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Reading and Writing in the Digital Age

Essay #1

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Prophesying the Future of Literary Consumption

Perhaps the only prophecy more popular than that of the next great advent is the imminent collapse of all we hold dear. Even prior to Rudolph Clausius coining the term entropy, humans have had a natural predilection to believe the worst is in store (Entropy). The same goes for the future of literature, as seen in *The End of Books* by Octave Uzanne from 1894 and Maria Sachiko Cecire’s *Massively Open* from 2016. Both works divine similarly bleak futures for the printed word, which is forecasted to be replaced by digital and audio mediums. Though we’ve long surpassed the assumed timeframe of Uzanne's printed reckoning, the fears still hold weight today and when paired with Cecire’s vision. Both works vocalize the belief that society has reached a turning point in technology where the future traditional forms are uncertain. However, contrary to the authors’ claims, the printed word is in no danger. Though new technologies arise daily, the book has persisted for hundreds of years, its prevalence undiminished. The book is not in jeopardy so long as humans propensity to gravitate toward the physical world persists.

In *The End of Books*, Uzanne portrays a future in which books and all forms of physical literature have been replaced by portable phonographs. Thought the phonograph has come and gone in popular technology, the principle of the argument easily extends to audio and ebooks. Neither has deposed physical books as the primary medium of reading, despite their greater convenience and modernity. Since their arrival on the scene purchases of physical books “increased 7% in 2016, [while] ebook sales declined by 4%,” (Cain). Additionally, the push to return to paper is spearheaded by younger readers who continue to favor physical books, contradicting the assumption that the fondness for the analog is held solely by older generations (Cain). Clearly, the apocalyptic visions of Cecire and Uzanne have been staved off for the time being, but why? The answer lies in the physical manifestations of the story, rather than the content of the text itself. The ebook creates no physical connection between the reader and the content. The online text disappears when one wants it to, the analog does not. The physical book is a constant reminder of the story which awaits the reader’s return. The form of the ebook does not call to be read: there are no pages to turn, no progress to be seen as one reads. It is stagnant medium, one which distances the reader from the text rather than making a more immersive experience.

Proponents of e-reading argue that it provides the same experience as reading an analog book because the information delivered is the same; however, that is not the case. Looking at a photo of the Maldives is not the same as visiting. The same can be said for reading a book online versus on paper. The words are the same, but the reading experience is not. When we hold a book it provides an opportunity to not only step away from digital devices but also to physically engage with the story: turning the pages, scribbling notes, leaving our mark on the book so that whoever receives it next has a version slightly richer than the one before. Ebooks are grossly impersonal, arriving the same to every reader. While story within an ebook is unchanged, it is still possible to form an emotional connection with the story, the physical connection is lost. There is no familiarity in an ebook. Upon cracking the cover one is not transported back to the moment of the first read, as there is no such cover to crack. The lack of familiarity does nothing for the possibility of a reread. A well-loved book welcomes the reader home, no matter how many times before the pages have been flipped through. Aside from an already read title, the ebook does not encourage one to revisit an already discovered text. There is nothing new to be found among the endless scroll of backlit words.

Additionally, there is no physical value to the ebook, beyond the reading experience. Analog texts provide a physical manifestation of our passions and interests. Like everything else we choose to surround ourselves with, the books we covet are extensions of ourselves. They are the stories that have impacted us, like thumbprints on a glass. Humans collect items without thinking about it, rooted in a survival advantage that “those of our ancient ancestors who managed to accumulate scarce objects may have been more prone to survive long enough to bear offspring,” (Halperin). It is partially due to this survival instinct that we as humans are drawn to items which are collectable. We give such items value and seek to possess more of them. Ebooks are not collectable, they are ephemeral at best. The same can be said for digital music. No one collects digital music, rather vinyl records and CDs are common coveted items. The physical connection between the owner and object creates a sense of value which is impossible regarding a digital item. If digital books had any collectible value than they would be far more popular, with lower prices they could easily undercut the print competition, but that will not happen because ebooks do not hold any intrinsic value as a creation. Psychologists have noted “a single item of great perceived value can trigger the collecting instinct. This might explain why marketers sometimes use phrases such as ‘rare,’ ‘limited edition,’ or ‘one-of-a-kind’,” (Guth). The same can be said for the value of a physical book. Its uniqueness created by each reader sets it apart from the uniform ebook.

Though the unique qualities of a physical book make it valuable to some, fans of the ebook claim that it’s convenience outweighs the physical in every respect. It is correct to say that the Kindle or any other form of ebook is slimmer, and smaller than most analog texts. That said, such convenience does not outweigh the loss of physical connection brought not only directly, but indirectly from an analog book. Receiving a physical book requires human interaction, whether it is going to a library or visiting a bookstore. It requires the reader to make a physical journey to acquire the story they seek. Libraries across the country are suffering, with numbers staggeringly low, “in the 12 months before the most recent Pew survey was given, only 44 percent of Americans visited a local library or bookmobile,” (Meyer). The statistic is so disturbing because the library is an important part of our culture. It is a haven for those seeking a story and a treasure trove of information. A library is a place for a community to come together and interact. With fewer people visiting, libraries are dying.The solitary nature of the ebook only contributes to the lose. The ability to purchase books via the internet sounds like a gift, but in reality it limits the scope of the readers’ world and further atrophies already disconnected communities. Books create a connection beyond that of the text and the reader, they are a bridge to the world of literary culture. Perhaps one may save space and time by reading ebooks, but a vital link to the world outside of the story is lost.

Beyond text for pleasure reading as discussed in *The End of Books*, *Massively Open*, Cecire addresses the role of books and artificial intelligence in society. In her story, online universities dominate the field, the role of the liberal arts college becoming obsolete except to the affluent few. Along with the role of the brick and mortar university disappearing the analog book is nigh extinct as well. At the conclusion of the tale, we discover one of the pivotal characters, a student named Damien, is actually an artificial intelligence program. The realization is a shock, one which both the main character and the reader cannot fathom: how can such a personable, life-filled being be digital? What is the ‘life’ that he had though he was no more real than a text message? Such is the character an ebook lacks. We are willing to consider the possibility of Damien still being an individual because his actions and qualities make him distinct. Ebooks are not distinct. A print book is unique and thus it takes on a life of its own. It humanizes the story and allows it to come alive.

The landscape of reading is changing, that is indisputable; however, what is to be left behind as collateral or carried on is still up for debate. Though many have prophesied its doom, the printed word is here to stay. Despite all of the technical innovations of today’s world, the printed book is integrated into the structure of our world. We cannot do away with the analog story without pulling the rug out from under our own feet. It may sound idealistic to declutter the archives and digitize the world around us; however, to do so would be a grave mistake. With people more absorbed into cellphones and a world outside that around them than ever, to lose the connection between ourselves and our literature, the very history of humanity’s creativity is a terrifying prospect. We must hold onto our books, because doing so let’s us hold onto what makes us human, or ability to connect and create.

Mason, you’re off to a very strong start here. Overall you employ specific and pertinent evidence in defense of debatable claims. There are definitely some spots where your argument can be improved by clarifying precisely the distinctions you’re tracing between e-books and their paper siblings. Look over my suggestions and come chat with me if anything is unclear.

--Ryan Cordell

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