Crossing the Digital Rubicon: From Print Books to E-Books and Beyond

When Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon River in 49 BC, he proceeded past the point of no return with uncertain and unpredictable consequences for his and Rome's future. In the 21st century, we are crossing a digital Rubicon from print to digital culture. The digitization of information resources, practices and infrastructures is being embraced by many, including librarians, readers and writers. But as we cross the digital Rubicon, moving away from a print past toward a digital future, the consequences and effects of such a change remain unclear. Like Julius Caesar, we cannot fully ascertain or really predict what the implications of these changes will ultimately be.

Nevertheless, the increasing integration of digital technologies into librarianship, reading and writing are creating and fostering the digital librarian, the digital reader and the digital writer. These new digital information actors require and expect new types of resources, platforms and infrastructures to maintain and advance their digital practices.

E-books

The e-book, for example, has some serious implications for libraries, as more and more readers turn to the Internet and e-books for their reading purposes. The e-book is fast becoming an integral part of reading and writing practices, requiring librarianship to respond and adapt to it.

According to Michael Colford, director of information technology at the Boston Public Library, "people still think of libraries as old dusty books on shelves, and it's a perception we're always trying to fight. If we don't provide this [digital] material for [digital readers and writers], they are just going to stop using the library altogether" (Rich 2009). The inclusion of e-books in library collections helps attract those individuals who might not otherwise use the library, in addition to offering new resources for regular patrons.

Paul LeClerc, president of the New York Public Library, argues that as more and more people, especially young people, "become used to reading [and writing] virtually everything online, that is going to propel a change in terms of readership of e-books rather than readership of physical books" (Rich 2009). In other words, the e-book is helping to encourage the emergence of library 2.0, where traditional library resources and services are digitized for online clients. Many "web 2.0 technologies have played a significant role in our ability to keep up with the changing [digital] needs of library users. Technological advances in the past several years have enabled libraries to create new services that before were not possible, such as virtual reference, personalized OPAC interfaces, or downloadable media that library customers can use in the comfort of their own homes" (Casey and Savastinuk 2006). The e-book is just one, albeit important, new digital resource that is beginning to transform librarianship, reading and writing, guiding digital information actors across the often turbulent digital Rubicon.

Co-existence

But we have not yet completely crossed the digital Rubicon. "Bricks and mortar" libraries remain an important institution, providing essential services for many people and communities. Individuals continue to frequent the library to research and read, take out books and other materials, attend exhibits and lectures, and socialize, especially in troubled economic times. Library 2.0 and its digital components, like the e-book, have augmented and enhanced libraries' reach, extending their scope and practice into digital environments.

Nor does the growing popularity of e-books and other digital resources signal an end to the print book, which some pessimists would have us believe is a dusty relic of the past. Many authors and readers, moreover, still write and read print monographs and rightly expect to have access to them on libraries' physical shelves. And despite their growing popularity, there are some problems with e-books.

First, e-books are not always financially or technically accessible for patrons. Being able to borrow (or buy) and download an e-book requires an e-reader, like the Kindle. In other words, you need to have the money to purchase an e-reader in order to then download a library's e-book. If you do not have an e-reader, a library's collection of e-books will be largely inaccessible to you.

Second, it may be financially prohibitive, and logistically problematic, for a library to provide e-readers to its patrons.

When library budgets are already overstretched, it is difficult to find enough money to make digital resources freely available. Moreover, e-books and other digital resources require a constantly upgraded digital infrastructure, which itself is expensive (Bertot et al. 2009).

Third, despite the growing popularity of e-books, many people argue that too much of a print book's content gets lost in translation from print to digital format. E-readers, for example, have their limitations. Features like "typography, layout, illustrations and carefully thought-out covers are all being reduced to a uniform, black-on-gray template that looks the same whether you're reading *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* or the Federalist Papers" (Ganapati 2009), creating what some readers find to be an ugly and boring experience.

But interestingly, technology is already marching beyond the e-book to the vook, the latest so-called book of the future. Unlike the apparently ugly and boring look and feel of the e-book (again, depending upon one's personal opinion), the vook consists of "text and video clips produced in concert to form integrated works. You can read/watch them with a Web browser, but they're primarily intended for mobile devices like the iPhone" (Miller 2009) and are aimed at those people who spend most of their time online. Strongly hinting at the digital future beyond the e-book, the vook takes us one paddle stroke closer to the other side of the digital Rubicon.

Part of a process

It should not be very surprising that new digital resources like e-books are becoming more popular within libraries. We did not just begin to cross the digital Rubicon, but began crossing it in the 1990s as computers and the Internet became more widely adopted, embedded and used within various institutions, businesses and personal lives. Today, libraries' "commitment to providing access to [digital resources like computers and] the Internet is total, making significant contributions to the information, education, recreation, culture, and economic resources in their communities. As a result, [computer and] Internet access, training, and services are now an essential part of what public libraries provide to their patrons and their communities" (Bertot et al. 2009). The inclusion and use of new digital resources in libraries has helped construct new digital information actors and simultaneously propelled us further toward the other side of the digital Rubicon.

As we continue our crossing of the digital Rubicon from print culture to digital culture, even though we do not know or fully understand what awaits us on the other side, it is important to realize that the library, far from being a sad relic of the print past, exists on both sides of the divide. The library's role, reach and mission are all augmented and enhanced on the 2.0 side, expanding its collections and services and continuing to provide access and training to all kinds of information, print and digital.

While Julius Caesar had no clear idea what awaited him after he crossed the Rubicon, at least we can be confident in knowing that whatever changes occur, (digital) librarians, (digital) readers and (digital) writers will continue to enjoy a long, meaningful and successful life once we complete our crossing of the digital Rubicon.

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