# Beyond Prophecies: The Printed Book Survives

**S. Gopalakrishnan[1], M. Prabakaran[2] and  P. Ramkumar[3]**

[1]*Librarian, Velammal College of Engineering & Technology, Madurai – 625009, Tamil Nadu, India*
[2]*Librarian, Vivekananada College, Thiruvedagam West – 625234, Tamil Nadu, India*
[3]*Asst. Librarian, AMET University, Chennai – 603112, Tamil Nadu, India*
Email: librarian@vcet.ac.in, velgapraba@gmail.com, ramkumar_pe@yahoo.com

*Abstract -* **In 1948, Vannever Bush gave initial thoughts towards the concept of a public memory in the form of memex – a device named by him for the storage of library documents.  In 1965, Licklider continued the thread given by Bush and discussed the concept of networked information environment.  The advent of digital documents made many over imagine a situation that may substitute the printed books. Many came out with speculations about the future of libraries which were exclusively dealing with printed books till 1960s.  Future of libraries then was discussed in the context of print and paper.  All such speculations fixed a deadline for the extinction of the printed book and the advent of a paperless society.  In 1978, Lancaster in his paper fixed 1989 – a period of 20 years from his date of prophecy for the death of the book and the maturity of a paperless society.  What happened to the prophecies?  This paper provides an overview of all such speculations and an answer in view of the real life situation in library environment.**

*Keywords:* **Libraries future Future book Print vs digital Paperless society**

## I. Introduction

In the beginning was the word, says the Bible. The printed word comes to stand as the basic unit for Education and Communication. The conventional printed Book is an evidence of human cultural history of social knowledge. The printed word and paper have been associated with human history for a longer period than any other invention and remained dominant for centuries in libraries. Predictions have been there since the advent of the computers regarding the death of the book. Every predictor fixes a probable year for the end of the book.  Electronic revolution has been transforming the printed book into digital documents creating illusions that the book is terminally ill and a paperless society is in the offing. Time and convenience of access to the e-resources created 'anywhere, anytime, any device' environment and truly take the readers away from the library.  Does this abandoning of the printed book by a majority of readers in their prioritized preference to e-resources mark its end?

## II. Paperless Society

For centuries, since their inception, libraries have been absorbing innovations in the formats of documents in favour of collectivities all along.  Preservation and dissemination of knowledge evolve continuously.  A variety of graphic materials have come and gone. History reveals that, whenever a new material came, it substituted the previous one. "Ceramic plates, baked clay plates, manuscript rolls, papyrus and parchment among other supports, invariably, after the printing press was invented by Johannes Gutenberg, are definitely relegated to disuse and replaced with mass-produced books printed on paper. Later on, it was the time of microfische, compact discs (CD), digital versatile discs (DVD) and so on until reaching the digital support, when physical libraries start being hosted in clouds". Many of the innovations that seemed to be substitutes for the printed book did not last long and did not have the mass appeal. The best example is the microfische which did not reach the average library user.  Of all the innovations, it is the printed book that has been long lasting and running along in the history of mankind.

## III. Pushing The Book to Oblivion

The dawn of the computer technology and the advent of the e-resources make experts believe that the book may be pushed to oblivion. In July 1945, Vannevar Bush  (1948) [1] proposed a device named by him as Memex – a term for a machine to store and retrieve a library of information at a desk, and also to link related bits of information together in a fashion similar to hyper-linking. Envisioning the databases and information systems of today, Bush proposed Memex 'as a way for scientists to share and disseminate knowledge, helping  them to wade through the enormous volume of information being produced and find the important gems.' Storing vast libraries in a Memex system would replace printed books, and would aid in search and retrieval of information. Much of what Bush predicted has come true but the erasure of the book from the library.

In 1965, Licklider  (1965) [2] published his book entitled Libraries of the Future, in which he discussed how information could be stored and retrieved electronically. His theoretical information network, which he called a procognitive system sounds remarkably similar to Tim Berners-Lee's World Wide Web.  In that line of prophecy or a speculation came Lancaster's  book (1978) [3], Towards Paperless Information Systems which attracted citations heavily.  After generously acknowledging information pioneers like Vannevar Bush, and J.C.R. Licklider, in his book, Lancaster laid the foundation for his own vision of an information-driven, paperless society assuming a possible withering of libraries.

## IV. Lancaster's Prophecy

Lancaster's  prophecy  regarding  paperless  society became a dream and did not become a reality and never happened.  Quite contrarily, it seems that the knowledge society is drowning in paper as some critics observed. However, Lancaster's work is still very much interesting for his views on the dominant role of  e-resources and the future of the book as well. Till 1960s and further, printed book was synonymous to library. Lancaster  (1978) [4] recognized that libraries do not need to be "physical entities bounded by walls" consisting "of whatever resources the librarians have the wit to exploit from those available in the global information network."  Lancaster lived to see his own predictions regarding electronification of the library which came true again excepting the erasure of the printed books. Right from 1978 till 1999, Lancaster [5,6,7,8] contributed a number of publications reviewing the transformation of libraries entering into the electronic universe.  In his initial work, the year 1989 was marked by him as ultimatum for the disappearance of that last book from the libraries.

Lancaster did not hesitate to revisit his own views though he did not give up his prediction regarding the death of the printed book. The cream of Lancaster's discussions point out the user as the decision maker when Lancaster  (1985) [9] asserted that, "The fact that I have written about an electronic future does not necessarily mean that I endorse such a future or that I enthusiastically look forward to it. A new technology may improve an existing situation but bring with it its own set of problems. It can be used to benefit society or to impair it. The impact is determined by the qualities of the humans [italics introduced] who exploit it, rather than by properties inherent in the technology itself." Lancaster was clear in his vision to project the library user who may exploit technology as the deciding factor rather than the properties of technology.  Lancaster (1985), seven years after his first publication on the future, revisited his own predictions and came out with his final article [10]  in the year 1999 entitled Second Thoughts on the Paperless Society. Lancaster was continuous in contributing further to the literature through a number of publications. In his final version, Lancaster, coauthoring with Bradley, in 1989 extended the time frame of prediction for the paperless society to the year 2090. It can very well be assumed that in the year 1989, they worked it out for a hundred years and hence 2090. Lancaster wanted to foresee a universe in which "the Brain" would serve as the non-interactive provider of information to all the clients as envisioned in Lancaster & Bradley [11],  (1989). Lancaster and Bradley were clearly alarmed about the robotic future and they did not forget to alert the library profession. Lancaster concluded his dialogue with librarians saying that, "Technology alone will not improve the perceived value of our services to users. We need to reduce our preoccupation with technology and increase our concern for library users as individuals with individual needs. We need to recognize that the ethic of public service should be at the center of our professional education. We need more warm librarians."

Future Developments may be speculated or predicted to some extent and reality need not match exactly or verbatim the predictions.  Developments are based on environment shaped by many attributes with the library readers as the decision makers. They exhibit by their actions and never Information Communication Technology is the major player in shaping today's environment in general amidst various other factors.  This has caused a drastic change in the role of the library as a major source of information.  It is the green past, green ever in the memories of librarians who would have started their career prior to the 1990s. Patricia P. Nelson (2003) [12] writes that, "The library was a place for serious study and quiet reflection. The card catalog was an arcane system to be mastered to find needed information. Literature searches were preformed only by librarians. The ideal library was a big building with large holdings." Well, things have changed away from those days. Actually, Nelson points out that change is constant and fast in our information world.  Of all the attributes, changes get their effect and implementation on the extent of acceptance by the end user as already pointed out by Lancaster.  The truth is that the book lives on along with the e-resources though with reduced number of takers.

## V. Free for All to Speculate

Even two years ago, in August 2011, Ewan Morrison (2011) [13] asserted, "within 25 years the digital revolution will bring about the end of paper books." Morrison has been one among the links in a chain of continuity to declare the demise of the traditional book. Jeff Gomez (2008) [14] was one of many speculators who declared that "Print is dead." Prophecies have been there for long on the death of the printed paper and hence the book. A few may be writing from various corners of the world on the supposed terminal illness of the book.

## VI. Exaggerated Death News: Twain and The Book Alike

Whenever the concept of digital library comes under discussion, in the context of the traditional book and e-books, many among the community of librarians thought that it was the end of the day for the traditional printed book. This resembles a situation that confronted Mark Twain, the famous literary figure who happened to see his own death news in the obituary column of a newspaper, of course in print format of his days (19th century). It was June 1, 1897. The New York Herald, regarded as one of the top daily newspapers in America, reported Mark Twain, then 51, to be "grievously ill and possibly dying. Worse still, we are told that his brilliant intellect is shattered and that he is sorely in need of money." At that time Twain was in London. He was closely associated with another magazine, the New York Journal. Twain's association allowed the New York Journal to puncture The New York Herald's account as false. In an article published the next day, on June 2, 1897, beneath the headline, "Mark Twain Amused," the Journal skewered the Herald's story and offered Twain's timeless denial: "The report of my death was an exaggeration [15]." The paper has been in the lime light of the supposed premature "death-of-the-book" prophecies. The electronic book is current in a long line of technological innovations that are destined to depose the book. In recent years, speculation about the demise of the book has become a common place.

Well, things have changed away from those days. Actually, Nelson (2003) points out that change are constant and fast in our information world." Of all the attributes, changes get their effect and implementation on the extent of acceptance of any new technology by the end user as already pointed out by Lancaster. The truth is that the book lives on along with the digital resources though with reduced number of takers. Carol Tenopir (2003) [16] in her article "What user studies tell us?" reported that, "Even science faculty favor printed journals for their personal subscriptions, with medical faculty conducting a lot of current awareness reading in print journals. Print is still used for some reading and is a part of research in almost every discipline. A majority of e-journal users still print out articles, making a format like PDF popular." Though, it is 10 years after Tenopir's observation, the situation does not seem to have changed far too much. A similar survey report was released from Honkong wherefrom Bodomo *et al.,* (2003) [17] reported that, "Electronic resources seem likely to replace most of print materials, especially journals, but uncertainty still remains. Some students still prefer print books in the 21st century. The paradigm shift from print to digital libraries, if this were the target at all, would depend on measures taken to encourage a positive attitude of users of digital resources. The fact is that, most students of this century are more accustomed to print books. Schools in Hong Kong adopt more print literacy practices than electronic ones, i.e. students are trained to be more 'print literate' than 'digitally literate'. It is thus understandable that there is a long way from full acceptability." The results of a global survey of [18] samples from various countries regarding print and digital resources were released in 2007. The survey found that, "Approximately 50% prefer electronic versus 18% for print. For 72% of the respondents e-journals provided more effective access than print and 68% found them easier to use. Reading a whole book or extensive sections of it was an obvious exception for 79% of the respondents who preferred print. The electronic resources that faculty thought were most appropriate for the majority of their assignments were e-journals (88%); educational, governmental, and professional web sites (82%); online reference databases (74%); and e-books (65%). This closely reflected the preferences faculty reported for their own usage."

Most of the surveys suggest that today's college students, the youngest of the library clientele lot who have been quick to adapt to electronic delivery of music have been only lukewarm to e-textbooks and to e-book readers such as Kindles and Nooks, at least for the moment. Many of these students are still found printing off electronic textual materials, saying that "reading on the screen for too long is stressful on the eyes. Many say that they cannot easily annotate their e-books. A new publication service allows

students to purchase textbooks in one of three ways: an inexpensive digital version, a more expensive paperback version, and a high-end hardback version. Despite the lower cost of the digital version, the company reports that 80% of students purchase a printed version of the textbooks [19]." A recent survey by the University of California Libraries found that a majority of students preferred printed text books to e-textbooks in part because the computer presented too many distractions [20]. Will this preference for physical books continue as these students mature? Even if they demand fewer books because of an indifference to reading, whatever the format will these users still prefer physical books to electronic devices?'

## VII. Conclusion

Will the score for traditional book end in zero and if yes, when? , remains a perpetual question. Speculators and predictors may not stop but come with prophecies. Why not a positive speculation? The aesthetic pleasure of reading a printed page cannot be substituted or erased by technologies which change the format of reading material but not the printed book. So far mankind is there, the printed book may live to the happiness of readers. Speculators are mortals but not the printed book.

### References

[1] Bush, Vannevar , As We May Think. The Atlantic Monthly. July 1945, Vol.176, No.1, pp.101-108, 1945. http://www.theatlantic.com/ unbound /flashbks/ computer/bushf.htm Retrieved on 09-09-2012.

[2] J. C. R. Licklider,"Libraries of the Future Cambridge", Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1965.

[3] F. W. Lancaster, "Toward Paperless Information Systems", New York: Academic Press.

[4] F. W. Lancaster, "Whither libraries? or Wither libraries", College & Research Libraries, Vol.39, pp.345–357, 1978.

[5] Lancaster, "The Future of the Librarian Lies Outside of the Library". Catholic Library World, Vol.51, pp: 388–391, 1980.

[6] F. W. Lancaster, "Libraries and Librarians in an age of Electronics", Arlington, VA: Information Resources Press, 1982.

[7] F. W. Lancaster, "The Evolving Paperless Society and its Implications for Libraries", International Forum on Information and Documentation, Vol.7 No.4, pp: 3–10, 1982.

[8] F. W. Lancaster, "Future Librarianship: Preparing for an Unconventional Career", Wilson Library Bulletin, Vol.57, pp.747–753, 1983.

[9] F. W. Lancaster, "The Paperless Society Revisited", American Libraries, Vol.16, pp.553–555, 1985.

[10] F. W. Lancaster, "Second Thoughts on the Paperless Society", Library Journal, Vol.124 No.15, pp.48– 50, 1999.

[11] F. W. Lancaster and Bradley, J. Image 2090: The Brain in Control. Wilson Library Bulletin, Vol.63 No.10, pp.50–53, 1989.

[12] Nelson, Patricia P. (2003), Current Issues in the Design of Academic Health Science Libraries: Findings from Three Recent Facility Projects. Journal of the Medical Library Association, 91(3), p. 347.

[13] Morrison, Ewan. (2011), Are Books Dead, and Can Authors Survive?" The Guardian website, August 22, 2011. www.guardian. co.uk/books/2011/aug/22/are-books-dead-ewan morrison. Retrieved on 06-12-2012.

[14] Gomez, Jeff . (2008), Print Is Dead: Books in our Digital Age. New York: Macmillan, pp.175 –193.

[15] mediamythalert.wordpress.com/.../noting-the-anniversary-of-twains-r. Retrieved on 25-10-2012.

[16] Tenopir, Carol. (2003), What User Studies Tell Us. Library Journal, 128 (September 1, 2003), p. 32.

[17] Bodomo, Adams., Lam, Mei-ling., and Lee, Carmen. (2003), Some Students Still Read Books In The 21st Century: A Study Of User Preferences For Print And Electronic Libraries. The Reading Matrix, 3(3), pp.46-47.

[18] McKiel, Allen W. (2007), Global Faculty E-book Survey. Paul Alto, USA: ebrary. Available at: www.ebrary.com Retrieved on 26-04-2013.

[19] Campbell, Alex. (2011), New Digital Tools Let Professors Tailor Their Own Textbooks for Under $20. The Chronicle of Higher Education, October 9, 2011. Available at: http://chronicle.com/ article/New-Digital-Tools-Let/129309 Retrieved on 23-09-2012.

[20] Lauer, Jonathan D. (2012), Baseball Bats and the Wired Library: A Cautionary Tale. The Chronicle of Higher Education, April 29, 2012. Available at: http://chronicle.com/article/Baseball-Batsthe-Wired/131669.Retrieved on 03-03-2013.

[21] Different Reading Devices, Different Modes of Reading? News release, Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz, October 20, 2011. Available at: www.uni-mainz.de/eng/14685.php. Retrieved on 02-04-2013.