

Ink vs. Bytes: The Delicate Balance I Tried to Maintain in a Library

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Abstract: Librarian is a misleading term that imposes a general idea upon what those who work in libraries do on a daily basis. Amongst the numerous tasks I was assigned and completed during my two years at my library system, one of the most intriguing and, perhaps, difficult to accomplish was finding a balance between technological advantages and written, tangible works. While the internet creates an easily accessible forum within which to disseminate information, even of the scholarly field, it also creates a sometimes seemingly insurmountable gap between those familiar with technology and those who find it to be a frightening tool that they will be unable to understand or use properly. Conversely, many patrons are forgetting the magic that exists with tangible documents, especially ones such as handwritten letters. A few vignettes of my experience with a variety of patrons will, I hope, serve to shed light on the balance I tried to find between paper and electronic sources.

Keywords: librarians, internet, technology, patrons, electronic sources, computers, discrimination

A small island made of wood and metal stands in the midst of a library floor, the seemingly simple sign, "Information," hanging above it like a beacon to those lost in the roiling seas of paper and electronic data. In the middle of that island stand a pair of instructor and research specialists, as some librarians are titled in the library system where I worked for two years. The title was a fitting one for obvious reasons. Our job entailed providing instruction when a confused patron asked how to set up an e-mail account or helping students learn how to research acceptable sources for that Shakespeare paper that was due tomorrow, the one they meant to start working on a week ago. Our library system, in particular, had aligned itself with the state education system. The title I was given, along with a few of my fellow librarians, was not a mere fancy. We were meant to be seen by our patrons not just as librarians, not just as robotic finders of books and guides to the Dewey Decimal System, but as educators, as all-purpose instructors. For me, a typical day may have entailed assisting someone in setting up an e-mail and Facebook account one hour and the next helping someone search out and view a particular microfilm. I moved between the lands of digital and ink words on a minute-by-minute basis, providing not only research help but technological assistance as well. In a world where technology is rapidly evolving and becoming an integral part of people's daily lives, many patrons took the first step towards familiarizing themselves with technology within the doors of our libraries.

Between the years of 2012 and 2014, I held the position of instructor and research specialist for the non-fiction section of my library system, though I did occasionally assist in the children and fiction departments as well. The term librarian sets itself as a general, catch-all term; I dislike it as it does not differentiate between the many roles different staff members carry out within a library. The position I held, for instance, also consisted of finding a delicate balance between technological resources and paper ones, which are not as antiquated as many of our patrons thought. With technological advances, finding reliable sources for information has become far

easier, as articles can be read online. Many such online databases impose a rather significant fee, which many libraries such as ours shoulder so that patrons can access these scholarly journals from the comfort of their homes with only a library card and internet access. While I certainly applaud the increasing accessibility of such journals—no longer does a patron have to wait for a particular issue or text to be returned in order to peruse it—I believe that something can be said for maintaining a respect and appreciation for paper and tangible sources as well. To be clear, I am not here to claim that one approach is better than the other. As I will attempt to illustrate in the following vignettes, I wish to urge libraries as well as their patrons to find a balance between the two; I tried to accomplish this difficult task in both the library where I worked as well as the universities in which I taught and still teach.

How Computers are Creating a New Form of Discrimination

Early on Monday morning as snow fell quietly out of the large glass windows lining the non-fiction area of the library in which I worked, a gentleman walked confidently up the stairs and onto the second floor. He was immaculately dressed in a suit and fit the stereotypical image of a powerful businessman. Of course, to me, his attire did not matter; I mention it here only to make a point. As he turned toward our bank of computers, he faltered ever so slightly, his hand reaching up to touch his temple. Sensing his momentary discomfort, I calmly but quickly walked over to see if I could assist this new patron, someone I had not seen in our particular branch before that morning.

His smile was quick and easy, his greeting warm. Yet, he hesitated. Of course, I could not be certain, but after helping numerous patrons, I had developed a knack for sensing someone's discomfort and emotions. For instance, I could often tell a student had clearly left an assignment to the last minute before they even walked up to the desk to specifically ask for help. In this case, I found myself thinking that this man wished for someone to assist him but was either unwilling or embarrassed to ask for help. This attitude was not new to either me or my fellow research and instruction specialists. We had often seen people wander in who had an utter lack of computer knowledge; yet, they hesitated to ask for help as they thought this may mean being ridiculed for their lack of knowledge.

I chit-chatted with the man for a little bit. After a few kind and encouraging words, I was able to convince him to have a seat at one of the computer work stations. He kept his hands neatly folded in his lap, his eyes averted, as if to even look at the freshly cleaned keyboard would be an admission of ignorance. I did not rush him. Since I had never seen him before—and I tend to be excellent with names and faces, as I also teach four separate courses of English 101 to college freshman—I asked him what brought him to our library and if he was searching for something particular today.

As he grew more comfortable, he shared a bit about his past, his story gradually becoming clearer. He was an older gentleman who had started a business and grew it to be highly successful. With the sudden downward shift in the economy, however, he had been forced to close the doors. Unfortunately, having worked over thirty years as the CEO of his company, he had no idea how to go about searching for a new job. The worst, he finally admitted with a

forced laugh, was that he knew he would have to brush up his resume—when he wrote the last one, he had used his father's typewriter—and apply to jobs online. He was not scared of learning something new; rather, he was afraid of hiring managers thinking he was stupid.

He understandably found the idea reprehensible as he was a highly educated man. I could not blame him. Cautiously, I carefully asked how, running his business as he did, had he managed to not come into contact with computers. The answer was absurdly simple yet something that had not occurred to me at all. He had a slew of people working for him, including several secretaries, all of whom wrote the e-mails he dictated to them or took care of other computer-related aspects of the company. His job was to make sure the company ran smoothly and made a profit. He did not need a computer to do that.

So, together, the two of us, along with several other fellow research specialists set out to guide him down a path he had let others walk but never traveled. We used a mixture of texts, which included detailed pictures on everything from how to search open positions online to formatting a resume. Having a text in his hand, being able to flip the pages and look at several screenshots, helped ease his anxiety considerably. Here was a manual for him, and he knew how to utilize it. In this case, a mix of the old and new, paper and screen eased him into the world of computers. However, he was lucky in the sense that he, at least, had a general knowledge about computers and the internet, though he had never used either extensively. Unfortunately, not everyone has these basics upon which we can help them build.

An hour before our branch closed a mere month before Christmas, a harried looking gentleman hurried up the steps and towards the bank of computers situated right in front of the Information Desk. He was dressed neatly. Most of us did not even notice the marks of his profession, a few paint splatters decorating his heavy, tan work boots, until he pointed them out to us later. He was smiling, though he seemed a bit unsure as he shuffled from one foot to another, glancing from the computers to our desk. I stepped out from behind the little island to assist. As if waiting for someone to approach him, he immediately rushed to share some news about which he was excited. He informed me that Home Depot had a job opening and the assistant manager had mentioned to him that she would be willing to hire him if he could simply fill out an online application. Having lost his full-time construction job nearly a year ago when the housing market declined, he had been working any odd job he could pick up. Having a steady income, especially around Christmas, was something he greatly desired; I'm sure most people would agree with him. The only glitch was that he had never, not once in his life, touched a computer, let alone used one to apply for a job.

He was an exceptionally skilled worker, as far as I could tell from the few stories he shared with me. His English was perfect, his manner refined and endearingly polite. I say this not to compliment him, per se, as much as to show that he was very similar to the gentleman who ran his own company: he was intelligent but feared others would not think him so. He could not understand why the assistant manager, who had written down his name in order to make sure his application was reviewed directly by her, could not schedule him for a face-to-face interview. Why did she need his online application when he was more than happy to provide a whole stack of resumes, which his son had so kindly typed up and printed for him on the school's computers?

He did understand that technology was becoming a part of the hiring process and how using online applications streamlined the process. At the same time, his frustration was also comprehensible as the assistant manager had spoken to him and practically offered him the position already; an online application was a seemingly unnecessary obstacle to overcome. I found his argument both compelling and intriguing. Shrugging, he told me that he knew the difference between a wide variety of drill bits and the best nails to use for installing roof shingles verses building a house frame. He had all the qualifications for the position, so why did he now need to prove that he was able to navigate the Home Depot site. He poses an interesting question, since the assistant manager herself had told him that the only time he'd ever have to use the computer would be to submit the application.

The process of teaching him how to use a computer was far from simple, as he had never so much as held a mouse in his hand. He often became frustrated, not at me or any of my fellow staff members who were assisting him, but at the company. We guided him, taking care to explain the little details that we sometimes take for granted—"The cursor is that little white arrow you see on the screen."—and though he was patient, the whole process clearly became a bit of an ordeal for him. Part of our job is not just to help explain how to use technology, but why it is important to know how to use it. As he became increasingly upset, I gently told him that this lesson and his efforts would not be wasted. Once he learned how to use a computer and search for and apply to positions online, he would be able to use that knowledge in the future whenever he wanted to search for a job. I then also explained to him how this could save him both time and money if he ever went job hunting again in the future. By coming into the library or using his son's computer at home, he did not need to spend gas and valuable time driving around to different stores asking about open positions. With advancements in digital technology and the hiring process, he could accomplish this all in pajamas from home. I think this cheered him up quite a bit.

Both of these two gentlemen were highly skilled in their fields. Yet, a lack of knowledge forced them to feel, in a very real way, outside of society. I cannot offer a solution to this, not truly. However, I do think that our library system, in particular, has tried to make great strides in closing this gap between those who are technology-educated and those who are not. We create, offer, and teach free classes to all age groups where every topic from the use of cell phones to conducting an internet search, is covered in simple, easy-to-understand terms and often with accompanying texts. Many times, people think only the elderly need assistance with technology. However, we worked with high school and college students who needed help navigating their new tablets or e-readers. Sometimes, even those who were quite tech-savvy wanted to learn how to request books from other libraries or how exactly an audiobook worked. We worked with patrons of various ages, who had widely differing social and educational backgrounds. Many times, we even conducted one-on-ones for those who were too shy or who simply did not want to attend a class; they were able to schedule these appointments by either going online to our website or by calling us. Our goal was to educate our patrons so that they would be able to utilize all the advantages of technology, whether they wished to simply read a book on their e-reader, apply for a job, or conduct research on an important academic paper.

Some of the cases we had proved to be quite touching. I once worked with a lady whose son had

married and moved to Jamaica. This poor lady had become a grandmother twice but had never seen her grandchildren except for the few pictures her son sent via e-mail. I helped her set up a Facebook account; I do not use the word help lightly here, as I did not set it up for her but guided her through the process. Setting it up for her myself would not have served her well, I believe, as then she would have been dependent on someone being by her side whenever she wanted to use Facebook. In this way, she was able to learn to do most Facebook related tasks on her own once we walked through them together. With her account ready, she sent her son a “friend” request, which was immediately accepted. Her expression turned to one of joy and delight as her son's profile appeared on the screen. With tear-filled eyes, she gazed upon the uploaded videos and the practical treasure trove of photos in his profile. Technology can be a wonderful, amazing tool to connect people and diminish distances. Yet, at the same time, it can create odd, sometimes demoralizing gaps between those who know how to utilize it and those who do not. We constantly strove to bridge this gap.

Teaching the Younger Generation—and the Older—Why Letters are Important

I personally own two tablets, a smart phone that rarely leaves my side, and a laptop; I love them dearly. My appreciation for technology and the advantages it offers runs deep. In fact, when I was not at the library, I taught two hybrid English classes. One day a week, I assigned an online task, which the students had to submit online once completed; there was no face-to-face interaction. However, as much as I love being able to send and receive information with only a few taps of my fingers, I have also tried to instill a love for tangible letters in patrons.

Over the course of two years with my library system, I developed a number of classes for adults, teens, and tweens. For the younger patrons, I lured—I am being honest here—they in with Harry Potter, a novel rather chock-full of letters, which, for the most part, appear with specific penmanship unique to each character. Mumbling and grumbling, the teens and tweens walked into the large conference room and sat down, some a bit morosely, in their seats. Their parents, of course, had brought them, and they clearly had reluctantly agreed because Harry Potter was involved. On the projection screen, I flashed an image of a letter and asked who wrote it. The answers came surprisingly quickly, even from some of the parents who had decided to stay: Dumbledore. On it went for each character. Even though I had removed the name from the bottom of the letters, everyone could easily recognize the handwriting of Harry, Hagrid, and even Ron. The letters, or more specifically, the penmanship of these characters became a sort of fingerprint. Texting and e-mailing are all wonderful tools, but, as so clearly shown in my example of the CEO and his secretaries, they can be written by anyone. While handwriting can be copied, managing a believable copy is difficult and often requires a great deal of artistic skill.

At the end of the class, I handed out papers and pens. After seeing that there was a way for them to leave a mark on the world—a mark different than a Facebook post or a tweet, one that was a bit more personal—even the surliest teen became excited to write. I worked hard to instill within them the idea that having a tangible piece of paper with a person's writing is a sort of treasure. Instagram, for instance, is a wonderful way to share pictures and memories with friends and relatives, some who live far away. A hand-written letter may be just as beautiful and touching as a sepia-filtered shot. They both have special qualities and can bring joy; one should not be

forgotten in lieu of the other.

The adults, however, were a bit more difficult to convince, though many of them did admit to liking Harry Potter. For the adults, I created a thank you notes class. I taught them the basics of writing a quick but personal thank you card and how to keep it simple instead of writing pages that no one, truthfully, had either time to write or read during the holidays. What I tried to insist upon was that these notes should be written in the gift receiver's hand and not sent out as a mass or even a personal e-mail. I, furthermore, urged them to think about how they would feel receiving a handwritten, personal note from, for instance, their children in college or in different states, even countries. It would be like holding a piece of them, this paper that they touched, that they wrote upon, into which they put some effort and thought. By the end of the course, each had started scribbling down ideas for notes. E-mails, of course, can also elicit emotional responses and be heart-warming; I was not trying to deny this fact, but merely remind them that letters had a similar power.

I am not claiming here, of course, that e-mails should be banished or that term papers need to suddenly be written out by hand. Instead, I made a conscious effort to breathe life into a dying art to the patrons of my library system. I taught—or hoped that I did—them that while technology is marvelous, sometimes a simple piece of paper can have a bit of magic too.

Ink vs. Bytes

Am I claiming one is better than the other? Shall we lay down our keyboards and pick up our pens? Shall we insist that companies only accept paper resumes? Absolutely not. I am simply saying that as an instructor and research specialist, a librarian for those of you who are traditionalists, I tried very hard to find the balance between the two and tried to explain to my patrons that this is a balance for which struggling is not a waste but a worthwhile endeavor.

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