Why We Will Always Need Books

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There's been a lot of talk lately about the 'death of libraries' and the 'death of books' as the Google generation grows up and more resources become available online. This article discusses some of the reasons I think books aren't dead and briefly outlines my views on why libraries will never die It is partly a plea to librarians (in particular those in corporate law libraries) to think about the importance of maintaining their own, in-house, hard-copy collections.

The examples are skewed towards the law library, since that's my current place of work; though the sentiments are influenced by my previous homes-away-from-home (which has included government, academic and public libraries).

So here are some of the reasons I believe that books will never die.

Because not everything is online

Not everything is available on the Internet, and nor (I believe) will it ever be. There is so much new information being created every day, I'm not sure it's possible for society to keep up with capturing it. There are numerous historical digit-isation programs underway; but it is equally important to maintain current collections as well and resources aren't always on our side Striking this balance is difficult when budgets shrink and expectations continue to rise.

Of course we sometimes forget that not every-thing that is online is also free. A recent article – 'The Twenty-First Century Law Library' high-lights this issue particularly well:

One of the reasons that we continue to need print is that all lawyers don't have access to these electronic resources. Some of them go out and practice in small firms that really can't afford the $5 million budget, so that's one reason we also need to keep a variety of formats [1]

And yes, even the new stuff isn't always online. We receive many requests for print journal and newspaper articles every week – most often as a result of our 'current awareness' service. We still need to scan articles from the hard-copy because we simply don't have access to all the resources online – either because they aren't published online or because the cost of accessing them is prohibitive

Because sometimes online doesn't work

We have all experienced slow Internet speeds, time-outs, 'this page doesn't exist' messages and, sometimes, full system crashes. This issue is equally relevant for all types of libraries – what do you do when online is broken or a resource is temporarily unavailable?

It is ludicrous to think that a library must close its doors and stop providing a service because the Internet isn't working If we ever find ourselves sliding towards this point, then we need to step up and provide better training – both for the library staff and for our customers. We need to know – and make sure others know – how to access and use physical resources We must continue to market our print collection – making it easy to locate and use. Strategies could include

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[1] Richard A Danner, S Blair Kauffman & John G Palfrey, 'The twenty-first century law library' (May 2009) 101(2) *Law Library Journal* 143

providing maps, 'popular texts' guides or special training sessions.

Timeliness comes into play as well. We can't necessarily wait for the online access to become available again. A common example we use when training our juniors is "the partner doesn't care that the online version isn't available – they just want the answer and they want it now" – a scenario that's unlikely to change

Because sometimes paper is quicker and easier

Patrick Meyer recently surveyed US law firm librarians about the kinds of research tasks they perform; one of the librarian's comments is worth highlighting here:

> At our law firm, we think print resources are best when an attorney is starting a new, unfamiliar project, or needs to see the 'big picture'. Online is best when the attorney has a pretty good idea of what he/she is looking for. New attorneys seem too unfamiliar with print resources. Also, new attorneys don't seem to be familiar with how to do legal research most cost-effectively [2]

It's true that the initial research stage (or starting-point) is often better performed with print resources. This is accepted by librarians and lawyers alike. When we run our research training with the incoming graduates we ask a senior lawyer to introduce the sessions. They invariably stress the importance of background reading in textbooks (even without any prompting from us)

The results of Meyer's research hints at another important point – a lot of the work we do is time critical. We know that there are other libraries out there maintaining hard-copy collections (eg our Supreme Court libraries); but sometimes we just can't wait the 1-2 hours it would take for someone to visit, locate, copy and return to us. Regardless of the speed factor, we need to recognise that in the bigger picture this isn't an efficient use of company time.

I acknowledge that the situation in US law libraries as surveyed by Meyer is slightly different to ours – the fee-per-search model is much more common. That's not to say that the model won't be adopted in Australia. Indeed, it might be something we need to look out for, considering that the three major Australian legal publishers all have strong ties to the US market. I suspect this means that free-to-use (after the initial purchase – eg of a textbook) resources would be more important in the US – ie the 'cost-effective research' mentioned by the librarian above.

Paul Hellyer in his article 'Reference 2 0' sums up these points neatly:

> it's easy to forget that print sources still offer some advantages. For example, browsing is often more efficient in print than online, since people can usually flip through and skim paper pages faster than Web pages. Browsing in print is especially useful as compared to online retrieval when a user is unsure how to spell the word or name being searched. Moreover, useful features found in print sources are sometimes omitted from their

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[2] Patrick Meyer, 'Law firm legal research requirements for new attorneys' (April 17, 2009) 101(3) *Law Library Journal* 297

online counterparts. Patrons searching in legal encyclopedias are usually best served by an index, but most legal encyclopedias on Westlaw and Lexis don't have this feature. The omission of title pages, publication dates, and page numbers from online sources can frustrate users who need to cite the sources they use.[3]

Because print is more authoritative and reliable

Feedback from the partners in our firm is consistent across the board – they want juniors to start with a textbook, written by an *expert*, to glean the basic legal issues and concepts. The key point is the 'expert'. There is a whole system of checks and balances in place in the print publishing world to prevent false or misleading information reaching the market (though I'm not suggesting it doesn't happen sometimes, but certainly not on a large scale).

We can also be fairly certain that the content of a textbook isn't going to morph into something else or be removed overnight, as often happens online. It actually happened to me quite recently. I was searching for a government document that had been on the department website earlier in the year but when I re-visited the site a few months later the document had been removed. All that remained was a note stating that the department felt that an appropriate amount of time had passed for the public to gain access to the particular item. In this case, I was able to get a copy from another subscription service, but if I worked in a different library without access to the full range of

databases, my only option would have been to contact the department – certainly not an efficient or timely process.

I should clarify that I'm not talking about print reliability verses the various subscription databases or ComLaw or even Austlii. I'm talking about the proliferation of information on the Internet that is false and misleading (either by mistake or by intent). Anybody can publish on the web these days and it's becoming easier (and cheaper) to do so. Of course, this is partly an information literacy issue. We should be teaching people how to evaluate online resources, just as we were taught how to evaluate print resources (remember high-school history and all that time we spent discussing the value of primary vs secondary resources?).

Because we still do a lot of historical research

At least in law libraries we do. I also know that the most popular collections in my last public library were the hard-copy local history and genealogy resources – for the same reason – history. There doesn't seem to be a week goes by that we aren't asked to "trace this section of an Act back to its insertion in the 1890s" or "what were the company's obligations in the 1960s?" This sort of work usually can't be done online and we can't always rely on external sources (such as the Supreme Court libraries) to help. I mentioned the time critical element earlier but we also need to consider the fact that these institutions are no doubt struggling for space themselves and may not be able to hold onto everything we cherish forever.

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3   Paul Hellyer, 'Reference 2.0: The future of shrinking print reference collections seems destined for the Web'
     (March 2009) *AALL Spectrum* 24-27.

Because some people just prefer paper

Reading a textbook is often easier and more accessible than anything online. In my workplace, it's often older staff that prefer the hard-copy, but, perhaps surprisingly, many of our juniors also prefer the book.

Personally, I know I have trouble reading from the screen for long periods and find that I don't retain information as well. E-book readers might go some way to solving this because they are much easier to read from than an LCD computer screen. As an aside, Ian McShane, in a recent Radio National segment on the *Future of Libraries*,[4] made an interesting point about e-book readers -- think about how much they are trying to replicate the book and the particular physical experience of reading a book that we are all used to. He points out that we shouldn't underestimate the cultural significance of the 'book' as a physical specimen.

And what about advanced (or what I call 'messy') research? I mean the kind of research where you have 3 or 4 books open at the same time and dip into each as needed – either to compare their content or quickly cross reference something. This type of research isn't easy on a computer or an e-book reader.

Moving away from the professional setting for a moment – into the world of leisure reading. There is one reason I can think of for buying myself an e-book reader – international travel. I can definitely see the advantage of not having to lug multiple books around and add weight to my luggage. Plus, on my recent trip I had to leave my books behind as I finished them, which tugged at the heart-strings a little (I'm sure other librarians feel the same way about giving away their books). I wouldn't have had to do that if I had an e-book reader. But what do you do when the plane is taking off or landing and you're not allowed to use electronic devices? That is when I want to read most of all – to distract myself from the possibility of the plane hurtling to the ground in a ball of flames. Maybe airlines will relax this requirement? After all, they say that mobile phones don't actually interfere with the equipment any more (or maybe they never did).

Despite these advantages, I can't move past my love of the physical experience of reading a book – holding it, turning the pages, using bookmarks and all the rest. I'm not sure what lies at the heart of this feeling – maybe it's simply comforting. In her article 'Why I prefer hardcopy', Katrina Hughes makes the salient point that you also don't have to be as careful about *where* you read a hard-copy item – eg at the beach or in the bath. This is an excellent point – I certainly wouldn't risk my kindle or i-pad that close to the water.

The times they are a-changin'

Despite my adamant stance that the book (and the library) isn't dead, I do realise that things have changed, and they will continue to change. Nor am I am afraid of (or opposed to) these changes.

For a start, the kinds of tasks we use our hard-copy resources for are evolving. For example, these days it's much more about historical and background work than detailed case law research using the old print annotators.

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[4] ABC Radio National, *The Book Show*, 30 June 2010 (Ian McShane) <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/bnooksow/stories/2010/2940701.htm>.

Another obvious change is the choice many libraries are making not to continue providing access to both print and online versions of an item. My library, as one example, has in the last few years cancelled our print holdings of two encyclopaedic resources – Laws of Australia and Australian Current Law Reporter. These resources are examples of the changes in the type of research we can now do more easily (and probably more efficiently) online.

The proliferation of technology-based library blogs is a more subtle indication of how our own industry is changing. Phil Bradley recently posted an item about the benefits of an e-book reader on his blog:

> No lugging the book around. No keeping an eye on it. No trying to remember where I was. I wanted it, I read it. How much easier can it get? And what's more – I no longer have to worry about having the book cluttering up the shelves gathering dust. Why on earth would I want the physical item? Makes no sense to me.[5]

It's important for people like me, who prefer the print, to remember that there are people like Phil, who prefer the online. I also recognise that there is nothing wrong with these divergent views – diversity is what makes the world go around and keeps us on our toes.

During my career so far, I've noticed that it's becoming increasingly common (and worrying – I feel so old at times) to deal with people who don't even remember a time when the Internet didn't exist. In my library, we would all be rich if we had a dollar for every time someone comes to us confused as to why they can't find a pre-1990s EM or government report online.

What about our future?

So, here is where I get all misty-eyed and emotional. Just kidding. I simply want to make a couple of points about where I think our future lies.

One key reason I believe libraries will survive is their physical beauty. Many libraries are special places to just be in (think of the State Library of Victoria, for one). But it's not just the architecture that creates the beauty. It's the whole design of the place – these are institutions dedicated to knowledge – to connecting people with information in whatever way they want to connect. There aren't many (or possibly any) other institutions in our society that offer the same all-encompassing and all-welcoming atmosphere.

Then there's the numbers – they speak for themselves. If you visit the State Library or even Melbourne City Library you will notice that the places are practically bursting at the seams with people. Many are there to use the computers, many need study space, some use them as a meeting place, some as a refuge, and still others to access the hard-copy collection. It's ridiculous to suggest that public libraries (or any library) will close due to the Internet age. All the literature I have read suggests the opposite – a growth in the popularity and different uses of the 'library'.

As to librarians – there are numerous articles out there already talking about how the profession is

5   Phil Bradley, 'Does the 'e' in ebooks mean easy?' on Phil Bradley's weblog (30 June 2010) <http://philbradley.typepad.com/phil_bradleys_weblog/2010/06/does-the-e-in-ebooks-mean-easy.html>.

evolving. I'll just make one point – the Internet provides access to so much information that it's become overwhelming. People need, and will continue to need, someone to help them wade through and evaluate all this information. This is pretty much the job description of a librarian, isn't it? I'm not suggesting anything radical here – we all know that our skills mean we are perfectly placed to exploit these new opportunities. As an article in the UK *Guardian* so succinctly put it, "Libraries are a bridge between the information-rich and the information-poor".[6] We simply need to ensure that people know about us and how we can help them. That's right, we need to use the 'M' word – marketing.

Finally, some statistics

I thought I should include some statistics to prove I'm not making all of this up. Seriously, though, I was curious to see just how much we did use our hard-copy collection. I work in a library where we are fortunate enough to have an excellent print collection, so, for a 2 week period in June/July I asked our Melbourne reference desk staff to note down the number of requests we received that required the use of it. It turned out that nearly 40% of our requests needed hard-copy resources. The types of request included:

- Journal articles (new & old);
- Cases;
- Textbooks/reference books;
- Newspaper articles; and
- Historical legislation or other historical research

Fort the majority of these requests the information was not accessible online *at all*. In one instance the online version wasn't working; for another the print version was easier to use; and one was due to licensing restrictions on the electronic version. The newspaper articles were all due to the copyright restrictions that Fairfax imposes on its AFR Business publications (the articles are available electronically via an AFR. com subscription, but the cost of this service is prohibitive for every day current awareness/ business development purposes – even in a well-resourced library such as this one)

I also gathered some numbers from our request tracking system. These showed that in the last 4 ½ years around 16% of requests have required the use of our 'Print collection'. I'm no statistician, but even if we skew the numbers in favour of the tracking system and allow for a wide margin of human error, we would still end up with around 20% of our requests requiring the use of print resources, which, in my view, is a significant number

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[6] Ian Clark, 'We still need libraries in the digital age', *The Guardian* (UK), 13 July 2010 <http://www.guardian co.uk/commentisfree/2010/jul/13/internet-age-still-need-libraries>

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