

CURRENT ISSUES

Hard Copy or Online? Balancing Books and Bytes in the Digital Age

Abstract: Claire Greening explores some of the challenges that library and information professionals face when weighing up hard copy and online resources. Rather than trying to establish a preferred or ‘best’ format, this article instead explores the advantages that both formats have to offer and considers how they can co-exist within the law library. The article concludes with some questions to ask when purchasing and organising resources and explores some of the practical considerations to take into account regarding training.

Keywords: hard copy services; online services; information resources

INTRODUCTION

Hard copy or online? The question is one that we’re all familiar with, whether from articles in the media or our own conversations with colleagues or library users. The language used to discuss the point often suggests a battle between the two; hard copy David fighting to stay relevant against the onslaught from the Goliath electronic resources.

In actual fact, the two formats have been co-existing for years and probably will do for many more. Rather than trying to predict a winner, this article focuses instead on understanding the differences between print and digital media and explores the ways that library and information professionals can build this knowledge into the way that they support and guide their users.

MYTH-BUSTING

The best place to start is by dispelling some of the common myths that surround the debate. These are the things that we’ve all probably read online or heard people say but are not supported by any hard facts!

“I’m too old to use the online resources”

This myth has more to do with older adults’ negative perceptions of their own ability to use technology rather than their actual ability to learn new skills. In fact, many of the issues that hinder older people in their use of online resources are just as likely to apply to younger people¹.

“The younger generation want everything to be online”

Not true! Various articles have been published in the last few years containing evidence to suggest that university students often prefer using the hard copy books to the online resources².

“Nobody uses books anymore – everything you need is online”

Firstly, not all books are available in electronic format so anyone who believes this myth risks missing out on important information and resources. The message from booksellers compounds this; for example, at the 2015 BIALL conference we heard that even though eBook sales are increasing, hard copy sales are not in decline. Outside of the legal publishing world the market has reached an equilibrium, with about one in three books sold in digital format³.

“The online resources are more up-to-date than the books”

Many people are under the impression that the online resources are updated more regularly than their printed equivalents. In fact, in the majority of cases, online versions of books are exact replicas of the printed versions and are updated at the same frequency. Whereas the hard copy editions will be clearly marked with edition or issue numbers the same information is not always so easy to find online.

UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFERENCES

So what is the truth? Why do some people prefer one format over the other? Looking beyond the myths, research would suggest that each has its own advantages and disadvantages. The more we can understand these differences, the better we can make the right choices about which format to use and when. We can use this knowledge to inform our purchasing decisions and to shape the way in which we make our library collections available to users.

Hard Copy	Online
Focused or in-depth research and study	Quick reference and fact-finding
Browsing or 'reading around' topics	Targeted word-searching
Navigating through large, familiar texts	Inter-linking between and within resources
Provenance and publication date information	Updates inserted directly by the publisher
Easy sharing of resources by people in the same location	Remote access to materials
Free from technological limitations	Free from physical or spatial limitations
The sensory pleasure of the physical library	Technology as an integral part of our lives

Figure 1: Hard copy v. Online

The table above summarises some of the most commonly-cited advantages for each format. It is not intended to be an exhaustive list but will provide a useful framework for this analysis.

Understanding the needs of the researcher

A number of studies have found that reading printed materials rather than on-screen can be beneficial for in-depth or focused study⁴. They claim that reading on-screen encourages skim reading and that the temptation to follow hyperlinks through to other articles or to quickly check email can be a big distraction for readers. It has also been suggested that there is something about the physical geography of a printed page that can help the brain to retain what is being read⁵.

Anecdotal evidence supports this. It is not unusual to hear users comment that they find it easier to concentrate when reading on paper and it is common for people to print copies of online material to read rather than using them on-screen. You may be buying your resources online but if the reality is that people are printing them to read then there are cost, licensing and environmental considerations that you should not ignore.

On the other hand, there are often situations where users need to check a fact or confirm a specific point. In those circumstances it is often far quicker to find the information online and with no detriment to the user's ability to absorb the information. Research also suggests that, over time, users can be taught to achieve the same level of focus and information retention from reading on-screen as they can from paper⁶ so in the longer-term this difference between the two formats may disappear.

Searching or browsing?

Hard copy books within a library can create a clear, visual set of resources to consult on a particular topic. Users can easily browse materials and may serendipitously find the answer to the problem where they were least

expecting to find it. They can assess the density and even the date of a book just by looking at it on the shelf.

Of course, the physical library is not without its problems. If key texts are missing from the shelf then users are not able to consult them or they may, based on its appearance, dismiss a book that would have provided a vital piece of information (the downside to judging a book by its cover!).

The electronic resources, on the other hand, are ideally suited for searching. One of their key strengths is the ability to run targeted searches for words or phrases that may not be indexed in the hard copy book but can be easily located by a quick search online. Searching may lead users to books that they never would have thought to consult in hard copy.

The downside to this is that users looking to read around a very general topic may struggle to find what they need if searching with very general keywords. That's not to say that it's impossible but it's likely that they'll need advanced knowledge about the database that they're using in order to do so. What's more, browsing can also be much more difficult online especially if key books on a particular subject are scattered across different research platforms.

Navigation between and within resources

In each area of law there are one or two texts that are held particularly dear to practitioners. These are often large printed volumes, usually decorated with a multitude of coloured flags and labels that signpost users to the information that they use most often.

Feedback suggests that books such as these can be difficult to navigate online. Web-based platforms do not usually offer the ability to 'flag' particular pages or sections and users can sometimes lose track of where they are within a large work if they are moving between different sections. The experience can be frustrating for users who usually consult the hard copy and can be daunting for inexperienced users who are exploring the text for the first time.

What the online books do offer, however, is the ability to quickly jump between hyperlinked references. These may be references to other paragraphs, case or legislation citations or even sections within other books. This is particularly helpful when using a particular resource as a starting point for research. The trail between commentary, primary law and other materials can be much easier to follow if the materials are all linked within a single online platform.

How up to date is the information?

Checking the date that information was published (or is up to date until) is a vital part of the research process. In a printed book a quick check of the title page will provide the publication date and the introductory paragraphs will usually contain a 'law as at' date. Loose-leafs typically have publication date information in the release notes at the bottom of each page.

However, when the same books are reproduced online this information can be hard to find or, in some cases, is lost altogether. Taking into account the popular misconception that anything online is always completely up to date, it is important to help users understand that, in most cases, the online versions of books are not updated any more frequently than their hard copy equivalents. When publication date information is hard to find this becomes a particularly difficult challenge!

A big advantage of online texts, however, is that those which are updated regularly, such as loose-leafs or annual books, are much easier to manage online. There's no need to fight your way through filing instructions and no last minute panic if you realise that you've forgotten to order the latest edition of that essential annual textbook! Updates will be automatically inserted by the publisher and, in some cases, new editions will be available online before they have been published in hard copy.

Access to materials

Lending hard copy books is easy (although getting them back again can be a different matter!) and, provided that the copyright rules are complied with, there are very few restrictions about how the books can be borrowed and shared between individuals. The same is not true when it comes to eBooks. Licensing within the commercial sector does not permit the sharing of eBooks and the copying or pasting of information is also prohibited.

Hard copy books do, however, have the disadvantage of being tied to a single user in a particular place. This is not the case for books that are available via online platforms, which allow multiple users to access the same book at once. If the licence and format permits, users can read books on the train, in their home, in court – wherever they need it and regardless of the size of the work or whether it is needed for use by other users at the same time.

Limitations of space or technology

One of the big advantages of hard copy materials is that they do not expose us to the frustrations of flat batteries, outdated software and all the other frustrations that come with technological failure. Technology may also limit our ability to build and maintain archives. For example, will we still be able to access the digital books that we're buying now in fifty years' time? Where will we archive them and will it still be possible to read them in their current format? Does it even matter? These are all questions that we need to be asking ourselves when deciding which format to choose.

At the same time, printed books are also vulnerable. At the 2015 BIALL conference we heard from Sara Roberts of the University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand about the devastating effects of the 2010 earthquakes on the law library. If our books have been destroyed or the library is no longer safe to access then we need to ensure that our users still have access to the essential materials for their work. Having an electronic database of key texts would be essential in such a situation.

Physicality

Finally, it would be impossible to write an article about hard copy resources without acknowledging the importance of the library itself as a physical space. Most law firms are gradually decreasing the amount of floor space allocated to the library but there is still a strong case to be made for having a quiet area for focused study. What's more, for many lawyers, books (and the library) represent knowledge. How many law firms have disbanded their central library only to retain a set of old books in client areas as a show of the firm's abilities?

The hard copy book also appeals to our senses. How many times have you heard someone say how much they love the smell of new or old books, or that they enjoy the feeling of holding a hard copy book? These things may sound unimportant to some people but our senses are thought to be linked to the way that we absorb and recall thoughts and information⁷ so their importance should not be dismissed.

Just as it is important to acknowledge the role of the library as a physical space we need to balance that against the increasingly important role that technology now plays in our lives. It is predicted that over 1 billion people worldwide now have tablets⁸ and for many people smart phones, tablets and other electronic devices are an essential part of their working lives. If we want to provide information to users in the most helpful formats then we need to understand and acknowledge the ways in which they are using technology.

FINDING THE RIGHT BALANCE

It is our responsibility as librarians and information professionals to understand and evaluate all of the

advantages and disadvantages discussed above so that we can provide the best mix of hard copy and online resources to support the needs of our users. We need to organise the resources in a way that makes them easy to find and navigate, regardless of their format, and to train our users to understand which resources they need and when. The following paragraphs explore some of the questions that we should be asking ourselves when making decisions about resources and training.

Purchasing new resources

For most people, the first question that comes to mind when evaluating the purchase of a new resource is 'how much is it?' This is, without doubt, an important consideration but there are other questions that we should also be asking when making the choice between hard copy and online resources:

- What type of resource is this? Will it require focused reading or is it a quick-reference material?
- What demand will there be for it? Is it for single use or is it likely to be in demand by a number of users at the same time?
- Where are my users based? Is the library easily accessible to them or are they based in multiple, off-site locations?
- What formats are available? eBooks may require users to have specific devices, while online (internet-based) books may not be compatible with tablet devices. What type of device do your users have?
- What feedback do we have about the formats? Some online tools are notoriously difficult to use. Will there be any real benefits to users if they have this resource online?

Organising the resources

Having the right resources is important but they also need to be easy to find and access if users are going to be able to make the most of them.

- How can we create links between the hard copy and online resources? It is important that users think of them as belonging to a single library. The catalogue can help with this but what else could we be doing? Some libraries display lists of electronic books in the hard copy library or annotate online resources with notes about helpful alternative hard copy resources. What would work in your library?
- How can we encourage browsing of online resources, as well as searching? Many firms are moving towards federated search models as a way to consolidate their resources but should we be looking

at ways to federate browsing across different platforms as well?

- How can we guide users through the resources, regardless of their format? Some libraries have created resource maps that indicate the best hard copy or online resources for specific topics. What other ways can we use to direct users to the right resource in the best format for their particular need?

Offering the right training

Finally, we need to make sure that, as much as possible, we share our knowledge about finding and navigating the resources with our users.

If users are searching online, it's not just a matter of showing them how to choose the right search terms or explaining how to narrow or refine their results, it's about getting them to understand what is being searched and making sure that the best resources are being selected from the outset. It's also important to help them know how to browse the resources (in both formats) and understand why they might want to do this rather than searching.

On top of this, most libraries probably have at least three or four major online platforms for resources, each of which will work in different ways. This creates a tendency for training to be platform-specific which, although useful, ignores the wider context of understanding how the resources, hard copy and online, fit together. One solution to this is 'flipping the classroom', or moving away from resource demonstrations to learning through scenario-based teaching⁹.

Finally, there are also practical skills that we need to teach our users. For example, if we know that they are going to want to read the online material in hard copy then we need to make sure that they know how to print from each platform and how much our licences allow them to print. We also need to make sure that users know how to check the date that information was published instead of automatically assuming that it's current. By 'flipping the classroom' we can balance this kind of platform-specific training against the broader scenario training.

THE FUTURE

In the past, keeping a well-stocked library was a question of making sure that it contained the best titles on the topics of interest to our users. We need to think beyond that now and evaluate the format of the resources we buy in order to make sure that users can also access them whenever and wherever they need them. By understanding the advantages of both electronic and hard copy we can make better informed decisions about the ways that we make resources available and can share this knowledge with users through the training that we provide.

There are lots of people who see the printed book as fighting a losing battle against the electronic resources. This seems an over-simplified view of the situation and ignores many of the key issues around why one format may be preferable to the other in different

situations. Maybe one day, with the right technology, the book will finally disappear from our shelves for good but until then it is our responsibility as library and information professionals to dispel the myths that surround this debate.

Footnotes

¹ Tim Broady, Amy Chan, and Peter Caputi, 'Comparison of older and younger adults' attitudes towards and abilities with computers: Implications for training and learning' [2010] *British Journal of Educational Technology* 41(3), 473–485

² See, for example: Michael S. Rosenwald, 'Wired millennials still prefer the printed word' *The Washington Post* (23 February 2015); 'K-12 Print Needs Persist Despite Digital Growth' *Education Week* (15 April 2015); Ian Burrell, 'Looks good on paper' *The Independent* (20 February 2014)

³ Henry Wallop, 'The Kindle is dead, the book is back. Or is it?' *The Telegraph* (10 January 2015)

⁴ For a helpful summary see: Maria Konnikova, 'Being a better online reader' (16 July 2014) <http://www.newyorker.com/science/maria-konnikova/being-a-better-online-reader> accessed 10 July 2015

⁵ Tom Chatfield, 'Why reading and writing on paper can be better for your brain' *The Guardian* (23 February 2015)

⁶ See Konnikova (2014) above

⁷ For a light-hearted view on this see: Piotr Kowalczyk, 'Book smell is back – 24 paper-scented perfumes and candles' (25 November 2014) <http://ebookfriendly.com/book-smell-perfumes-candles/> accessed 10 July 2015

⁸ 'Tablet Users to Surpass 1 Billion Worldwide in 2015' <http://www.emarketer.com/Article/Tablet-Users-Surpass-1-Billion-Worldwide-2015/1011806> accessed 10 July 2015

⁹ For a very helpful overview of this idea see: Nicola Sales, 'Flipping the classroom: revolutionising legal research training' [2013] *Legal Information Management* 13(4), 231–235

Biography

Claire Greening is Head of Library and Knowledge Services at Withers, an international law firm for successful people, their families, business and philanthropic activities. The Library and Knowledge Services team are responsible for ensuring that everyone in all teams across the firm has the knowledge, information and resources they need in order to complete their work to the highest possible standards. In 2015 the team were awarded the LexisLibrary Award for Best Legal Information Service (Commercial Sector), London.