people read. With e-books you must scroll. Need I remind you, books replaced scrolls; and what is an e-book reader, but simply a glorified scroll?”

I've been thinking about this again lately and I have found that I needed to think about the book *for itself* as well as for the wisdom it contains. This is especially pertinent in the context of the institution that I work in now, where it seems to be an important issue, but I'm sure it applies elsewhere.

I am Resources & Systems Manager at University of the Arts London (UAL). I manage the teams that support and procure our print and e-resources, and the systems we use to discover and manage them. UAL is Europe's largest specialist arts and design university and has around 19,000 students at six colleges – Camberwell College of Arts, Central Saint Martins, Chelsea College of Arts, London College of Communication, London College of Fashion and Wimbledon College of Arts. We teach art, design, fashion, communication and the performing arts.

It's a fascinating (and sometimes challenging) place to work for librarians more used to traditional HEIs. Before UAL I had worked in old and new universities of various kinds – but what they all had in common was a heavy reliance on e-resources and a commitment to continuing and growing that focus, along with a presumption that print would decline. Our students at UAL on the other hand, are enthusiastic users of books which they often use for inspiration rather than discovering them through reading lists or lectures, although of course they do this too. Use of our libraries is rising and we still buy a lot of printed books – e-books too, but there is still a lively demand and often an absolute preference for the print.

In the art and design context, this makes sense. Students are looking for ideas and to express concepts as well as for information or 'content' (we overuse that word in library land in my view, knowledge would be better). They are interested in illustration, they sometimes want 'not-digital' colour reproduction from their sources. They like to browse, and it's great to see them sitting with huge piles of books, seeking inspiration for their work. Art books are often big and heavy, which means they are frequently more easily used within the library space rather than elsewhere. Sometimes they make art *from* books by deconstructing them (hopefully not ours!) and creating something new. And a recent experiment with 24/7 opening at one of our sites led to an explosion in 'making' (ie actually doing) art of all kinds in the library space as it was the only accessible place available to them out of hours. Although the mess was a bit disconcerting for our staff, it's a logical extension of student use of our spaces.

So there's all the above plus the importance of the book as a 'thing' in itself to our students and staff. Sometimes all the interest of a book is in the information or knowledge it contains – so an e-book might be as good as anything (although it might not actually, as even the best of them lacks browsability). But sometimes (and not only in the special or archival sense) the interest to the reader is about the book as an entity – its typography, its covers, its special binding, its glue or endpapers. These are not things that can be reproduced digitally.

Finally, our students and others are *creating* books and other printed things in a couple of ways:

- There is a whole genre of 'thing' called 'artists' books'. These are one-off or very small edition works of art in a book or book-like form – we have a world class collection of these now, from our own students, alumni and others. These are often a bit weird, but are always fascinating.
- People (including our students) are producing, and we are also collecting, 'zines'. This has been going on for some years. These self-published, non-commercial vehicles to share opinions and ideas, not the traditional fanzine although they arise from that tradition. Some of these are online but many are printed and have a physical aspect that won't reproduce digitally.

So for us – and for others – the book persists and thrives and evolves in new ways. And I for one will continue to read the reports of its demise with scepticism.



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