➤ POINT

Say Goodbye to the Book ... the Future is Virtual

by Harry Tuchmayer, Column Editor

Although I feel like some sort of evil person gloating over the death of a hapless victim, I can't help thinking that the growth of the virtual library and the death of the book as we know it is really a good thing. I love books! In fact, I like them so much that at first it pained me to think about their demise. But after agonizing over the issue, I've come to the realization that maybe it's time for the book, as we have come to know it, to face facts and finally give up the endless struggle with changing technologies and just expire gracefully.

This is not the first assault on books. Since the invention of the printing press (a rather disastrous invention if you happened to be a scribe facing unemployment), books have come under attack from changing technology. And each time they've rebounded, slightly redesigned, slightly less attractive, and slightly less artistic than the version before. But today they face a more dangerous threat, because this time the assault is not on the form of the book but on its very substance. And, I have to tell you, it's about time!

Books as information just don't cut it anymore! By the time a book is published, it's just not current enough. Now I know that the industry is trying to produce the instant book. Those cheap paperback accounts of the Gulf War and the rape of Kuwait that are littering the shelves of most libraries immediately come to mind. But, come on now, have you ever read one of those things? As far as I'm concerned, they are about as dull and unappealing as most of the junk we find on the Internet. With few exceptions, the information is only minutes old, and you can discard the stuff before it messes up the collection.

I know what you're thinking: sure, it's easy to attack books if all you're concerned about is quick information. But what about books as literature, creative pieces that push one's mind and imagination to the limit? What about those titles, fiction and non-fiction, that explore the furthest reaches of our universe? Nothing one can find on the Internet can ever match that kind of "reading."

I don't know about you, but those titles are becoming increasingly more difficult for me to find. For years now, it seems that publishers are more concerned about profits than quality. Just about every bestselling author seems to have decided that his books are off limits to editors, as if every word written is worth preserving. And publishers seem to feel that the extra 250 pages of "genre babble" justifies the higher price tag. Well, as far as I'm concerned, nobody's going to curl up with a three-pound wad of cheaply-bound and poorly-glued paper full of run-on thoughts and sentences.

But all is not lost. The current debate over the death of the book reminds me of a scene in my favorite movie when Miracle Max explains the difference between "mostly dead and all dead." When someone is all dead, he reasons, there is nothing one can do but "go through his pockets and look for loose change." Ah, but mostly dead is not all dead! Life is still a possibility if there is something truly noble to live for. We will all be a lot better off if those bits and pieces of "required reading" that we have all had to struggle with die a quick and painless death as a result of the virtual library. But the preservation of good books is a truly noble cause. As a bit of a romantic myself, I know that the preservation of those books, like the true love of Wesley and the Princess Bride, shall live happily ever after!

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>
> *— Tuchmayer*

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>
> *— Moore*

Sleeping with the Enemy?

by Tom Moore

I think that all this talk about virtual libraries is poppycock!! Computer nerds are scaring those of us who find computers a tool but aren't ready to sleep with them every night. Computers and the information to which they provide access are important tools for the present and the future. They only threaten libraries when librarians become their slaves.

A computer is only a tool to access information stored in an electronic format. Storing and transferring information electronically is a cost-effective method of making a lot of information available to a large audience. Because so much information can be stored electronically, it is also a very cost-effective method of providing very esoteric information to a very small audience.

Almost all of this transfer occurs on an individual basis. One person sitting at a computer directly accesses the information needed. There might be another thousand or so who are accessing the same information simultaneously. All of those people do not live in the same community. They live all over the country. They could not be so served by a single library. The publishers of electronic information recognize this. They market most of their services directly to individuals. Those that do market directly to libraries do so because they package their information on compact discs — fine storage devices, but inefficient retrieval devices. Libraries buy them because of the amount of information they can hold, but recognize that they are used just like books: for the most part, they serve one person at a time. Like books, they are updated regularly. Libraries must purchase these new editions as they are published.

The question is, will the so-called virtual library replace or destroy today's public library? The answer is, maybe. This will happen only if we (librarians) allow it to happen.

This is how I see libraries being replaced by the nebulous virtual library. If librarians forget that computers are mere tools for our use and begin to think of them as ends in themselves, we are well on the way to extinction. As a group we seem to be enamored with technology of any kind. Look at how we embraced film, audio, and video technologies. If we had really had our way, these technological items would have filled our libraries. The latest technological advances for the first time pose a serious threat to our existence. We are not really thinking of filling our libraries with computers so much as we are thinking of emptying them of books. The reasoning is simple and direct. If I can access any information online that I might need for my customers, I will not need to purchase the books that currently contain this information. Besides, these books are usually out of date by the time that they are published. Therefore, I no longer will have to select the best book on a subject, because I will be able to find online all the information there is on that subject.

If we empty our libraries of out-of-date books so that we can get on the Information Highway to get only the most current information, we are writing our own death certificates. All books are out of date as soon as they are published. Our customers still prefer the book or journal article for information purposes. Our customers need to be able to take information away from the library in a format that they can access directly. When it becomes necessary for our customers to own a computer in order to use the information which we store, we will no longer be a vital part of their everyday lives.

The virtual library will end public libraries if we allow ourselves to become so attached to computers and online systems that we forget what the majority of our customers want. When computer technology begins to reduce the amount of money that we spend on books and like materials, the real library will begin to be replaced by the virtual library.

As everyone knows, virtual reality is intriguing and close to the real thing. In virtual reality we can do many different things, like flying an airplane or driving a tank. Of course, being like the real thing and really doing something are as different as night and day. You don't walk away from a real airplane crash. You won't be able to walk away from the virtual library with a real book either. Too bad, I really like books.