

## **The cultural impact of eBooks**

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In a world of electronic publishing, do we need libraries? As a librarian with personal subjectivity or even in measurable statistics that is too simple a question. In important ways, books show little sign of decline, as the numbers of new titles increase each year; publishers are finding highly profitable new outlets in supermarkets for some kinds of books; our high streets now sport chain bookshops stocking far more than was formerly the case in all but the largest towns; and the Web has grown book sales (and continues to grow them, year on year) on a scale that has taken the world – and not least publishers - by surprise.

Let us rephrase our question, and turn it into several. Do we need so many libraries? Do we need only some kinds of libraries?

The management of change is always a challenge: that was true of the long transition from manuscript to print beginning in the mid-fifteenth century.

David McKitterick, *Print, manuscript and the search for order, 1450-1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). In a world where electronic access is not just commonplace, but will soon be dominant, we need to address especially our strategies for overall budgets, for acquisitions, for access, for people, and for space. Along with these questions, we need to ask others. Do our libraries have enough money to do what is expected of them in an electronic world? What exactly are our expectations? Do libraries have the right kind of staff? Do they have enough – or too much – space? Are they in the right places? Do our current models for their relationship to publishers and other suppliers work as well as they might? Like other institutions, be they schools, health, research laboratories or government, we also debate whether publishers are supplying what we need.