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# Remember When Ebooks were all the Rage? A Look at Student Preferences for Printed Text versus Electronic

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# REMEMBER WHEN EBOOKS WERE ALL THE RAGE? A LOOK AT STUDENT PREFERENCES FOR PRINTED VERSUS ELECTRONIC TEXT

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## ABSTRACT

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| Aim/Purpose | In many public and academic libraries, ebooks are being pushed on users mainly due to budgetary and space needs even though readers are still showing a strong preference for print books. |
| Background | Many librarians are focusing on how to get readers to use ebooks when they really should be considering how ebooks fit into learning, whether formal or self-learning, and the preferences that readers show for one format over the other. Library collections since the 1960s have generally focused on a strategy of "give them what they want," but in the case of ebooks, there seems to be a trend of trying to force ebooks on users. |
| Methodology | A survey was given to undergraduate and graduate students at the University of South Florida. |
| Contribution | Our research findings fit with current data that shows a decline in popularity of ebooks and a continued popularity of print books. We would like to convince members of the academy to think about this issue and question the ebooks plans that libraries have on their campuses. |
| Findings | Both undergraduates and graduates strongly preferred print over electronic in the case of textbooks and books for leisure reading. Only journal articles were preferred in electronic form, but from the comments it was evident that articles were printed out and the student used the print copy for studying and research purposes. Reference books were split 50/50 in preference for electronic versus print. |
| Recommendations for Practitioners | Librarians and teachers cannot assume that just because students use their smart-phones that they prefer ebooks. |

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| Recommendation for Researchers | More research is needed on this subject before libraries become too dependent on purchasing large ebook packages from vendors rather than the selection of print books. |
| Impact on Society | The format preferences of readers is important for education and lifelong learning. In the past readers generally shunned microforms whenever possible, and ebooks may follow the same pattern. |
| Future Research | Now that this paper has advanced our understanding of user preferences for books versus ebooks, we wish to expand our research to faculty and widen the geographical areas covered. |
| Keywords | books, ebooks, textbooks, user preferences |

## INTRODUCTION

If one contemplates the case of the many disappearing college and university bookstores, one might conclude that ebooks are still all the rage among young and new adults (Rosen, 2016, p. 5). Conventional library wisdom says, just as reading an e-journal, given the ease of printing from the electronic copy, is generally considered a much better alternative than going to the library to read the print copy, why wouldn't ebooks be more popular than print books.

But 2016 e-book sales tell quite a different story. In November 2016, the American Association of Publishers released a report showing that in the first half of 2016 ebook sales were down 20% ("Ebook sales," 2016). Along with this, a recent Pew study showed ebook usage is down significantly in public libraries where print book circulation far exceeds ebooks (Horrigan, 2016). Even in academic libraries the most recent statistics indicate that the usage of ebooks is at best flat (Ennis, 2016). Based on survey research, a 2016 report of ebooks in academic libraries found that "… print-books are still firmly ensconced in academic libraries, and are preferred by library users – students and faculty – for most kinds of content, although ebooks are favored for reference titles." (Library Journal, 2016, p. 3)

Many recent articles concerning ebooks in libraries conclude that at the outset patrons were fascinated with new e-reading technologies, but after their initial checkout of e-material many returned to reading hard copy print materials and ebook checkouts dropped significantly. Research by multiple authors pinpointed many variables for this but all identified one specific rationale, that is that initially readers were fascinated by the idea of ebooks and with the technology and they checked out ebooks. However, as the fascination wore off readers went back to checking out paper books and ebook circulation dropped significantly (Rosenwald, 2015).

Since statistics from publishers show that ebooks sales are declining as opposed to print, why are many schools, colleges, and universities still pushing e-books over texts? A case in point is ebook usage in Florida public schools, colleges, and universities. A concern for the rising cost of textbooks has not just aided but engendered a veritable rush for institutions to switch from print to digital textbooks. In some cases the switch was optional and in others it was mandated by school administrations or state governments.

For example, the Florida Legislature several years ago mandated that all Florida K-12 school districts use digital textbooks beginning with the 2015–2016 school year (*Florida Statutes,* Title XLVIII, Chapter 1006.29(3)). Children beginning in first grade are issued tablets for all their reading. Of course, if something happens to the tablet, parents are responsible for the replacement costs (which are likely to be far higher than the cost of at least most first-grade books). The Florida Board of Regents is also pressuring but not requiring the state universities under its control to adopt e-textbooks when available. But the pressure is mounting as every semester professors get a report that one or more of their textbook choices are not available as an ebook and wouldn't they like to join the bookstore in badgering the publisher to make the text available as an ebook.?

This rush to adoption of electronic formats has met resistance, and not just among the members of older generations often known for their reluctance to change. According to a recent article in *The Washington Post*: "Textbook makers, bookstore owners, and college student surveys all say millennials still strongly prefer print for pleasure and learning, a bias that surprises reading experts given the same group's proclivity to consume most other content digitally. A University of Washington pilot study of digital textbooks found that a quarter of students still bought print versions of e-textbooks that they were given for free" (Rosenwald, 2015).

Even many librarians are essentially trying for force e-books on users. There are (misguided) articles appearing in the library literature with sections on how to improve user response to e-books. Of course, there are articles from other disciplines with the same theme (Mercieca, 2004). As mentioned in a number of articles, a major incentive for libraries to acquire e-books involves the ever-present space and storage issues. Digital books from one point of view can solve the long-enduring problem of shelf space, and they obviously lack the storage and retrieval problems endemic to print resources. A number of library vendors today are offering mass packages of e-books to libraries. The intent is that the ebooks will replace print materials currently housed in these libraries, freeing up space and meeting a yet to be realized patron preference for ebooks.

This rush to create large digital collections is somewhat analogous to the microfilm/microfiche deluge in the 1970s. Libraries rushed to acquire large sets of journals and documents in microform to fill in gaps in collections and, understandably, materials that were not generally available on the non-antiquarian market. Yet patrons turned out not to be excited by this format. The current rush to replace print seems to be based on an overconfidence as to patron preference for e-books, a preference (if it exists), perhaps based more on curiosity and novelty than actual long-term preference.

As is the case with many university libraries, the University of South Florida (USF) Tampa's Main Library is acquiring greater and greater numbers of books in digital format only at this point, and we are interested in finding out how student preferences fit into or may be cognate with the Library's current acquisitions plan. Brunvand (2015) states that it is not a situation where e-books are inherently bad, but rather that an e-book-only-collection development policy is too much of a blunt instrument when really finesse in selecting the right format is what is really necessary (p. 392). It is a situation perhaps reminiscent of a scene in the movie *Dr. Zhivago* where Omar Sharif returns to his aristocratic family home after the 1917 Russian Revolution only to find it full of strangers, with many different families living in each room. As he is going up the stairs, he says to his brother, now the local Bolshevik commissar, that it is now "better, much fairer" (Lean, 1965).

The true head-shaker about the rush to e-books is that a foundational philosophy of current librarianship is to give the user what they want and need. If you go back far enough in the 20th Century, libraries operated more as educational institutions for those users who had to leave school to work at an early age and were therefore the center for what we now call lifelong learning. Then, as the U.S. population generally became more educated, the philosophy turned to "give them what they want".

However this foundational philosophy is being tempered by real budgetary constraints. Many libraries are embracing anything that reduces cost. Also, ebooks are relatively easy to deal with compared to physical books. No one needs to prepare digital books for circulation or check books in and out. Libraries don't need to shelve ebooks or build more space to house them, or charge fines for overdue materials (because at the end of the loan period, a user simply can no longer access the book), or have replacement costs for lost or stolen books. Fewer employees are needed to deal with ebooks. It would appear that the ease and budget friendliness of the library in dealing with e-books is the real force driving the change to ebooks not user demand.

Fortunately, not all libraries are pushing e-books at the expense of print. One example is the California Digital Library Task Force.

> Print has many rights and powers that e-books don't. We like e-books but we must not allow ourselves to be locked into technology or legal/social paradigms that impair our ability to support open research, teaching, and public discourse of our community. We will favor vendors who support open process of scholarship and long-term preservation so we will not rush into e-books (California Digital Library Ebook Task Force, 2001).

In terms of format, it is the opinion of the researchers that a preference for format is just as important as that of content from the viewpoint of library users. This research is an early start in looking at the preference of users as to e-books versus print books for leisure reading, textbooks and research.

## METHODOLOGY

Two surveys were sent out using Survey Monkey to mostly undergraduates but also to some graduate students to determine preference for electronic versus print materials for leisure reading, textbooks, and class research. The undergraduates were mostly living on campus or residing in the Tampa metropolitan area. The graduate students were mostly online students who live all over Florida, and also included some out-of-state and international students. The undergraduate students were enrolled in USF's Library and Information Science (LIS) 2005, a general information literacy course, which utilizes both face-to-face and online instruction, and is part of the university's general education curriculum. The graduate students were all from the School of Information which includes 2 master's degrees and three post-baccalaureate certificates.

Out of a possible 333 total students (263 undergraduate; 70 graduate), 175 survey responses were received, for an overall 50.3% response rate, which the researchers consider an excellent return rate for a non-required survey response. The differences in responses of the graduate and undergraduate students were not statistically significant, so their responses have been combined in the findings below.

## FINDINGS

As the graduate students were mostly online students who might not have easy, daily on-site access to an academic library, the researchers anticipated that they might indicate a general preference for online materials, but in actuality distance from the campus library not did not affect their preferences for print or electronic. Both groups generally preferred print except in cases where they needed journal articles for class, in which situations they generally preferred electronic journal articles over print, but they report that they generally print them out for reading and research purposes. The first questions on the survey (Table 1) dealt with materials for class work and the second half (Table 2) concerned leisure reading.

As the researchers expected, there was an overwhelming preference for print textbooks. Some students indicated a preference for electronic texts based on cost alone. We note that as e-books continue to become more expensive and approach the price of a print textbooks, this perceived advantage may begin to melt away.

In the open-ended question, i.e., seeking student input as opposed to just preferences, some students stated that they preferred print because they could mark-up and keep better track of where they were in the text. One student wrote, "If I am doing some heavy reading, I prefer print because it does not strain my eyes as it does when I read an e-book. Also, with reading school textbooks, it is easier to read them in print because it is easier for me to turn the page and highlight and underline key words myself. It helps me remember information better."

**Table 1**
**Listed below are types of resources you might use when doing class work. What is your preference when using these sources, print or electronic?**

|  | Print | Electronic | No Preference | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Textbooks** | 79.62%<br>125 | 14.01%<br>22 | 6.37%<br>10 | 157 |
| **Journal Articles** | 17.96%<br>30 | 69.46%<br>116 | 12.57%<br>21 | 167 |
| **Books you can check out of the library** | 60.84%<br>101 | 22.89%<br>38 | 16.27%<br>27 | 166 |
| **Reference Books** | 36.67%<br>64 | 46.67%<br>65 | 16.67%<br>29 | 158 |

Another student commented, "There was not an option to choose both. However, for textbooks, books from the library, and newspapers, I like using both. Electronic is good when using a search function. Print is good for flexibility in where and when you can read. I would have chosen both, and would pay for that flexibility if it were not too much more expensive."

In some disciplines where the textbooks tend to be large and heavy, some students wanted both print and electronic. The print copy was needed for purposes of studying at home or in the dorm while the electronic copy was desired for carrying to and from class. Another case involved a student in biology who did not think that the diagrams in the biology textbook were rendered well enough to follow in the electronic version. There were also a few disability issues where the electronic copy could be "read" with software for the blind or greatly enlarged for those with poor eyesight.

**Table 2**
**For leisure reading, what format do you prefer?**

|  | Print | Electronic | N/A - I do not read for pleasure, only for school! | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Books** | 76.38%<br>122 | 19.69%<br>28 | 3.94%<br>7 | 156 |
| **Magazines** | 74.80%<br>120 | 20.47%<br>29 | 4.72%<br>8 | 157 |
| **Comics or graphic novels** | 56.35%<br>88 | 12.70%<br>21 | 30.95%<br>46 | 155 |
| **Newspapers** | 51.59%<br>77 | 39.68%<br>65 | 8.73%<br>13 | 155 |

When the book is not a textbook, students showed more tolerance for e-books, but not nearly so much as the researchers had expected. One student responded, "I don't like reading off computer

screens, I much prefer the physical book in front of me." Another mentioned that reading off the computer screen too much hurt his or her eyes, so preferred print for all leisure reading.

In marked contrast to book materials, survey respondents did express a strong preference, whether among undergraduate or graduate students, for journals in electronic form. However, as indicated in the comments, many of these students print out the journal articles to make them easier to use and more accessible for class work. Again, they prefer to be able to mark-up the material and to be able to put like materials together on their desks when writing papers. As a student said, "My preferred method of journal use is to skim and scan in an electronic format for relevant content, but then print selected items for research purposes."

Another wrote, "For journal articles, I typically print electronic copies out to have hard print versions. I'm on the computer almost all the time, but for reading, I prefer having it on paper, especially for taking notes directly on the reading material."

## CONCLUSIONS

What we conclude is that students fairly consistently prefer to read long-term value content, such as textbooks and novels, in print form, but in respect of perceived short-term value content, such as news, journal, and magazine articles, the digital format seems more apropos. These results fit in with the trends reported in the media concerning the public and academic library usage statistics for ebooks, where libraries are not in effect forcing ebook usage by purchasing only a small percentage of current materials in print format.

However, even if the library is not trying to force usage by not purchasing very many books in print, many are heavily advertising ebooks over print for budgetary reasons. Ebook packages continue to be attractive to librarians largely because of cost considerations and shelving issues. The students surveyed also wisely recognize that both forms have their respective advantages and disadvantages and do use both formats.

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## BIOGRAPHIES



**Vicki L. Gregory** is a Professor in the School of Information at the University of South Florida, where she was Director of the School from 2001 to 2008. She earned Master's degrees in Library Service and in History from the University of Alabama, and a Ph.D. from Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. She was initiated into Beta Phi Mu in 1996. Prior to coming to the University of South Florida in 1987, she was an academic librarian for 12 years at Auburn University in Montgomery, Alabama, where she was Head of Systems and Operations, which included computer systems, cataloging, acquisitions and serials. Her teaching areas include collection development and management, digital libraries and library management. Her research is based in various areas of collection development and with gender issues in communication as well as concerns in distance education and in accreditation. She is currently working on the second edition of her collection development textbook for Neal-Schuman, an imprint of the American Library Association (ALA). She is a member of and served on the Board of Directors and as Treasurer of the Association for Information Science and Technology. She is also on the Board of the Southeastern Library Association and President-elect of Beta Phi Mu. This is her fourth year on the ALA Reference and User Services Association Notable Books Council. In the recent past, she has served on the ALA Committee on Accreditation (COA), and was Chair of COA from 2010-2012. She is also a member of the Association for Library and Information Science Educators, the Association for Computing Machinery and the Florida Library Association.



**Kiersten Cox** is a Senior Instructor in the School of Information at the University of South Florida. She earned a Master in Library and Information Science degree from the University of Hawai'i and a Master of Arts in International Affairs from Ohio University. She spent many years as a librarian in a variety of settings. She was a research assistant for a Fulbright Scholar which allowed her to live in Indonesia and the Netherlands. She has been teaching in the School of Information at the University of South Florida for over nearly 20 years specializing in teaching information literacy skills to students in an online environment. Her research is based in information literacy and with gender issues in communication. She recently published a chapter in ACRL's *The Discovery Tool Cookbook: Recipes for Successful Lesson Plans.*