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# Academic Library Book Digitization and Contemplative Reading

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**Robin Mark Phillips**

**ABSTRACT**

Since the beginning of this century, academic libraries have been at the forefront of book digitization and access. During this same period, many individuals have made the transition from reading printed materials to reading on screens, which has led to profound shifts in how libraries conceive their mission, structure their spaces, organize their resources, and allocate budgetary funding. This article explores how e-resources impact reading habits and orient readers to approach texts with a mindset of efficiency rather than contemplation. The article proposes how academic librarians can leverage the unique qualities of the physical book to encourage contemplative reading.

## Introduction

At the dawn of the last century, almost everyone's access to reading occurred via the printed word through books, magazines, or periodicals. Now, well into the twenty-first century, the printed word can no longer claim hegemony as it competes with a variety of digital media, including e-books, e-journals, and websites. What role have academic libraries played in this shift? What implications has this shift had in the reading experience of students? By exploring these questions, we can gain a deeper understanding for how academic librarians might foster innovative approaches to enhance student engagement in general and contemplative reading in particular.

## Academic Libraries and E-Books

Academic libraries and librarians played a key role in this shift through their involvement with Google Books, following Google's 2002 announcement that the company had started a "books" project (*Google Books History*, 2016). Later, the company clarified that they intended to create "a future world in which vast collections of books are digitized." In this world, "people would use a 'web crawler' to index the books' content and analyze the connections between them, determining any given book's relevance and usefulness by tracking the number and quality of citations from other books" (*Google Books History*, 2016).

In December 2004, a number of research libraries opened their collections to Google scanners, including libraries at the University of Harvard, Michigan, Stanford, Oxford, and the New York Public Library (Rubin, 2016, p. 190). This collaboration

between Google and libraries, known as the "Library Project," occurred at a time when the mission of libraries was already expanding to incorporate increasing digitization, especially in the burgeoning e-book and e-journal industry. Since then, the physical book has receded to being only a part of what university libraries have to offer. By 2014, the average North American library was spending almost three quarters of their budgets on digital resources (Savova & Price, 2019). "The shift away from physical resources can be seen in the layout and design of libraries, which now devote less space to book collections and more space to facilitating stimulating experiences" (Barclay, 2015).

## Is There a Difference? Comparing Print and Electronic

The widening reach of e-materials has resulted in librarians joining with educators and cognitive psychologists to take an interest in the impact e-reading has on comprehension and engagement. The literature now contains a growing corpus of research exploring the differences between reading digital materials vs. reading physical materials. Early research seemed to suggest that students reported better reading experiences when reading printed materials (Bennett & Landoni, 2005; Coleman, 2004; Noyes & Garland, 2005, 2006), in addition to having superior scores when measured by speed, accuracy, and comprehension (Noyes & Garland, 2008). Additional studies suggested that learning via a digital medium can impair metacognitive monitoring and regulation (Ackerman & Goldsmith, 2011; Jabr, 2013). Other studies have been ambiguous, with some research reporting no significant difference in student recall after reading electronic text vs. printed text (Sage et al., 2019).

Daniel and Woody (2013) have pointed out that many of the instruments used for measuring cognitive processing and retention across the two media employ the non-naturalistic setting of a lab. The lab environment may smooth away variables that might be present when reading on the screen in one's home. For example, when studying in the home instead of a lab, the reading of electronic resources seems to be correlated with greater computer-based multitasking activities, but this correlation is likely to decrease in a formal testing environment. Support for such a theory can be found in research showing that a connected computer acts as an ecosystem of distraction technologies; consequently, the work of keeping oneself focused on the text can put a drain on the frontal cortex, leaving fewer neuro resources for contemplation, reflection, questioning, analysis, pondering, and schema formation (Phillips, 2020a; Raphael, 2014). This information tends to be overlooked in studies comparing digital and physical media. For example, Taylor (2011) studied the learning experience of seventy-four students after reading a chapter from a physical book vs. a digital equivalent. Two multiple-choice exams (one immediately after reading the text and another a week later) were administered to compare the two sets of students and found no difference between the two groups. Yet the study was methodologically flawed because all reading took place in a supervised

laboratory environment, thus insulating students from the normal distractions that arise from computer use in a more natural environment.

In the discussion that follows, we will build on these discussions by exploring one aspect of how digitization impacts reading habits. We will then consider how university librarians can respond to these challenges by encouraging a return to contemplative modes of reading, including modes more associated with physical materials.

## A New Kind of Reading

As the Google Books project got mired in lawsuits and high-profile controversies over copyright issues, it became easy to overlook how the Books project was helping to introduce students to a new type of reading. By making books searchable, students had the ability to harvest information and quotes out of the books without actually reading them. "For Google," Nicholas Carr observed, "the real value of a book is not as a self-contained literary work but as another pile of data to be mined" (2020, p. 165). He went on to warn that online books lend themselves to a different type of reading:

> To make a book discoverable and searchable online is also to dismember it. With writing on the screen, we're still able to decode text quickly—we read, if anything, faster than ever—but we're no longer guided toward a deep, personally constructed understanding of the text's connotations. Instead, we're hurried off toward another bit of related information, and then another, and another. The strip-mining of 'relevant content' replaces the slow excavation of meaning. (Carr, 2020, p. 166)

Qualitative evidence from the self-reports of readers supports Carr's concerns. People have touted Google Books as enabling us to "explore a book in 10 seconds" (Puppin, 2009). One student who received a 2008 Rhodes Scholarship and was president of the student body at Florida State University said, "I don't read books. I go to Google, and I can absorb relevant information quickly." He continued by observing that "Sitting down and going through a book from cover to cover doesn't make sense. It's not a good use of my time, as I can get all the information I need faster through the Web" (cited in Carr, 2020, pp. 8–9). These anecdotes support the findings of Ziming Liu from San Jose State University, who "conducted a series of studies which indicate that the 'new norm' in reading is skimming, with word-spotting and browsing through the text" (Wolf, 2018).

A range of factors have contributed towards the type of quick browsing that the digitization of texts makes possible. One such factor is the pressure students face to produce high assignment outputs, which in turn puts demands on students' time. To cope with these demands, students routinely employ a variety of short-cuts for maximizing outputs and minimizing inputs. The desire of users to maximize

convenience is a concept that has roots in S. R. Ranganathan's classic 1931 work *The Five Laws of Library Science*. The principle of minimizing time expenditure has been described in a variety of ways, including "The Principle of Least Effort," (Bierbaum, 1990) and "low-cost" information strategies (Schwieder, 2016). These theories often draw on Zipf's classic work showing that people will typically choose the easiest way of accomplishing any task (Zipf, 1949). These low-cost strategies make sense within the context of rational choice theory, a framework developed in the field of economics which posits that when the benefits of a task are too low to justify high time and effort expenditure, heuristic strategies will be favored on cost-benefit grounds (Larrick et al., 1993).

Digital texts, perhaps especially ebooks in pdf format, offer the tools for just such low-cost information-gathering, enabling students to adopt a grab-and-go approach in which the reader strives for maximum efficiency (Phillips, 2012, 2021). Instead of slowly digesting a text, students can use search functions to quickly identify the useful parts, thus reinforcing the productivity mindset that is already a strong cultural value for Americans (Smith et al., 2020). Given the increasingly high premium efficiency plays in the educational process, students may prefer these cost-benefit strategies (i.e., those that maximize outputs while minimizing inputs) even when such approaches are not correlated with actual learning. Daniel and Woody (2013) suggest that student preferences "are not necessarily the best criteria upon which to make pedagogical decisions" and add that when students' goals "revolve around efficiency more so than learning impact," they "have often been demonstrated to prefer pedagogical strategies that are not associated with learning" (p. 18). Among strategies associated with not learning, but which often mimic the activity of learning, are models of workflow and engagement orientated around task-completion rather than actual learning:

> Our digital reading tools encourage these habits: e-readers incite our progress through a text by showing us how many pages we have completed, and how many we have left. This mechanism makes it extremely difficult to lose oneself in a text, and often turns reading into a race. The e-reader suggests that we are reading not to savor books, but to conquer them. Reading morphs from relationship into conquest. (Olmstead, 2018, para. 4)

Since librarians played a key role in bringing e-resources into the mainstream, it behooves them to think critically about the new state of affairs. Specifically, how should librarians respond to these widespread shifts in reading styles that have emerged in the wake of digitization, especially the tendency to prioritize efficiency over contemplation when reading?

## Contemplative Reading in a Digital Culture

Zena Hitz (2020) discussed the joy that arises from reading with an attitude of

contemplation rather than efficiency. Drawing on Aristotle's philosophy, Hitz showed that contemplative reading—associated with losing oneself in a text independent of the text's utility value—is an intrinsic good and forms a constituent aspect of human flourishing. Her book is the latest in a string of texts on the value of reading slowly as a form of leisure (Lewis, 1992; Phillips, 2020; Pieper, 2009; Sertillanges & Schall, 1992).

While it is a skill to be able to approach a text with a task-completion mentality, it is also a skill to be able to approach texts in the contemplative manner that Hitz and others have described. Yet as suggested in the last section, digitally-mediated reading tends to be antithetical to contemplative reading by enabling cursory reading or skimming and fostering a mindset of efficiency and pragmatism. Is it possible, even in widespread digital culture, to create habits and environments that foster contemplative reading? And what role, if any, might academic librarians play in fostering more intellectually-rewarding reading habits?

It is possible to encourage contemplative reading habits, and the following paragraphs propose six ways academic librarians can draw students to the pleasure of slow reading. Empirical research would have to be undertaken on the efficacy of these proposals before implementing them on a large scale.

First, academic librarians can foster contemplative reading by designing spaces that encourage inward calm and "leisure," properly qualified (Pieper, 2009). What I propose is similar to what we can observe in the mindfulness movement, with hospitals and corporate office complexes designing spaces to encourage inward calm and contemplation. Just as libraries increasingly devote space to areas that explicitly encourage digitization (for examples, rooms with computers and recharging terminals), so they also might profitably explore the impact of digital-free zones designed to foster contemplative reading and quiet text-oriented reflection. Just as public libraries have been experimenting with "contemplative spaces" designed for "cultivating the inner lives of their patrons" (Pyati, 2019), it would be worthwhile for academic librarians to conduct research on which elements (e.g., plants, fountains, and open spaces) help to create an atmosphere conducive to contemplative reading.

Second, given that the physical book and physical space seem both to be associated positively with contemplative reading, academic librarians can use scholarships and conferences to join the resurgence of interest in the physical book and its relationship to the space of the library. Amanda Clark, director of the library at Whitworth University in Spokane, Washington, has begun making important contributions to this scholarship by exploring how the physical book serves an invaluable function in underscoring the importance of the library *as place* (Clark, 2020). She has noted that

> Despite the increasingly digital nature of information retrieval, both users and computers continue to occupy physical space, and the library – as place – offers an

essential location for inspiration. In an age when one might assume that the digital negates the physical, a finite place can root the individual within space regarding both composition and information retrieval. In this seeking for the essentially human element of the physical book within space, we may also discover a need for the library as place. (Clark, 2014, p. 73)

Clark continued by observing that the physical book offers users a connection to permanence that is lacking in digital texts.

> While defying time, the physical book waits to be handled and rediscovered over passing ages, which necessitates a place to rest in anticipation of this future use. The library patron, or inhabitor of space, is summoned into the ever-present, ever-fleeting immediate moment within place, that is, the library. There is no digital equivalent to this mindful presentism. Reality, as considered by St. Augustine (397/398), is that which is present in the physical moment [see Book XI] in space and time. The physical book is arguably more "real" than its digital analog, which, since digital exists outside of place, space, and time, by its very nature vanishes without a trace until it is transformed into a physical manifestation. (Clark, 2014, p. 73)

In the post-pandemic world, Clark's observations are even more pressing. During the pandemic, self-reports and material from blogs indicate that many found digitally-mediated experiences difficult and alienating (Carr, 2020). Some students showed themselves "to be highly reliant on the library to study and distractions at home hindered their resource management" (Biwer et al., 2021, p. 9). The place, space, and physicality of the library was appreciated with fresh urgency when it was taken away (Carr, 2020b; Wiradhany, et al., 2021).

Third, academic librarians involved in information literacy and freshmen engagement can teach about the side-effects of digitized text while highlighting the role that physical books can play in contemplative reading.

Fourth, academic librarians can work with professors to incorporate activities that stretch the students toward contemplation and away from the efficiency mindset that may be correlated with digitally-mediated reading. Just as many universities offer workshops on skimming techniques, it may be worthwhile to offer workshops on how to read slowly and deeply. To facilitate this, freshmen engagement librarians can assign students certain non-graded activities in contemplative reading spaces, and then ask the students to journal afterward about their experiences. Smith et al. (2020), tells of one teacher who tried such an exercise within a Christian school. The class had been studying about Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. They had been discussing how throughout the scriptures God speaks to people in the wilderness, yet today we have fortified ourselves against wilderness through continual noise,

technology, and distractions. At one point in the lesson, the teacher sent the students out of the classroom to find somewhere quiet to study the Sermon on the Mount. The students were expected to take notes using pencil and paper and not to bring any technology with them. "We decided to attempt to create a little wilderness space in our busy day by seeking as much solitude and silence in the school as possible to allow the Word of God to come to us," the teacher said. Smith describes what happened next:

> After a reasonable time, the teacher calls the students back into the classroom and tells them, "Raise your hand if you didn't get to chapter 7." He then asks them to move into groups based on which chapters they finished reading. It becomes visible that almost 60% of the students did not get to the end of chapter 7. At this point, the teacher pauses and asks, "Wait, you didn't get to 7?" and then looks at them in silence for a full ten seconds. The students all nod. (A ten-second silence is an eternity after a teacher has asked a question in a North American classroom; for most teachers a pause of two or three seconds requires training.) It is not too hard to surmise what students may be expecting him to say next. They have failed to complete the assignment.

> Finally, the teacher speaks again. "Okay, I'm proud of you because you are engaging with these chapters." In saying this, he frames the learning sequence in terms of the concerns he had voiced earlier, concerns that valued slowness, wilderness, listening. …he wanted to affirm that "learning to slow down and engage the text is one of the skills I want you to be developing." (Smith et al., 2020, p. 233)

This story illustrates how librarians and professors can use strategic activities to instill in students the values of contemplation, slow-reading, and quiet. They can begin pushing back against the values of a society increasingly designed on cost-benefit models through emphasizing that more is not always better and that sometimes the most rewarding reading occurs when we have turned off our technology.

## Conclusion

University libraries have been at the forefront of book digitization. However, as digitally- mediated reading has come to occupy an ever-more central role in the library and university, there have been unintended consequences in how students read. While the research is far from conclusive, an emerging trend in the literature suggests that reading on the screen may underscore values of efficiency and pragmatism; reading becomes a type of cost-benefit game to get the most done in the least amount of time. This can be contrasted with the type of contemplative reading that has been highlighted in recent scholarship. This paper suggests various ways that academic librarians can use physical books and spaces to push-back against the culture of efficiency, helping students to rediscover the joys of contemplative reading through engagement with physical books.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robin Phillips has a master's degree in historical theology from King's College London and a master's degree in library science through the University of Oklahoma. He is the blog and media managing editor for the Fellowship of St. James and a regular contributor to *Touchstone: A Journal of Mere Christianity* and *Salvo*. He is the author of *Gratitude in Life's Trenches* (Ancient Faith, 2020) and *Rediscovering the Goodness of Creation* (Ancient Faith, 2023).

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