



Evidence Summary

Access of Digitized Print Originals in US and UK Higher Education Libraries Combined with Print Circulation Indicates Increased Usage of Traditional Forms of Reading Materials

A Review of:

Joint, Nicholas. "Is Digitisation the New Circulation?: Borrowing Trends, Digitisation and the nature of reading in US and UK Libraries." *Library Review* 57.2 (2008): 87-95.

Reviewed by:

Kurt Blythe
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
151 Davis Library, Chapel Hill, NC 27514
E-mail: kcblythe@email.unc.edu

Received: 12 December 2008

Accepted: 10 February 2009

© 2009. Blythe. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Objective – To discern the statistical accuracy of reports that print circulation is in decline in libraries, particularly higher education libraries in the United States (US) and United Kingdom (UK), and to determine if circulation patterns reflect a changing dynamic in patron reading habits.

Design – Comparative statistical analysis.

Setting – Library circulation statistics from as early as 1982 to as recent as 2006, culled from various sources with specific references to statistics gathered by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), the Library and Information Statistics Unit (LISU), the Association of Research Libraries

(ARL), the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), and the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL).

Subjects – Higher education institutions in the United States and United Kingdom, along with public libraries to a lesser extent.

Methods – This study consists of an analysis of print circulation statistics in public and higher education libraries in the US and UK, combined with data on multimedia circulation in public libraries and instances of digital access in university libraries. Specifically, NEA statistics provided data on print readership levels in the US from 1982 to 2002; LISU statistics were analyzed for

circulation figures and gate counts in UK public libraries; ARL statistics from 1996 to 2006 provided circulation data for large North American research libraries; NCES statistics from 1990 to 2004 contributed data on circulation in “tertiary level” US higher education libraries; and ACRL statistics were analyzed for more circulation numbers for US post-secondary education libraries. The study further includes data on UK trends in print readership and circulation in UK higher education libraries, and trends in US public library circulation of non-print materials.

Main Results – Analysis of the data indicates that print circulation is down in US and UK public libraries and in ARL-member libraries, while it is up in the non-ARL higher education libraries represented and in UK higher education libraries. However, audio book circulation in US public libraries supplements print circulation to the point where overall circulation of book materials is increasing, and the access of digital literature supplements print circulation in ARL-member libraries (although the statistics are difficult to measure and meld with print circulation statistics). Essentially, the circulation of book material is increasing in most institutions when all formats are considered. According to the author, library patrons are reading more than ever; the materials patrons are accessing are traditional in content regardless of the means by which the materials are accessed.

Conclusion – The author contends that print circulation is in decline only where digitization efforts are extensive, such as in ARL-member libraries; when digital content is factored into the equation the access of book-type materials is up in most libraries. The author speculates that whether library patrons use print or digital materials, the content of those materials is largely traditional in nature, thereby resulting in the

act of “literary” reading remaining a focal point of library usage. Modes of reading and learning have not changed, at least insofar as these things may be inferred from studying circulation statistics. The author asserts that digital access is favorable to patrons and that libraries should attempt to follow the ARL model of engaging in large-scale digitization projects in order to provide better service to their patrons; the author goes on to argue that UK institutions with comparable funding to ARLs will have greater success in this endeavour if UK copyright laws are relaxed.

Commentary

The article does a good job of confronting with statistical evidence what the author perceives to be the widely-held belief that print circulation is declining as a result of changing modes of learning and habits in reading on the part of higher education students and public library patrons. On the contrary, the author finds that print circulation is actually up in many institutions, and he reasons that when audio book circulation and digital access of print originals are combined with print circulation, the overall circulation of book-type materials is up in nearly all libraries; Joint contends that these figures indicate that “reflective” reading has not been overthrown in favor of non-linear reading habits. The cognitive processes of younger, “digital natives” are not changing.

The article is less effective at proving that because traditional materials are being accessed – regardless of format – they are being consumed in traditional ways, although proving this is not the thrust of the article. Likewise, relatively little data are provided regarding audio book circulation statistics and what, how often, and for what reason digital collections are used. The author points out that visits to UK public

libraries are increasing even as print circulation is decreasing, but fails to provide more than speculation that those patrons are using the library for anything more than "net surfing and game-playing." The article attempts to argue that differences in US and UK copyright laws account for differences in the effectiveness of digitization efforts, but neither closely analyzes differences in copyright nor studies to what extent copyright impacts digitization. Neither does the author really prove the correlation between increased digitization and decreased circulation; it simply remains unproven that those elements of digital content accessed by patrons are traditional in nature, and that methods of consuming those materials are also traditional in nature.

Nonetheless, the article does well to compare the potential for digital books to the situation with journals moving online wherein the mode of access changes while the content and method of consumption remain largely the same. Moreover, the

article is useful to libraries questioning their role in an increasingly technology-dominated environment. Although the argument for public libraries receives less attention, and detracts somewhat from the overall effectiveness of the article; some good points are made for the case of traditional scholarly content, regardless of format, in retaining its use-value in higher education. While the article is perhaps too far-reaching, moving from statistics and speculation on usage and the cognitive processes of patrons to copyright, and more speculative than is entirely useful the overall argument that traditional, reflective reading is still being done is strong, as is the argument for digitizing print originals. In regions where copyright law (and funding) allows for wide-spread digitization of print originals, as seen in the ARL model, library patrons are provided with an excellent service; one that combines content with format, and does not weaken the library's position in the discovery process.