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Greening the Media

How media technology contributes to the global ecological crisis.

by Richard Maxwell, Ph.D. and Toby Miller, Ph.D.

Hey Book Lovers: Stop Paying to Read Books

The alternative is free, friendly, and green

Published on September 6, 2014 by Richard Maxwell, Ph.D. and Toby Miller, Ph.D. in Greening the Media

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If there's one thing we learnt from the recent battle between the mega-publisher Hachette and the on-line retail giant and super polluter Amazon, it's that they both want to increase their take of the reading public's money.

Media coverage of this corporate dust-up has largely focused on the Walmart-scale power that Amazon wields over its suppliers and how this is changing the business model of publishing. Caught in the middle are the authors who make their living writing books, who have come to depend on Amazon's virtual bookstore for sales (disclosure: our own book sales are too meager for us to care). And this now includes a growing proportion of downloadable books for e-readers.

The episode reminds us that mainstream commentary on publishing does a fine job of explaining what's important for the commercial book market, but generally fails to address the social context of reading. We see this in the way the debate over digital versus paper reading has been reported. In a previous column on the topic, we concluded that most of the differences between the technologies disappear when we think of these reading materials as public goods—books, magazines, and news that are made available to all who want them. As we wrote there, the public library is an enduring example of this socially oriented model—a great facilitator of democracy and key site of the American Dream.¹

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For a long time, commercial publishers and book stores treated libraries as competitive nuisances—publishers wouldn't sell certain titles, or set prices at higher “library rates” to diminish the availability of free reading.

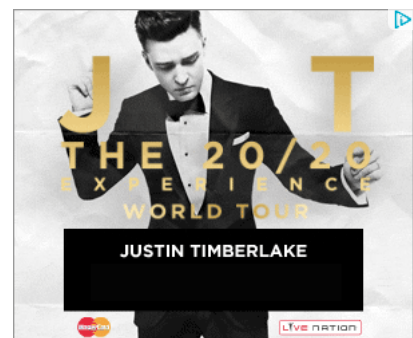
The same thing is happening with e-books, as publishers limit a library's access to full catalogues of digital material, even as an increasing number of libraries now provide users with online access to downloadable library books and make e-readers available for free check out. The private commercial media have long disdained public media in all its forms, and will take advantage of any chance they have to win readers away from free reading material (the same could be said about profiteers grabbing pieces of public education, public health care, transport, and so on). Book stores recognized the value of the social spaces provided by libraries and installed coffee shops and comfortable reading chairs to create their own for-profit version. And Amazon, helping itself by helping libraries, has offered a ten percent commission on e-book sales



Richard Maxwell, Ph.D., is Professor and Chair of Media Studies at Queens College, City University of New York. **Toby Miller, Ph.D.**, is an interdisciplinary social scientist. [more...](#)

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made at library kiosks when visitors discover that the digital versions they want are not in the free library collection.²

The most telling difference between the for-profit and non-profit provision of reading material is found in the power of the lowly library card. Here's a sampling of that power from a New York library guide:

- You may borrow materials for free (movies, books, videogames, magazines, music...)
- You may access wireless internet for free
- You may borrow laptops for free for use on-site
- You have access to all online material, including databases, on-site or off-site
- You may have 50 items on loan at any time

The only restrictions are shorter loan periods for high-demand items, movies, and music, and limited time on desktop computers.³ And all this free stuff is just part of the library experience. On a recent visit to a crowded local public library in New York on a Saturday morning, we found full reading rooms, computers being used by children doing homework and people applying for jobs, and special services for seniors and young readers. Multilingual programs are available (in some New York libraries, collections are kept in two dozen languages) as are English literacy courses. Here's a link to a short video on New York's libraries: <http://www.theatlantic.com/video/index/371084/why-libraries-matter/>

Public libraries are not only free reading and meeting places; a growing number of them offer "makerspaces." These are working areas within a library that provide settings for collaborative projects, hackers, web designers, and fab labs—equipped for fabricating physical things. This emphasis on learning how to make content, rather than just consuming it, is a digital update of older craft activities encouraged by public libraries—knitting, sewing, crocheting, and the like—though makerspaces are responding to a demand to enhance education in science, technology, engineering, math, and art.⁴ While these makerspaces have yet to prove their potential to free up creative thinking and innovation, they show how public libraries can expand to serve changing community interests.⁵




When we think about market-driven debates over access to books and other reading material, it is important to remember the social context in which we learn, read, hack, design, debate, and gather with friends. Let's celebrate this September as "library card sign-up month" and try to take our reading away from some big corporation's business.⁶ Visit your local library, support increases in funding, and make something while you're there. It's the cleaner, greener, collective alternative to an exclusionary corporate world.

1. <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/greening-the-media/201309/don-t-be-misled-about-paper-versus-electronic-books>
2. <http://fortune.com/2013/07/22/amazon-vs-your-public-library/>
3. <http://www.queenslibrary.org/services/library-card/using-your-card>
4. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/00049670.2013.853335>
5. <http://tascha.uw.edu/2014/07/examining-the-maker-movement-through-discourse-analysis-an-introduction/>

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