Are E-Books Making Us Stupid?
Why Electronic Collections Mean Trouble for Libraries and Their Patrons

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ABSTRACT

In 2008, Nicholas Carr published a provocative article titled “Is Google making us stupid?” in which he ponders the effect of the internet and electronic sources generally on the brain. This paper discusses one source specifically, e-books, and explores whether libraries are acting wisely by moving from print to electronic book collections. The topic is considered from the vantage point of the library and from that of the patron. Specifically, the prospect of an all or largely all e-book future is considered and whether that future means an end to traditional library collections and services. The potential problems for “deep reading” are also considered, and, specifically, whether e-books can serve as an adequate substitute for patrons who will no longer be able to use electronic collections in the way they once used print. In short, this paper explores whether e-books are making us—librarians and patrons—stupid.

Keywords: Digitalization, Effects of Electronic Books, Electronic Books (E-Books), Electronic Collections, Libraries

INTRODUCTION

In 2008, Nicholas Carr published a provocative article entitled “Is Google making us stupid?” in which he ponders the effect of the internet on the brain. “As the media theorist Marshall McLuhan pointed out in the 1960s,” Carr writes, “media are not just passive channels of information. They supply the stuff of thought, but they also shape the process of thought” (Carr, 2008). Specifically, Carr wondered if his own extensive use of the Internet had been chipping away at his ability to contemplate and concentrate; he also wondered whether or not he was alone in this. Indeed, in his casual discussions with friends and acquaintances, he noted a similar phenomenon—they confessed to an inability to “stay focused on long pieces of writing.”

A recent study by scholars at University College London, apparently supported his informal observations. Computer logs which kept track of what a number of researchers were doing when consulting online journal articles, e-books, and other electronic sources of written information revealed that the researchers in question were exhibiting “a form of skimming activity,” hopping from one source to another and rarely returning to any source they’d already visited. [The subjects] typically read no more than one or two pages of an article or book before they would ‘bounce’ out to another site” (Carr, 2008).
Since concentration and focus have traditionally been regarded as traits necessary for intellectual and scholarly activity, Carr wonders whether electronic media might somehow be antithetical to such essential activities.

Studies such as that emanating from University College, in addition to a widespread nagging sense that users are no longer reading in the way that they once did, recently prompted Eric Schmidt, the 54-year-old chief executive and chairman of Google to express his concern that young people growing up in the mobile and instant information age might indeed experience problems with “deep reading.” "As the world looks to these instantaneous devices... you spend less time reading all forms of literature, books, magazines and so forth," he told the World Economic Forum in Davos. ‘That probably has an effect on cognition, probably has an effect on reading’” (Google, 2010).

Schmidt’s intuition about the effect on reading is supported by a number of studies which indicate that we read online in a way which is different from the way we read print. According to Maryanne Wolf, at Tufts University (and quoted by Carr), “We are not only what we read. We are how we read.” Reading online materials, she explains, results in a reading style which privileges “efficiency” and “immediacy” over deep reading and makes us “mere decoders of information.” Our ability to interpret text, to make the rich mental connections that form when we read deeply and without distraction, remains largely disengaged” (Carr, 2008). Wolf analyses the situation further: “Because we literally and physiologically can read in multiple ways, how we read—and what we absorb from our reading—will be influenced by both the content of our reading and the medium we use” (Wolf, 2010).

Clearly, this unease on the part of some scholars has implications for libraries. The move towards the digitization of journals has been underway for decades, and the next wave—e-books—is here. Yet, as we discard print and head toward an electronic collection of monographs, there is almost a profound silence from information professionals on whether what we are doing is ultimately good for patrons, particularly those who are thereby forced to use e-materials for research and study. There is also remarkably little discussion on whether it is good for libraries.

Eric Hellman, former director of OCLC (Online Computer Library Center) New Jersey, is one of the few voices in the wilderness on this matter. “It’s frustrating to a number of us in the library business that libraries are mostly sitting on the sidelines while technology is tipping towards e-books,” he writes (Hellman, 2010a). Hellman believes that libraries may not even be able to lend books in the future, particularly given the roadblocks thrown up by publishers in this new regime. Indeed, some publishers are now refusing to supply any of the e-books they produce to libraries.

The “Annoyed Librarian,” columnist for Library Journal.com (it’s ironic and telling that we have to depend on electronic media to supply the needed critical assessments of the problem) has also weighed on the future of libraries in the world of e-books. Once books are only available digitally, she notes,

"We’ll have a situation where libraries are useful only as cash cows for publishers, and content is controlled, organized, and made available only as the publishers wish. Forget about selection, because it won’t be possible anymore. Libraries will take the packages of books on offer, or they won’t. Publishers will realize that there’s no point in pretending to sell individual books since they’re just licensing content now. They’ll be doing the selection for libraries, take it or leave it. There will be e-book packages based on obscure categories whose main purpose is to make money. There will be “academic” and “public” packages, but with enough missing from each that libraries will have to buy both to have even remotely comprehensive collections. There will also be current files and back files and every other possible way of dividing up the available books to make the most money from them. No matter what libraries try to do, they’ll end up paying for a lot of junk they"
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