
Point:

The Future of the Book in the Public Library

— Thomas L. Moore

There appear to be two different trends of thought with regard to books in the public library today. One trend says that books in paper will cease to exist; they will become museum pieces in a relatively short time, as electronic format materials will replace them. The other trend is that the traditional book will continue to exist as a viable, and the preferred, format for conveyance of ideas and information. These opposing viewpoints are often represented as being mutually exclusive and at war with each other. In some instances the combat is real. One need only read one article about the controversy at the San Francisco Public Library (“Nicholson Baker is a Luddite”; “The leaders of the San Francisco public library are book burners”) to understand that not only are the two belief systems at odds, but also that they really don’t like each other and occasionally dip to “ad hominum” arguments to prove their points.

Note: The author is in agreement with many points raised by Isaac Asimov in his essay, “The Ancient and the Ultimate,” first published in May 1971 for *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, and anthologized in *Asimov on Science: A 30-Year Retrospective*, Doubleday, 1989.

Rather than spend an excessive amount of time engaged in proving or refuting these positions, I think it might be interesting to spend some time looking at what the ideal reading device of the future might look like. The reason that I would find it interesting to pursue this line of thought is that I believe that reading will continue to be an important activity for humans in both the near and distant future. Looking to our past we can see how important books and reading have been by examining a few quotes from the rich and famous. Erasmus said, “When I have some money, I buy books. If I have any money left over I buy food.” Thomas Jefferson said, “I cannot live without books.” And more recently that great pundit, Groucho Marx, said, “Outside a dog, a book is man’s best friend. Inside a dog, it’s too dark to read.” As I look to the future, the question seems to me, not will books exist, rather what will books look like as they exist in the future? With that premise as the basis for proceeding, I would propose that the design for the book of the future be based on state of the art technologies that are readily available and can be applied to the new reading device with ease. By studying the future of these devices it will be possible to predict the future of the book and the library buildings that will house them.

So, let’s take a peek into the future. Let’s look at and design the ideal reading device for the future. I propose that we start by developing some criteria for this ideal device.

The first criterion is that the reading device must be portable. Portable includes the following features:

- Lightweight (under one pound)
- Smaller than a breadbox
- Self-contained energy source
- Can be carried with one hand
- Wireless

The second criterion is that the reading device must be ecologically friendly. Ecologically friendly includes the following features:

- Made from a renewable resource
- Low energy consumption
- Non-polluting

The third criterion is that the reading device must be economical. Economical includes the following features:

- Low or moderate cost
- No significant problem if lost or stolen as it could be easily replaced
- No additional expense to use the device — it works with what you already have

The fourth criterion is that the device should be easy to use. Easy to use includes:

- Simple to turn off and on
- As it is a reading device, easy to go back to where you left off
- Should be easy on the eyes — adapted to human reading requirements to prevent eye fatigue
- Able to scan content with ease

My children have supplied the fifth criterion to me. My children have been raised in a total technological environment. The oldest is a microbiologist who is familiar with an electron microscope as I am with a pocket knife. He splices genes. I wear jeans. My middle son is a graphic designer. He works on computers designing what you see on computers. When he has to go to the office, he has a three-hour commute on public transportation. He is the one who articulated the fifth criterion to me. My daughter is a junior in college. She is a Graphic Design major with a minor in photography, and seems to live on the Internet. My children, citizens of the technological age all agree. The reading device of the future must have NO BATTERIES!

It seems to me that there might already be a device that meets these criteria. Could it be that the device that I seek has already been invented. Could it be the book? The traditional book, the paperback, the textbook, the romance novel, the beach read — all meet all of the criteria above. There is no reason for technology to replace these marvelous time and travel devices. When movies and radio and television all started to saturate the public marketplace, they were all characterized as a threat to and the end of the book and reading. They did not. One of my favorite replies when asked if I saw the movie, *The Bible* was, “No, but I read the book.”

The new technology will not replace books. These new devices will supplement books, and will do things that traditional books could never do. I do not believe they will make books obsolete, nor will they cause them to disappear.

Considering this, that means that my second question needs to change a little. As I believe books will continue to exist, the question becomes, since there are still books, will there still be libraries?

I believe this is a greater concern. I fear that for reasons that sound good and reasonable, institutions that support books and reading may disappear. In the past several years, some public libraries have closed their doors. They have closed not because the people said that books and reading weren't important. They closed because the people in their communities said they no longer wanted to pay for them through their taxes. This has not been an anti-intellectual movement. It has been an anti-tax movement. I think we can see signs of this all over the land today. From statewide budget cuts in Ohio to no school media centers in much of California. Libraries are not threatened by the new technology. They are threatened because of the way they are funded. Our challenge is not to respond to the new technologies; rather it is

to find ways to convince our citizens that libraries are worth paying for, and to find appropriate ways to pay for them.

So, will libraries exist into the twenty-first century? The answer is, only if we want them to. This we is us, you and I, reader and writer. We are the ones who will determine if libraries remain around for the future. We are the ones who will have to say to our citizens, and our elected and appointed officials, libraries and books are important! We want them to remain an important part of our community. We are willing to pay for them! And we must say this over and over again. We want our children and our children's children to have those marvelous experiences of entering a building full of books and people who read those books. People who entice us to the wonders of the imagination that play inside of our heads as we look at books and discover the joy of reading. B. F. Skinner said, "we ought not to teach our children the great books, we ought to teach them the love of reading."

California State Librarian Kevin Starr, in a speech to the friends of the Newport Beach Public Library, said, "If this were some science fiction fantasy and we only had the Newport Beach Public Library, we could rebuild civilization right here." This would be true for almost every public library in this country. We must continue to support and sustain them. We must speak out as leaders of our communities. Being willing to pay for them isn't enough. We must use our libraries, for if we don't use them, we might indeed lose them.

When I first wrote this article as a speech just two years ago, it seemed adequate to end on an exhortation to read, and to pay for our libraries. Paying for library service has become an even greater problem in the past two years. Every month current library literature highlights major library systems that are reducing hours, or closing for certain days or weeks at a time. These closings and reductions in hours come about not because there is less use of libraries, and therefore they aren't needed as much. They are being closed because there is not enough money available to operate them.

I'm sure we all have seen the sign that says "libraries will get you through times of no money better than money will get you through times of no libraries." The problem with this slogan is that after eliciting a chuckle and a nod, the reader goes on her way without another thought about the importance of libraries. Every scheme that I have seen for establishing permanent funding for public libraries seems to resort to some kind of tax, be it property, sales, income or even alcoholic beverage control taxes. Combined with state and federal aid to libraries, the thought seems to be that these are all that a library will need for the long run.

In the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century, Andrew Carnegie began giving grants to local communities to build public library buildings. Carnegie was aware at that time that long-term funding for the library's operations was going to be a problem. He established as a requirement for receiving one of his grants that each community commit by resolution of the governing authority of the community to supporting the library operations by making an annual grant equal to one-tenth of Carnegie's grant. I had the privilege of being the director of a Carnegie library early in my career. It was constructed in 1903 with \$25,000 granted by Carnegie. The community was required to contribute \$2,500 annually to operate this library. From almost the first year of operation, that was not enough, and the community was always looking for additional money. Similarly, the library that I currently direct was established by a local citizen who gave the money to build the library in honor of his first wife. The local community was asked to support it through a grant from the elected board of the city. The library's benefactor continued to support the library by buying many of the books that were added to the collection on an annual basis. He also built in some

rental retail property that was to continue to support the library for years to come. Alas, this too was insufficient to the cause, as were the grants from the local city and county. One hundred years later we still struggle to find adequate resources to support the operations of the system.

Our predecessors were unable to solve the funding problem. It seems as if we have been unsuccessful in solving the problem as well. Unless we find a solution for long-term financial support for our public libraries that doesn't rely on taxes alone, I believe that public libraries in the United States might disappear just as the dinosaurs did.

Aside from the funding issue, which must be addressed in some way, I would advocate that there is another approach that we should use. One, which I believe would be effective and prevent this extinction from happening. I believe that it is important that public libraries get back to the basics and focus on what it was that caused us to come into existence in the first place. That focus should be on books and reading. We should focus on the young child, introducing these children to books and reading as soon as they are able to hold a book in their hands. We should focus our efforts on the parents of these young children, making our services an integral part of child rearing. We should concentrate everything that we do around books and reading, especially for our youngest citizens.

We must integrate ourselves into every segment of society, all age groups, all ethnic groups, rich and poor alike. We must demonstrate that our services are essential to everyday life. We must meet the everyday reading needs of our citizens by having what they want to read, when they want to read it.

I believe that our profession has gotten sidetracked into a whole series of social issues that have little to do with what we ought to be about. I cannot understand why our professional organization, ALA, would spend over 1.75 million dollars in a losing effort to defend a pornographers right to publish on the Web and allow unrestricted access to that material by citizens of any age, when there are thousands of children who have no access to age-appropriate books at all. I believe we should focus our efforts on providing books and other reading materials to our own communities before we get engaged in broad political issues that weaken our credibility with our local community.

In conclusion, I believe that the book as we know it has a long future and will continue to exist as we know it today. There will be other technologies that will enhance the book, but they will not replace it. The public library will continue to exist only if we do the things necessary to make that happen. Here is the way that I see us, you and me, making this happen. First, we must pay for them. Second, read every day! Read books, and newspapers and magazines and cereal boxes. Read. Go to your local library and check out books and read them. Buy books, and read them. Read to your children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Read to your spouse or significant other. Read! Read! Read! Make reading important by reading. If we do that, we can then make sure that books and the libraries that house them continue to exist far into the future.