London School of Publishing

Why bookshops should be protected: a case for slow learning

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Why bookshops should be protected: a case for slow learning

Despite the growth of e-books and the omnipresence of Amazon, bookshops are still surviving in the UK, although their numbers have dwindled. There are now less than a 1000 independent bookstores in the UK and it is very likely that more will close over the next decade. Many of the larger bookstores and their branches will also probably decrease long term. But the demise of bookstores is not necessarily due to people reading less or the growth of online retailers. An equally important factor is the rise in rents and business rates that make bookshops increasingly unprofitable. Local councils should try and retain their local bookshops for the purpose of "biodiversity" as part of a healthy local business "ecosystem". But greedy landlords and exorbitant business rates impose themselves and bookshops, like other commercial outlets close, making our streets less interesting places.

I believe that local bookshops, as well as national chains, such as Waterstones, should be offered some form of special protection or concession to keep themselves alive and kicking within local communities. The French have taken some steps to protect local bookstores against Amazon by banning free delivery and with one of the highest number of bookstores in the world (3500 currently) they are not going to allow Amazon to impact on a cherished institution. Although I recognise that offering bookshops some protection goes against free market principles and that any business must survive and prosper under its own merits and innovation, my assertion is that bookshops are a special case and deserve our attention and help. Why?

1. Bookstores should be considered part of our cultural heritage and as havens of intellectual curiosity and discovery
2. Bookshops offer people, irrespective of age and background, the chance to browse and experience the wonder of discovery and learning; in this regard, bookshops have become substitutes for libraries
3. They provide an oasis of peace and tranquillity in the hustle and bustle of large cities and towns and improve our wellbeing
4. They provide opportunities for children to experience the winder and excitement of discovering of books while reading with their parents

Overall, bookshops make appositive contribution unlike a betting shop or fast food outlet. There are, of course, forceful and rational business arguments against this approach, which would cite market forces and the rights of landlords to get their due market rent. I am not

suggesting that companies like Waterstones should not fully compete like all others forms of commerce on the high street, but what I am suggesting is that in recognition of their importance to the community, some moderate assistance should be provided, which may take the form of reduced business rates or some other form of concession. Bookshops are the gateways to "slow learning", by which I mean, one can sit and read slowly in a comfortable atmosphere. Books encourage their readers to reflect – this is somehow more difficult while on the Web as it is so easy to surf from one page to another.

The demise of books has been somewhat exaggerated. UK publishers released 184,000 new and revised titles making the UK, in absolute terms, the third leading publisher in the world. Adult fiction has been hit and sales are down, most probably due to the ability to secure Kindle title versions at good value. But Children's book sales are up in 2014 and most bookstores have become much more commercially savvy about what sells, and not just books!

People are still interested in browsing, but the costs of many titles make people think twice. So it becomes a vicious circle – the bookstore owners are under financial pressure from their sheer physical presence and also of the margins required by publishers and distributors, all of which is reflected in the price. But once again, I think we are poor at relative value. People have no problem spending £50 on a meal or a few DVDs, but inform a prospective buyer that a fascinating book is priced at £29 and they often repel in horror. A book can provide lasting value for a lifetime, a good meal last as long as our digestion allows, even taking into account any accrued social capital with the experience.

We are also in danger of slowly entering into an era dogged by anti-intellectualism and anti-rationalism. This is being fuelled by rising fundamentalism and a growing trend to believe what appears on the Web as "fact", not comment. To be fair, much debate is laudable on the Web and young people are eagerly involved in many of these debates making excellent contributions. Nonetheless the trend is to read fewer books and therein lies the danger of not experiencing enough rigour and depth to arguments. Of course detail and incredible depth exists on the Web, but people generally will not read past the first web page – for a book, they are more likely to delve deeper and return to it.

Nicholas Carr produced an important article in the Atlantic magazine in 2008, entitled "Is Google Making Us Stoopid?" in which he points out that the Internet, despite its incredible democratizing effect on the access to knowledge, has also impacted on our ability to cope with

long essays or books, owing to our growing inability to concentrate. Is this the result of the Internet's ability to summarise things and the growth of brevity in communications as a result of social media?

My experience is that people are simply too busy to seek depth and analysis these days - and to some extent, I do not blame them. The Web provides succinct answers to complex issues, but equally so can books. A good example of this is Macmillan who published a group of books called "Life Lesson From .." – and in my case, I purchased the one on Thomas Hobbes. It was a most excellent introduction to Hobbe's philosophy and thinking, given that Leviathan is sometimes impenetrable.

All-in-all, books still represent a medium worth protecting as they offer a very effective way of getting across new ideas and stimulating real curiosity. When people stop reading they can become more prone to superstition and loss of reason, using arguments based on incredulity, fallacies, superstition and false dichotomies. The Web is abound with facts and figures and reasoned arguments, but there is also a mass of nonsense and garbage that people take as being authentic and "fact". My contrarian stance is of course a loaded one, but it has been my own experience when researching. I accept that people do not need to retain in a Gradgrind manner facts and general knowledge as they can google what they need to know in an instant, but googling does not necessarily give you the opportunity to reflect and contemplate the merits of a complex argument.

Given that books provide a valuable input into any healthy democracy and stimulate debate through access to science, history and social sciences, as well fiction, then it makes perfect sense to protect the vehicle by which they are sold. You can get good books through Amazon downloaded as e-books I here you shout. BUT – bookshops allow you the opportunity to browse and interact with a book – feel its cover, flick through its pages and sit down in a comfy chair and become lost for 15 minutes or so. No e-experience can do the same. More importantly, bookshops encourage children to read and learn to value books and knowledge.

In order to balance the argument, I also recognise the value that apps. provide in bringing many "books" alive, such as "The Elements" by Theodore Gray. These are wonderful learning tools and provide a dimension to learning, usually in a graphical or animated sense, which a 2-D book

just cannot provide – this I totally accept. This is not, however, a logical argument to allow our bookshops to become a victim of cruel creative destruction.

Early I used the biological analogy of "biodiversity". Well, just as any sensible person realises the importance of species richness and genetic diversity in an ecosystem to keep it healthy and prevent it from collapsing or becoming artificially altered by the introduction of a non-native disruptive species, bookshops are "keystone species", the removal of which diminishes us all. I am aware that for every argument in this article there is a valid counterargument, but my point goes above and beyond this. Bookshops are worth saving because they are a vital part of our cultural and intellectual inheritance and can stimulate learning in the young, so let us put pressure, both at local and national governmental level, and lobby for more, not less bookshops on our streets, and recognise the importance of "slow learning" in our society and how bookshops contribute to it. This does not in any way denigrate online learning, this is here to stay, but slow learning can be complementary to fast learning, allowing both sides the opportunities to provide synergy in the learning process.

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2015