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Physical plus digital

When *Journal of Documentation* began life in the late 1940s, the information world was physical: print-on-paper, plus the paper card ‘machinery’ well described by Marcus Krajewski (2011). Mechanised documentation – punched cards, edge-notched cards, and the like – was on the horizon, and numerous early *JDoc* papers were devoted to it, and to its consequences for information management. Then the information world became a bit digital, with computer databases and online searching, and then very digital, with the internet and all that flowed from it. And these developments too were chronicled in the *Journal*’s pages, though these pages too were increasingly read in digital form.

And so we became accustomed to the idea of a hybrid information world, a world of ‘physical plus digital’, and a number of *JDoc* papers looked at how these two aspects of the world fitted together, and whether digital environments counted as places; one of them, a consideration of the idea of the digital library as place by Jeffrey Pomerantz and Gary Marchionini (2007) is still among the most downloaded *JDoc* papers, five years after its publication. But in all these analyses, there seemed to be the assumption that the world was moving inexorably towards an all-digital condition.

Well, perhaps not. A recent report from J Walter Thompson (Rose 2013), explains why “physical is hot”. While there is still enthusiasm for digital, in many aspects of life people are seeking out, and valuing, physical equivalents. While speed, convenience and low cost are powerful motivators for seeking digital materials, physical items have an emotional resonance, an authenticity, and a pleasing imperfection, which is driving increased purchases of physical books, music, pictures and films, and even writing paper and traditional-style wristwatches.

Quite what this means for information dissemination and information behaviour is not easy to tell. Certainly not a return to library stacks full of printed journals, nor a revival of card catalogues. But we should not assume that the information world, any more than any other part of the world, is going to be inexorable all-digital; the digital-plus-physical balance is likely to be more subtle than that. No doubt analyses of the balance will contribute to *Journal of Documentation*’s pages, still physical-plus-digital themselves, for the foreseeable future.

David Bawden

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