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Notes on the digital tsunami

On the end of Encyclopædia Britannica.

We read with sadness last month the news that the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, after 244 years of continuous publication, has decided to stop producing a print edition. The first edition, published in Edinburgh between 1761 and 1768, fitted comfortably into three volumes. The last "dead tree" version of the venerable reference work (published in America since the early 1900s) is the thirty-two-volume 2010 edition. "Some people will feel sad about it and nostalgic about it," said Jorge Cauz, President of Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc. "But we have a better tool now. The website is continuously updated, it's much more expansive and it has multimedia."

Two points. First, the name "Encyclopædia Britannica" refers to two quite different enterprises. Until around 1950, it was a great reference work, written by experts, edited by people who cared about clarity of expression. Then academics like Mortimer Adler got into the act. They turned it from a work one could read with enjoyment into a pseudo-Aristotelian reader-proof object of veneration that people might acquire to obtain a patina of culture but no longer read. (It was Adler who reorganized the encyclopedia into three parts with the rebarbative names "Micropædia," "Macropædia," and "Propædia.") There were some very great editions of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Perhaps the greatest of all was the celebrated eleventh edition from 1910. We have a copy adorning our shelves and consult that brilliant, opinionated work often with profit and pleasure. Recent editions shared the name but not the accomplishment.

Second, the decision to stop producing a paper version of the encyclopedia was little more than a formality, a doctor's official pronouncement of death after the corpse has been moldering for an unseemly period. In 1990, according to an article in *The New York Times*, the company sold 120,000 sets of its reference work in the United States. In 2010, the number was 8,000 sets. In that year, sales of the encyclopedia accounted for less than 1 percent of the company's income. Some 15 percent came from the 500,000 annual subscriptions to Britannica's website (count on that to diminish as Wikipedia, which is free, continues to grow and improve). The lion's share of its income—close on 85 percent—came from the dissemination of "curricular materials" for schools. Thus the "realities of the digital age"—a phrase that regularly crops up when the subject is the collapse of traditional print—and what one commentator called the "inexorable trend" away from

what we might call paper-based documents.

Let's pause over the phrase "paper-based documents." We require some such circumlocution because "documents" has become an equivocal term. Something similar can be said about the words "print," "book," and even "read." A "document" used to refer to words inscribed on paper or similar medium. Today, the inscription can be virtual, a matter of illuminated pixels, and the medium electronic. You might be reading this in the handsomely printed, perfect-bound collection of 7.25-by-10-inch pages that appears on newsstands and in mailboxes throughout the civilized world monthly from September through June. Or you might be reading it on a computer screen or handheld reading device. In either case, it is a document and what you are doing is reading it.

So is the news about the *Encyclopædia Britannica* no news at all but merely further corroboration of a *fait accompli*? In part. Look around at similar large-scale publishing ventures. It is by no means clear, for example, that *The Oxford English Dictionary* will enjoy another print edition. Back in 2010 Nigel Portwood, CEO of the Oxford University Press, was interviewed by the Sunday *Times*. "The print dictionary market is just disappearing; it is falling away by tens of percent a year." Would the third edition of the OED be printed? "I don't think so," he said. We'd wager that the venerable *Dictionary of National Biography*, which, with considerable fanfare, simultaneously published its new edition in electronic as well as print format back in 2004 (we reviewed it in our issue for January 2005), has also seen its last print edition.

When it comes to the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, it is also worth noting that it (unlike the OED or DNB) has been leading a sort of posthumous existence for decades. We suspect that the collapse of the paper-based aspect of its enterprise is merely the prelude to further diminutions. But the technological revolution of which it is a casualty is a larger and more mysterious phenomenon. It is also, we suspect, a revolution that has barely begun. What does it portend?

Back in October 2009, we wrote in this space about Cushing Academy, an ivy-halled prep school in Ashburnham, Massachusetts, that had recently decided to remove all the books from its library and transform the space into a computer center with high-speed access to the internet and such upscale amenities as a $12,000 cappuccino machine. Last month, we read that the New York Public Library will be following suit. As part of a $1 billion renovation project, the library will ship more than two million books from its flagship Fifth Avenue building to storage in New Jersey and transform what was a non-circulating research library into a computer-friendly circulating library designed by Norman Foster. (Sandwiches and cappuccino, *The Wall Street Journal* reported, will be supplied by 'wichcraft.)

Whatever one thinks of this brave new world, one thing is certain. It is irresistible. It is the wave of the present, transforming the world of publishing, education, and research. There are undoubtedly huge benefits in the offing. Publishers, for example, will no longer have to budget on seeing 40 or 50 percent of what they sell come back to them as returns from booksellers. They will no longer have to pay tens of thousands of dollars a year to warehouse inventory and pay for

shipping. Instead of spending $30,000 to print ten thousand copies of a book, they will buy a $1,500 piece of software and create any number of books that can be infinitely reproduced and distributed for the cost of a few key strokes and an internet connection. The upside is considerable.

And yet it is the rare benefit that does not come with attendant liabilities. One liability is that in our rush to embrace a new technology we ignore, to our impoverishment, a serviceable old technology. It is difficult for anyone who has spent any time on the internet not to appreciate its power. But we recall an anecdote that the great classicist John Herington recounted in these pages in 1997. "Back in the 1960s," Mr. Herington wrote,

> when computers were just beginning to make an impact on society at large, some conservative-minded wit put about the rumor that a new device of titanic power had just been developed. It was the key to everything you could possibly need to know, and yet it could be carried in the hand and needed no cords or batteries; it had no name as yet, but provisionally it was being called Built-in Orderly Organized Knowledge, or BOOK for short.

The internet is a wonderful thing; no less is a printed book. Two intellectual miracles: We needn't choose one and discard the other. It would be a pity if, in our race to be technologically *au fait*, we deprecated one critical, humanizing technology for the sake of another, more insinuating technology.

It is also worth noting that hidden in the extraordinary power of the internet and related technologies is a seductive infatuation: the belief that access to information is tantamount to the possession of knowledge. The critic David Guaspari put the point memorably when he observed that "comparing information and knowledge is like asking whether the fatness of a pig is more or less green than the designated hitter's rule."

The difference between information, on the one hand, and knowledge, on the other, should temper our technophilia—at least, it should make us chary of confining it to the latest manifestations of technology. A thornier issue revolves around what we might call the quality of attention. It is no secret that extensive use of the computer and internet breeds certain intellectual habits and discourages others. One casualty is patience. It's not just that we want access to the world's virtual library now, instantaneously. It's also that we find it increasingly difficult to sharpen our browsing into something more prolonged, concentrated, and thoughtful. Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger touched on this aspect of the issue when he observed,

> We have entered a time of total change in human consciousness of how people look at the world. Reading books requires you to form concepts, to train your mind to relationships. You have to come to grips with who you are. A leader needs these qualities. But now we learn from fragments of facts. . . . Now there is no need to internalize because each fact can instantly be called up on the computer. There is no context, no motive. Information is not knowledge. People are not readers but researchers, the float on the surface. This new thinking erases context. It disaggregates

everything. All this makes strategic thinking about world order impossible to achieve.

Secretary Kissinger was talking about the intellectual equipment a statesman should command. A kindred point can be made about the world of intellectual and moral enterprise generally. The digital revolution will make, has already made, many things possible. It is up to us who deploy these new technologies to ensure that they do not also make certain things we cherish impossible.

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