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E-Books in Academic Libraries

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12 | A Social Scientist Uses E-Books for Research and in the Classroom

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, a political science professor describes and evaluates her experiences with e-books in the classroom and for research. E-books are delightful resources for quick use, but for this user they have certain drawbacks when considered for sustained scholarly reference and teaching purposes. The author also considers the perspectives of students and colleagues. Some discomfort with e-books may be generational and may fade with the emergence of students and researchers who have grown up as “native users” of e-resources.

WHERE DO E-BOOKS FIT IN THE SCHOLARLY LIFE?

I was invited to write about my work-related uses of e-books as a university professor. In research and teaching, e-resources, including e-books, differ from traditional library resources in the possibilities they offer for acquisition, use, and information retention. The general point I make in this chapter is that e-books are delightful resources for quick use, but they still have certain drawbacks when considered for sustained scholarly reference and teaching purposes. Some of these drawbacks are practical issues that are likely to diminish as e-book technology adapts to suit the humans who use it. For now, humans must adapt to e-books to use them effectively. For people like me who did not grow up with e-reading technology, e-books are rarely optimal reading tools. Difficulties related to human cognitive development might diminish for people who learn to e-read as children, but from what I

can gather as a nonexpert, scientists are conservative about that prospect. I address the main desirable qualities of e-books below, followed by a section on e-books in use, incorporating some impressions I have gathered informally from colleagues and students. I then add some reflections on how the strengths and limitations of e-books may vary along with differences in the ways that we use e-books.

Below, I refer to all available online research tools as e-resources, e-books being a subset. E-resources, to me, are invaluable. I still subscribe to the major print periodicals in my academic field, international relations/political science, although many of my colleagues no longer acquire the journals in print that are so easily available online through a research library. Still, the hard-copy journals are stable and dependable ways to keep up with the topics of greatest professional interest to me, and to have them at hand.

I don't regret that electronic reference resources have more or less replaced physical reference books for current social science sources. For research, I search electronically. Then, if I am near my journals, I go to the hard copy. Like books, journal issues are easy to read, easy to file, and will stay neatly in order on a shelf until I need them. They are stable and dependable. However, I use my paper journals less frequently than I used to unless I am reading deeply, since it is so easy to go straight to a link for almost any article found in a search.

I went to school, to college, and began graduate school in the pre-web era. As an elementary school student in the 1970s, I recall a special class visit to a high school library, where we were taught how to slog through the *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature*. It was full of strange codes and hard to handle physically. No wonder children today get excited about using iPads for school research (Barger & Notwell, 2013). As an undergraduate, I attended Earlham College, known for its top-notch library education (Information Literacy, 2014), but the same challenges applied then and even later in my academic training when approaching the *Social Science Citation Index*, *The New York Times Index*, international and national government documents indices, and other reference tomes. There was no choice but to use these heavy volumes filled with fine print. On good days the thrill of a successful search was its own reward, but on bad days searching social science reference materials was like taking medicine. In contrast,

even though there is a learning process associated with the efficient use of electronic reference sources, research with electronic databases can be done relatively easily, and from the comfort of the office, coffee shop, or sofa. No heavy lifting required.

AVAILABILITY, SPEED, AND PORTABILITY

In my view, three characteristics of scholarly e-resources, including e-books, give them notable advantages over physical library materials for research and teaching: availability, speed of use, and portable access.

Availability

For availability of materials in a research library context, nothing beats electronic resources. Initial background research with all e-resources is simpler and more efficient than the old way. Heretofore, I have mainly used electronic databases and retrieval services for journal articles, rather than for books, but as libraries acquire more e-book holdings, I use them, too.

As of this writing, I have purchased exactly one e-book for professional use. That decision was a matter of availability. I had already bought and extensively annotated a paper copy of the book, but had misplaced or loaned it—in true absent-minded professor fashion—I am still not sure which. (Okay, I admit that reveals an obvious disadvantage of paper books, but let's not talk about that right now.) I needed the text right away to prepare for the next graduate seminar session in a course I was teaching. Needless to say, I preferred to avoid purchasing a second copy. Our library did not hold the e-book version of the text, a university press book. The physical copy was checked out from the library. Technically, since it was a text adopted for course use, I could have requested a desk copy from the publisher, but time was too short for that. The university press did not distribute its own e-books, but only paper. On the publisher's website I learned that the e-book was available for purchase through Amazon. At Amazon, the e-book was cheaper than the paper version and immediately available for download. And so it happens that, by accident, I learned what it is like to acquire and (re)read deeply and thoroughly using an e-book, even though I would not have ordinarily done so. I discuss the outcome of my natural experiment below in the section on e-book use, after first pointing out other desirable qualities of e-books.

Speed

After an electronic search, getting hold of the actual items, if they are electronic and available, is almost instantaneous. Speed of acquisition was a second, separate factor in my decision to purchase the e-book course text. The speed of e-resource access means that I can quickly get the lay of the land on a new topic, or update myself on ongoing research directions. I more often use e-books to *rule out* potentially useful sources quickly than to work at length with those sources.

If material is electronically available, I can take a quick peek and then either download it or request the physical copy for later perusal. I could use Google Books for a quick online look at some parts of most books, but the e-book format is a lot more accommodating. I particularly appreciate the ability to view e-books quickly if I am thinking about buying a paper copy, since well-stocked academic bookstores are hard to find. The speedy access to e-books is also great for students doing course-related research. One caveat is that an electronic word search rarely replaces a good index in a scholarly book, and it would be sad were e-publishers to begin skimping on e-book indexing.

Portability

You would think that portability would be one of e-books' greatest advantages. It is, if you are a student or do your work in more than one location. Students appreciate not having to lug lots of books around during a day on campus. Professors, if they have a workspace at home as well as on campus, and especially if they most often walk or bike to work as I do, potentially benefit from portability, too. However, there is still the little matter of how many devices and platforms are associated with that supposed portability. If I need to read one book, I would rather carry that single book to and fro than my tablet, especially if I also have to carry my laptop. Committed users of laptops for reading—or of tablets for writing—would not face this two-device problem, but I am not one of them.

Because of my overall preference for plain old books, the main instances when I am more likely to appreciate the portability advantage of an e-book are when I am temporarily away from the office and might need to carry one or more devices with me anyway. Then, for that kind of use, the portability of e-book supplements is really helpful.

No mid-career scholar really wants to sound like (or actually be) an old foggy, so among ourselves we either pronounce upon how much we know about the latest technology or cavil regarding how much we really, on principle, hate all this newfangled technology. Sometimes the same people do both. I have friends of any station in life who will break out the latest issue of *The New Yorker* on their iPhone during an unexpected wait in the dentist's office, and I suppose this could work with scholarly e-books, but who conducts research or course preparation in a dentist's office?

In any case, I first bought a portable device, a tablet, when I took an off-campus sabbatical in 2010. The principal reason was that I did not want to carry lots of photocopies with me. Before I left, a savvy colleague showed me an app, iAnnotate for iPad, which would permit me to receive and comment on my students' dissertation chapters using the tablet rather than print them or use a word processor (Branchfire, 2014). With this app I can type or write freehand on a PDF document, a process that replicates my usual hard-copy process *and* allows me to save my own copy and send it back to the student electronically. The notes are saved with a PDF version of the document. This works so well for me that I have retained these particular uses in large part because the app is great for interacting with students over e-mail about their writing. I also have begun using it when asked to review manuscripts for professional journals, and sometimes even book manuscripts for university presses. I used it to read and edit drafts of this very chapter. In an article-length paper, the somewhat slower reading and note creation demanded by the app can be offset by the convenience, eco-friendliness, and storage options achieved by *not* using paper. But even the relatively young editor who last asked me to review a book manuscript admitted that he, too, reads the long form faster and more efficiently on paper.

For general professional reading, I concede that it is nice to have a couple of things loaded on a tablet or phone in case one gets stuck somewhere and would like to feel productive, or alternately if one commutes by public transportation or travels frequently to professional conferences. In my quotidian experience, though, the portability of an e-book is overrated at the professional level. The availability and speed of access to e-books, for me, are a bigger draw than portability.

E-BOOKS IN USE

Now, on to describe the outcome of my e-book experiment. But first, where is that e-book now, several months after I purchased it? Is it in my iBooks app, which I thought of first, since I am mostly a Mac user? No. Is it in ebrary, the facility on our university library site for reading e-books (ebrary [ProQuest], 2014)? No, because the book did not come from the library. OverDrive (OverDrive, 2014), which is often used for e-books from public libraries? No, for the same reason. . . . Oh, here it is—in the Kindle app, because I purchased it through Amazon, and that is the only platform Amazon sells. Luckily, Apple's iTunes deigns to host a Mac version of Kindle, so I did not need to add a Kindle reader to my stable of devices.

The truth is, this proliferation of platforms is another major practical drawback for people who don't seek out e-books. Since the course ended about six months ago, I had forgotten where the file was. I had to figure out where I had bought the e-book first, then I had to remember that I had the Kindle app on my iPad, or that I could log into Amazon to find the book and my notes. What if they had disappeared in the meantime?

Taking Notes

For about 10 years I have used an electronic note-taking program, OneNote (Microsoft, 2014), for teaching-related review of course texts and often for research. This way, my detailed notes are saved and easily retrievable later for class, and whenever I teach the course again. If time permits, I do this whenever I am reading for class—it does make the note-taking process slower, but it also means that I think about what the author is saying, just as one does with paper-based notes. The saved notes can be synced to multiple devices; they also can be printed out, and PDF quotes from an e-source can be pasted into my notes record. Additionally, the notes can easily be revised and extended when I read a text again.

Several of my colleagues and students have gone entirely paperless, but I prefer to read a paper copy and take my notes with OneNote, which can be used either with a tablet or keyboard. Another colleague keeps her book notes in ebrary, but her unsaved notes have evaporated once or twice. As I do with my separate notes program, she appreciates the ability to bring up saved book notes for review within ebrary and to access them whenever and wherever she is online.

In my natural experiment, when I had no choice, using the e-book for class was not an entirely satisfactory fit with my work style. I tend to rely heavily on the text and my notes when teaching so, having no choice under the circumstances, I junked my usual practice and made notes on the e-book within Kindle. Otherwise, I would have faced another version of the two-device problem in order to take separate notes in my preferred way without cumbersome switching back and forth.

Notes in the Kindle app were not flexible enough for me. It is possible to highlight text and enter notes in Kindle, and the notes can be edited, but at the time I did not see a way to export them, print them, or sync them. Remember that I was a first-time user. A quick real-time Google search as I write this shows that, yes, I can use something called “Whispersync,” apparently a feature of the Kindle app, to sync my annotations and the book itself to other devices. It was not obvious how I could print notes without first cutting and pasting them, and the electronic format was not particularly convenient for later reference purposes. In other words, I cannot treat the e-book like just another book. And, because of the different platforms, I cannot treat one e-book the same as every other e-book. Each requires a level of special treatment.

An electronic alternative I sometime use with articles in PDF form, if I am in a hurry or have just one screen, is to import the file to iAnnotate and make notes that can be saved as part of the PDF. As far as I can tell, that level of interaction with the text was not possible with my e-book. First of all, many e-books do not provide a facsimile version of the paper copy. Usually, any page view can be traced to the actual page number of the paper book, but since the actual views do not necessarily match a book’s pages, it is not as easy to share references during text-oriented seminar discussion. Navigating the e-book and my notes was awkward.

Finally, the notes from my e-book experiment are not going to be easy to transfer to OneNote, where, as mentioned, I keep most of my research and teaching notes. There is a good chance that OneNote will be around for a while, since Microsoft produces it, but it is still true that if Microsoft stops producing it, I will be in trouble. An update is needed for the classic protest song (Dylan, 1990 [1962]): “How many platforms must one scholar adopt, before her records are washed to the sea?”

Deep Reading

At this point I probably do not need to say that, when a book's hard copy is readily available, I much prefer it to an e-book. The main reason why is that I find it easier to read on paper and take notes either in OneNote or right on the book, if I own it.

What I will call *cognitive fit* also affects my preferences when reading something lengthy. With books, especially, it is easier to sustain focus when I read on paper and easier to remember what I read. I like being able to flip back and forth inside the book if there is something I want to review. Now, I find that some of those intuitions about ease of use are supported by research summarized for a popular audience in a recent issue of *Scientific American* (Jabr, 2013). Apparently, the brain finds it more stressful to read on screen. The physicality of print on paper seems better suited to the object-oriented nature of human vision, according to one hypothesis. It is possible that we might change, as humans, as more of us are trained from birth to use screens. However, the ability to hold a book, to flip back and forth, and to reference passages easily, either alone or in discussion, without waiting for material to search or to load are all relevant features when comparing professional uses of e-books vs. paper books. And those features advantage paper books, for now. Of course, for some platforms, portions of a book can be printed out for reading, but throwaway printouts made from e-books are not an optimal solution because of the waste involved.

A friend in graduate school with me at the dawn of digitization used to call books "the ultimate multimedia tools." Books are easy to navigate, to open or close at will. Most are small enough to carry easily, with almost no obsolescence. I need not mention the need for an electric supply for long-term reading. You can use books off the grid. I have had the opportunity to carry out participant observation in several old but venerated research libraries recently: the most popular study spots are those with a plug nearby. For many uses of books, that does not matter.

A Sample of Student Perspectives

During a graduate seminar break one day several months ago, I talked with my graduate students about e-books. The issue came up in conversation before I was asked to be a part of this volume, and I had been thinking a lot about e-resources, because my natural experiment was conducted in that

same class. In a later (anonymous) course evaluation comment, one student indicated appreciation of “technologically literate” professors. (He or she used that phrase! I was relieved that the student seemed to think that I belonged in this group.) Having had the in-class conversation, I got the impression that, at minimum, technological literacy included making sure that electronic versions of course books and articles are available whenever possible and, more importantly, understanding how e-resources can be helpful to students and how students use e-resources. I think students perceive professors who do not at least have a working knowledge of the technological universe as either failing to exert due diligence or out of touch, or both.

I believe that the expectation of course e-material access for students (all in accordance with intellectual property rights) is a reasonable and widely accepted standard of practice nowadays. If students cannot find course resources with a click, sometimes the materials will not be used. I am not surprised if the run-of-the-mill undergraduate is not thoroughly familiar with the physical use of the library. That has become something that educators will have to teach some students to do. Students *should* be taught to do it competently. As I like to tell my undergraduates, there is more to “research” than typing a question into Google.

It is natural that, just as I have gotten accustomed to fast delivery of research material, we all get used to the wonderful, speedy availability of electronic course materials. Electronic availability makes course preparation for students far easier and cheaper than trudging individually to the library to photocopy reserve material, or buying a course packet of photocopies from a third-party vendor. Now that we can avoid that, we should.

Several of my graduate students said they “love” e-books, and they prefer only to use their laptops or tablets. Grad students have no choice but to be heavy readers, and a few of my students said they still, like me, found physical books easier to navigate when reading deeply. This group included a couple of nonnative English speakers who, like me, seemed to find paper a better fit for their reading and annotation needs.

It is an obvious possibility that some generational differences exist and may wax or wane as people grow up with sophisticated reading devices. The national and global economic divide related to digital access is something beyond the scope of this particular chapter, but I will say that libraries and affordable versions of publications, whether paper or digital, are part of the solution.

Given that many of my students prefer, or do not mind, e-resources for their college texts, and they prefer affordable texts, I keep that option in mind when I choose course texts. For students and for myself, I believe it is necessary to keep up with evolving publication platforms. I admit, though, that in the short run e-books, in whichever version one uses them, seem less enduring and, for me, more cumbersome and less valuable than paper books.

APP FATIGUE

A number of colleagues gave e-books mixed reviews for additional reasons. My account is anecdotal and restricted to personal acquaintances, but several have said they prefer physical books because they are easier to read, faster to read, and you don't have to mess with the technology and wait for it to load. Also, given the large amount of screen time already logged, many frequent book readers may find a sense of physical relief and even pleasure when reading a regular book.

Although I appreciate the constant software updates associated with improvements in e-resource use, I also rue the time it takes just to keep up with latest versions, software updates, and the jumbled assortment of ways to access various e-content sources. This, and the issue of dealing with multiple and changing software platforms, have induced in me a kind of *app fatigue*. Keeping up with the pace of technical change can cut into productive research, teaching, and even free time. This is a real phenomenon that extends to e-book use for me, and possibly for other frequent digital users like me.

In addition, many people who use screens professionally all day just for writing and daily uses like e-mail have at one time or another experienced a related health issue. Such concerns include eyestrain and other aches and pains (Korkki, 2011). I have to agree with a colleague who mentioned that, in practical terms, adding e-book reading to existing screen time is not a particularly attractive prospect.

CONCLUSION AND CONFESSION OF AN E-AUTHOR

To conclude, given my usual preference for paper, when must I have a printed book and when will an e-book do? I want a book when I will be making extensive notes on it, and when I think I will be referring to it repeatedly or in depth. I also really need a paper book when the subject material

is highly complex. This applies when I am using it in the classroom or as a key research text, when the subject matter requires deep thinking and concentration. The preference also includes potential uses *in extremis*, such as when I experience eyestrain or might lack either a charged device or Wi-Fi access. An e-book will often suffice when I am doing quick reference or searching for something in particular. Also, I often do find it convenient to read lighter fare on a screen.

On the whole, some practical benefits of e-books generally balance the drawbacks for many of my professional uses. I am very happy that libraries are beginning to include e-books in their holdings. Library access is extremely useful to me as a scholar. Still, I do not yet foresee a time when the physical book will be outmoded for my own use. If I buy a book, I prefer to spend money on a paper copy.

Finally, the incorporation of e-books into research libraries makes me more confident that if I suggest a book to individual students or colleagues, they will be able to peruse it without undue investment or inconvenience. My confession in this regard is that sometimes that includes library e-books that I myself have written. For good or ill, thanks to the presses that have published my work, I am now an e-author.

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