

A diminished thing

What are we losing by favoring electronic access?

by Stan Campbell

As I write this, I am looking at a nearly perfect copy of Suetonius' *Vitae Caesarum*, dated 1496. The white leather binding, which is slightly sprung, probably dates from the 19th century. The pages are beautifully preserved, and the ink is a rich black. On many pages, there are carefully written notes in the margins.

I can hold this work of art in my hands. I can open it and run my fingers across the surface of its pages. Actually, I just look. Although I do not read Latin, the look and feel of the book make me feel a bit richer.

This book connects me to 500 years of human history, and I wonder who has held this book. I wonder about their lives. I wonder who wrote the notes in the margins. I have to wonder who chose to preserve the book, for me and for all of us right up to the end of the 20th century and the millennium.

For somehow, the book has survived an ocean voyage (when? why? how?), the French & Indian War, the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, and the Civil War. It has survived at least two fires in several different library buildings on this campus.

And still I can take it from the shelves and show it to a group of fifth graders who, world weary as they may be, are still astonished when I tell them the book was published just four years after Columbus ran ashore in America.

My point, I suppose, is that this book reminds me of at least two reasons why I became a librarian. I wanted to participate in

the preservation of the record of humanity's struggle and I wanted to be someone who could teach others how to discover that record. I stand by these reasons still.

I look at this volume and find that I am moved by the very object itself and what it represents as an emblem of the culture that created it. And then, I have to wonder what from our own culture will survive to inspire anyone 500 years or even 100 years from now. I honestly don't know.

No warranties available

Laura Tangley, in her recent article in *U.S. News & World Report*, points out what we have known for a long time. Magnetic tape, compact discs, and even microfilm have limited shelf lives, even under ideal conditions. Tangley goes on to point out that the vast majority of nearly eight million presidential files due to arrive in the National Archives soon after President Clinton leaves office (no jokes, now) will be "in the form of computer discs, CD-ROMs, and magnetic tapes," and that archivists and librarians warn that these formats are less durable than "simple parchment."

Also, we know that librarians everywhere are under pressure to cut print acquisitions in favor of online access. Part of the pressure comes from patron demands or perceived patron demands or from college presidents and library trustees who seem to think that everything is available free in an instant on the Internet.

About the author

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No doubt, some of our decisions favoring alternative format to hard copy are logical, economical, efficient, even appropriate. I like electronic access just fine. Who would want to search *Chemical Abstracts* or *The MLA Bibliography* any other way?

Print's not perfect

Also, let me say that I know that print is not perfect and that many paper documents did not survive the last 500 years. The cultural record of the past is far from complete. It may be that a larger percentage of our cultural record will survive in some form than have the records of other civilizations.

I am not sure, however, what will live and I am uneasy with how we make the decisions that will determine what does survive. I simply do not trust that decisions made in response to the expediency of the marketplace will serve us or our great-grandchildren well.

So, I look at *Vitae Caesarum*, marveling at these pages, and I have to wonder. Will microfilm or a CD even mean anything beyond

the simple information stored there? Will the CD or some subsequent version of it be the emblem of our culture?

What a dismal thought.

In "The Oven Bird," Robert Frost wrote:

The bird would cease and be as other
birds

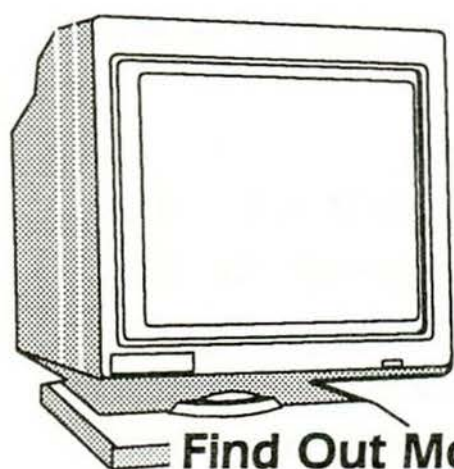
But that he knows in singing not to
sing.

The question that he frames in all but
words

Is what to make of a diminished thing.

And even though I know that we can make an argument that our decisions to eliminate the printed word and provide alternative formats and online access actually deepens our collections and enriches the cultural record, I pause. I have to ask. What is it we are losing? Do we really know why we are losing it? What are we to make of a diminished thing?

Just wondering. ■



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