

Are Libraries Obsolete? Are Bookstores a Thing of the Past?

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Preface

Shh! Anyone remember hearing that sound? It may have been at home from the lips of Mom or Dad, or perhaps at the library when you raised your voice to an unacceptable decibel level.

Perhaps the youth of the future will never experience the “Shhhh!” of a stern librarian. It is ironic that I received this topic as Indiana Tech is in the process of building a new library as a two-story wing of our new Academic Center. Building a new library on a college campus is not a common occurrence, at least not in 2013. But in our case it is needed because of student enrollment growth and new programs requiring additional academic support media. It may be surprising to you that our new library will be larger in square footage but house fewer books. The reason for this change will become more understandable in just a few minutes.

Are Libraries Obsolete?

Introduction

One doesn't have to search very far to find articles written by futurists predicting almost everything will become obsolete or at least experience radical change. More to the point is the matter of how will we, as individuals and societies, adapt to the coming changes? I don't know about you, but I sure didn't learn about nano and bio technology, quantum computing, mobile commerce, or 3D printing when I was in school! In the words of Heraclitus, “Nothing endures but change.” Looking back many years, people of means owned a horse and buggy but most

people walked. It took almost 50 years after the combustion engine was invented for the horse to be replaced and for us to start complaining about a different sort of pollution.

Something similar is happening with libraries. Many of us remember going to a card catalog and using the Dewey Decimal System to find a book on the shelf. Even though the DDS is still in use, many young people today have never used it or even heard of it. Actually that might be a good name for a band... The Dewey Decimals!

Brief History

Archeologists have found libraries in Syria, in an ancient port city named Ugarit, dating back to 1200 BC. There they found a palace and temple library, along with two private libraries.

Typically, the cuneiform script on clay tablets contained textual content ranging from diplomatic to scholastic to religious. Even earlier, about 5,000 years ago, the great library of Alexandria in Egypt was known as one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. It is believed that it included about 750,000 scrolls. Many of these were destroyed by fire, and some were taken to Rome by order of Cleopatra. Throughout much of history, most libraries where not accessible to the general public but were reserved for scholars. Books had to be read on site, usually from scrolls.

While North Africa and the Middle East had “halls of science” open to the public in the 9th century, it wasn't until the middle of the 19th century that true public libraries became common.

As leisure reading gained popularity, social or circulation libraries were opened. These commercial libraries made a profit by selling subscriptions. Early in the United States, while the

middle class could afford subscriptions to social libraries, poor people often could not. Then came the Scotsman: Andrew Carnegie, who grew up poor and became a wealthy entrepreneur. Later in life, Carnegie provided funding to build more than 2,500 libraries throughout the world. Few towns that requested a Carnegie grant and agreed to his terms were refused. In the United States, 1,689 libraries were built with Carnegie funding. By the time the Carnegie Foundation made its last grant in 1919, there were a total of 3,500 libraries in the United States, and nearly half of them were built with the construction grants provided by Carnegie. Indiana boasts 156 Carnegie libraries, the most in the United States. This includes two academic libraries found at Earlham College and DePauw University. Fort Wayne's first public library opened in 1895 and was housed in a room in city hall. In 1904, a Carnegie-funded library opened in Fort Wayne in the block where the current library stands.

Carnegie believed that “the dispensation of wealth for the benefit of society must never be in the form of free charity but rather must be as a buttress to the community’s responsibility for its own welfare.” Yet, all of society did not benefit equally. It wasn’t until the 1960s that public libraries were desegregated. Connie Scott, director of Indiana Tech’s academic library, shared with me, “Blacks were not allowed to use the front door of the library and were only allowed to use the tattered books in the back; books that were to be thrown out.” Thankfully, access to our public libraries is now available to all who need and can gain benefit in so many ways. When I think back to my personal library experiences, especially in my youthful days, I can’t help but see my

mother's face as we walked from our apartment to our local library. Once a week we would go there together, and I would look through the children's books and take a few home. Mom would have at least two or three books representing a variety of topics. I realized over the years that the reason my mother was the smartest person I've known in my life is because of all of the reading that she did. She didn't have a college education, but reading thousands and thousands of books made her a learned individual. I believe there are many others in our country and throughout the world who have benefitted from public library resources. It has been their college education and more.

Statistics

Newspapers, magazines, and web articles have declared that libraries are dying, and at the same time many librarians tout an increase in demand. I was eager to learn the statistical truth – to know what the available data indicates. According to a 2010 survey by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), the United States had 120,707 libraries, of which 8,951—less than 10%—are open to the public as community libraries. Public and private primary and secondary school libraries total about 99,180; special libraries which include medical, law, religious, and corporate account for 7,600; colleges and universities represent 3,689; the United States has 1,006 government libraries; and there are 265 armed forces libraries. While primary and secondary school libraries are by far the largest classification, much of the research available focuses on the public community library, and this is the one most predicted to make the endangered species list.

Public libraries reported revenue, or perhaps more correctly, stated public funding nationally of \$11.3 billion and expenses of \$10.7 billion with per capita expenditures at \$37.97. Indiana reported public funding of \$324 million, expenses of \$285 million, and per capita expenditures at \$56.91. Nationally, 85% of the funding came from local taxes, 7.6% other, 7.1% state, and .57% federal. Colleges and universities reported total expenditures of \$7 billion with \$2.7 billion allocated toward informational resources alone.

In November of 2007, the Indiana State Library commissioned an exhaustive research study focused on measuring the economic impact of libraries in Indiana. This study collected significant data and opinions for both public and academic libraries. The qualitative results and key findings indicate that most people believe that libraries are a good value. Communities express pride in their libraries, and a great percentage of community leaders believe that libraries significantly improve the local quality of life. The key statistical findings indicate that Indiana communities receive approximately \$2.38 in direct economic benefits for each dollar of cost. The study claims salaries and expenditures of public libraries generate about \$260 million in economic activity throughout the state. Academic libraries generate an additional \$112 million in economic activity. From an employment standpoint, nearly 7,000 people are employed full-time in our public libraries. An additional 2,000 jobs are in support roles in industries that serve our libraries. The study indicates that more than 80% of the holdings in our public libraries are in

fact books, but the inventory of video, audio, and e-formats is increasing dramatically. I would expect the next study to indicate a significant statistical shift.

Throughout our great Hoosier state, Indiana Public Libraries reported 237 central buildings, 194 branches, and 29 bookmobiles serving a population a little over 5.5 million. They reported 38.6 million visits, which was a 1.88% increase over last year. It is worth noting that this increase in visits contradicts the national trend of a slight decline compared to population growth. Library holding increases of note include 3,900% in downloadable audio titles, 291% in eBooks, and 83% in downloadable video titles. Children's program attendance has increased 63%. Users of computers capable of connection with the Internet are among the largest user groups for public libraries. Libraries are often the most convenient or the only place offering a free Internet connection in rural areas. During a recent trip to the Allen County Public Library, I observed dozens of people on public access computers. Other visitors to the library used their personal computers and tablets to access the Wi-Fi system. Computer and Internet access is often used to write résumés, apply for jobs, and file taxes.

Profile of Users

In an analysis of a recent survey on the use and non-use of public libraries, researchers Sin and Kim found that the largest user group was likely to be young, educated, and middle class. The survey showed significantly higher likelihood to use a library among those who lived close to

one. Women had higher use than men, and low-income/disadvantaged groups are less likely to use a library than all other groups.

In an interview with Jeff Krull, the director of the Allen County Public Library, useful and interesting information was gathered regarding the different patrons and age groups most likely to use the resources of a public library. According to Mr. Krull, “public libraries are not in the book business, they are in the learning business.” He stated that libraries provide opportunities to learn things through a variety of means including art exhibits, performing theater, public forums, lecture series, piano recitals for kids, and whatever else the community desires. He characterized the age differences based on interest groups beginning with children who are introduced to reading via picture books and story time. The second category, teens, is a tough group for the public library to serve. They desire information that appeals to their interests--for example, things related to video games--the availability of public computers, classrooms for research, and lively atmospheres. A third group is job seekers. This group appears to include the unemployed or those involved in a search for a new job. Many of the job seekers lack computer skills and are victims of the “digital divide” which still exists in our country. The fourth group, one that we are all familiar with, is the readers. They come to read, they browse in the library and in places like Barnes & Noble or independent book stores. But for the most part, Krull suggested that independent bookstores are closing or already gone and that they are becoming a thing of the past. More on that later. The last group presented is one that we can also relate to – the retirees. They use the Morningstar and other investment materials, and newspapers such as the *New York*

Times and the *Wall Street Journal*. They tend to flock to the silent reading room, and often avoid the use of technology. But all of these groups, whether they are young children, teens, job seekers, readers, or retirees, find the library to be an inviting place, a friendly place where they are all expected and welcome.

A Word about Academic Libraries

Primary and secondary school libraries are often a part of a school system. The organization of the system may differ from community to community and region to region. For many years, libraries have served students between kindergarten and grade twelve. In modern times we even find small specialized libraries in a preschool setting. Public and private schools often call the libraries media centers, and the librarians frequently are required to have an additional credential in education or a certificate in school media. Personally, I am more familiar with academic libraries that serve colleges and universities. In design, they are organized to serve students and faculty. The oldest academic library was founded in 1638 at Harvard University, when the new university received a bequest of 400 books from the young, recently deceased minister, John Harvard. From an obsolescence standpoint, academic libraries are safe. They serve students, learners, and faculty at all levels, and at the higher education level become very specialized and dependent on the type of degrees conferred at each specific institution.

Shifting Tides

The future for our public libraries isn't all "rosy" though. They don't exist on a level playing field for all communities. In many cities, public libraries have been closed due to budget constraints. Others have cut hours, eliminated staff, and sold books. Why has this happened? It started slowly with the creation of the Internet and search engines. As more content becomes accessible, more information will proliferate and be published online. With the explosion of personal digital devices (cell phones, notebooks, iPods, etc.), the high speed data channels, and the plethora of information sites, we may be living in an age when a growing percentage of our population never visits a public library. There is no stopping this, and it continues to grow and expand exponentially every day, 24/7, non-stop. Let's face it: Digital natives grew up with Wikipedia instead of the Encyclopedia Britannica! Information can be found almost instantly, 24 hours a day, from any location on planet earth – or intergalactically, for that matter! The Internet Archive (think digital library) currently has about 1.6 million public domain books available. Google Library Project wants to scan and digitize every book, although publishers have the option to decline, at least for now. They have already scanned more than 20 million books. This is just the beginning. Electronic books are a digital representation of a wide variety of books that often appear in printed text first and then are reproduced electronically. They are commonly referred to as eBooks. Kathy Witwer, the bibliographer at the Allen County Public Library, provided me with information regarding publishers of eBooks and their interaction with libraries. Jeff Krull passed on this information to me, and in the email he noted that Witwer's response was somewhat complicated. That was and is an understatement. It seems that publishers like

Simon & Schuster, Random House, Harper Collins, McMillan, Zondervan, and others all have different processes, procedures, rules, regulations, and pricing for eBooks. Many of them use a third party service known as OverDrive as a middleman to facilitate the distribution of their eBooks. It should be noted that many books found in print are not available as eBooks, but many are. Unfortunately, you may not be able to find your favorite eBook available from the library, either because of general non-availability or high cost. For example, a hardback book available electronically from Random House would cost \$85 for a library purchase. So for now, availability and cost are roadblocks to developing a growing eBook collection.

As with the music industry, it takes a while for the law to catch up. Not too long ago, artists panicked with great fear that digital music would be the end of the music industry. People would rip and burn CDs; Napster gained popularity; iTunes became mainstream; and now streaming apps such as Pandora and Spotify are threatening to push AM/FM radio into retirement. The whole process of recording, manufacturing, and distribution has changed. Artists are now able to find their audience online and bypass record labels. The music industry was not adapting to the customer and artist, and this disruption forced a change. Will this model prevail in the world of publishing and licensing of books and digital representations? Publishers may end up adopting licensing subscriptions like those that the music industry has. Today this evolution is a “mixed bag” and appears to have impact on public libraries as well as bookstores. In time, I believe the negative impact will be much greater on bookstores than libraries.

Currently, copyrights extend 70 years after an author's death. The appellate court recently put a class-action suit against Google on hold pending a consideration of the fair use issue first. Millions of out of print books are still under copyright. They are basically locked up and unavailable to the most people. Sales of eReaders like the Kindle and Nook are rapidly declining; they are being replaced by tablets such as the iPad, Nexus and Galaxy. The increase in eBooks has actually contributed to a higher demand for print books, with sales actually rising 6.2% last year. Reading begets more reading, but it is questionable how long this trend will continue. Recent surveys show that 67% of people still prefer to read a printed book. I am one of those people, and in fact, I read about 100 books per year. I purchase most online and occasionally from Barnes & Noble.

Libraries Are Already Adapting

Public libraries have been expanding, changing and transforming their services to keep up with community demands. While you can still check out a book, they also offer public computer and Internet access and training, literacy skills, community meeting and collaboration spaces, preschool and after-school programs (children's books comprise a third of all circulated material), research help, large print and Braille, books on tape, eBooks (which have tripled in less than 10 years), music CDs, and video DVDs. Some libraries have video rooms with green screens. You can make copies and send a fax or just find a quiet place to concentrate away from our hectic world. At many libraries you can even check out an eReader and get a cup of coffee at the Dunkin Donuts counter.

One community has taken adaptation to what might be considered an extreme by opening a library that has no printed books at all. The Bexar County BiblioTech library in Texas offers 10,000 e-books. Patrons can read them on their own device via app that can link to their library card or they can visit the BiblioTech to use one of its 600 e-readers and 50 computer stations. Only time will tell whether the BiblioTech can succeed. A previous attempt at bookless library in Tucson, Ariz., was abandoned after a few years when patrons that requested that printed books be available.

Predictions

While there are great works of literary excellence on library shelves, much usage is in the form of romance novels, movies, music, video games, and checking Facebook statuses. This trend is likely to continue adopting new technologies and media in rapid order.

Librarians already have an incentive to help the unemployed and under-employed secure jobs as this creates more taxpayers. According to a national survey funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and conducted by the American Library Association, two-thirds of library staff are helping applicants complete online job applications. Is it possible that libraries could do more to help create jobs, perhaps offering apprentice programs with certifications? Public libraries already spend much effort providing education and learning as new knowledge for many and remedial knowledge for others. Perhaps a new collaborative undertaking by public school

educators and librarians could develop a new model that would uplift the learning outcomes for those most in need.

Other ideas have surfaced to further diversify library services. For example, efforts to increase library visitors could include adding an exercise gym; having more creative space and encouraging entrepreneurial collaboration; opening a community garden; offering child and elder daycare; and providing space for online high school students and college lectures. Surely we will live to see more new ideas incorporated into the public library as it continues to evolve.

Are libraries obsolete? If one is referring to the type of library I read in as a youth, then the answer is yes. But libraries have already changed greatly. The transformation in fire departments provides an appropriate metaphor. Better building codes and materials have decreased fire calls so fire departments undertook emergency training to expand their skills and the types of assistance they could provide to their communities. Now most calls are as first responders, EMTs, etc. for traffic accidents. They didn't close fire stations; they evolved to offer additional services. Libraries will not become extinct but there will likely be less of them, and their services will continue to evolve. Maybe they will include branch computer kiosk libraries at malls. Oh wait, online shopping will probably soon cause malls to become obsolete too! I believe that libraries will not only remain but become even better at being an on ramp to the great equalizer.

Are Bookstores Obsolete?

So far this paper has almost exclusively focused on libraries, but what of the bookstores that we've become so familiar with? On the surface, the future of libraries and bookstores both seem tied to the fate of printed books. However, if you think about libraries as repositories of information and entertainment their ability to evolve and adapt becomes more logical. For thousands of years, information and entertainment was recorded and shared in written form. As that changed, libraries changed. Bookstores, on the other hand, face different challenges because they are so focused on the printed book and because they are driven by profit rather than community service.

As with most businesses, bookstores came to a point in their lifecycle where their product or service had to change to survive into the future. Frankly, I don't believe there is much hope for bookstores in the future. Just a few years ago Borders, a well-known bookstore failed. At first it filed Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection after many years of declining profits. The management of Borders projected that 30% of the bookstores across the country would close, and they would move toward a restructuring plan. But that restructuring failed, and all 399 Borders liquidated lock, stock, and barrel. Now the largest retailer of books remaining is Barnes & Noble. How are they fairing in the bookstore marketplace? As it turns out, not particularly well. Earlier this year, they reported Nook revenues down by 26% year over year. Moreover, comparable store sales were down about 2.2%. Currently, Barnes & Noble operates 689 retail stores and their former

chairman, Len Riggio, recently proposed to take the retail stores private, an interesting dilemma in the world of securities industry since he remains chairman of the company. An analyst accused Barnes & Noble of selling its working business to the chairman while keeping its shareholders beholden to the business that isn't working, presumably referring to the Nook reader business. In a recent Wall Street Journal article, Barnes & Noble retail CEO, Mitchell Klipper, was quoted as saying that in 10 years, Barnes & Noble will have 450 to 500 stores, not the 689 it has today. More recent reports said this was a mischaracterization. But things seem to be very confused as to the future of Barnes & Noble.

Several other fairly large bookstores have come and gone over the last few years. Waldenbooks opened its first bookstore in 1962 and by 1981 had become the first bookstore chain to have stores in every state. Waldenbooks went through a series of transitions, even being owned by the Kmart Company for a time. By January of 2010, 182 of the Waldenbooks stores had been closed, and by July of 2011, Waldenbooks filed for liquidation, which commenced on July 22.

B. Dalton Booksellers was another American retail bookstore chain founded back in the 1960s by the Dayton's department store chain. At its peak, it operated 798 stores throughout the country and continued to operate until a 2009 announcement indicated the last 50 stores would be liquidated by January 2010.

What about the independent bookstores? How are they fairing? The transition from print to digital has definitely had an impact throughout the book industry but perhaps in no other case more dramatically than on the independents. There still exists, in places throughout the country,

names like Longfellow Books, Skylight Books, Book People, City Lights, Strand Books, and others but for the most part they are small and shrinking in size and value. The American Bookstores Association noted that its membership had decreased from 2,400 to 1,900 in just the past 10 years. Those remaining, in many cases, are offering only online sales and have no physical locations. Although there is a certain allure to visiting a Barnes & Noble, I suspect that many people browse, find a book of interest, return home and order the book online. Sheepishly, I must admit that that's true of me.

The Competition

Bookstores face competition from two angles, both thanks to technological advances. One is the growth in popularity of e-books. The debut of Amazon's Kindle in 2007 spurred a surge in e-book sales. Soon more e-readers and tablets followed, further boosting the popularity of e-books to the point where they accounted for 22.5% of publishers sales in a study by the Association of American Publishers released in April. However, that growth is slowing and some think e-book sales may be leveling off. Nicholas Carr, a writer who focuses on technology, culture and economics offers this opinion on why this is happening:

“We may be discovering that e-books are well suited to some types of books (like genre fiction) but not well suited to other types (like nonfiction and literary fiction) and are well suited to certain reading situations (plane trips) but less well suited to others (lying on the couch at home). The e-book may

turn out to be more a complement to the printed book, as audiobooks have long been, rather than an outright substitute.”

This is not to say that e-books are no longer a threat to brick-and-mortar bookstores. However, it does offer the comforting thought that printed books are not in danger of obsolescence.

So, if printed books are not in danger, what’s the worry for bookstores? The answer lies in the second angle of competition: online book sales. The birth of Amazon.com in 1995 changed the world of bookselling, and ultimately retailing in general, forever. A simple comparison of a book or eBook available in the physical Barnes & Noble location vs. an Amazon.com purchase paints the picture rather clearly for me. The overhead in operating the stores is enormous and eventually more book readers, eReader patrons, etc., will be shifting their allegiance from physical bookstore to an online purchase. It’s only a matter of time. Amazon, and to a lesser extent other online booksellers, offer the advantages of convenience, price and selection. That’s a very difficult triumvirate for bookstores to battle.

Brick-and-mortar bookstores have one advantage on their side, and it is one that Amazon can never replicate: the physical experience of book shopping – wandering the shelves to see what catches your eye, feeling the printed book in your hands, flipping through it to sample as much

as you want. Editor and publisher Jason Epstein put it this way in his 2001 book “Book Business”:

“A civilization without retail bookstores is unimaginable. Like shrines and other sacred meeting places, bookstores are essential artifacts of human nature. The feel of a book taken from the shelf and held in the hand is a magical experience, linking writer to reader.”

Some very successful writers are conscious of that link and are trying to save it. Ann Patchett, a best-selling author of six novels, three non-fiction books and an upcoming collection of essays, opened an independent bookstore in Nashville, Tenn., in 2011. In a Wall Street Journal column she acknowledged that she may be biting that hand that feeds her by competing with Amazon, but she explained it this way:

“Authors need a good bookstore: It’s a place to give a reading ..., and a place where customers can browse, picking a book up because of the title or the cover or the staff-recommendation signs that paper the shelves. Our goal is to promote writers, writing, culture and community, which, I like to think, is aiming a little higher than free two-day shipping.”

James Patterson, perhaps the top-selling fiction writer ever, took an aggressive approach by placing full-page ads in publications such as the New York Times Book Review and Publishers Weekly suggesting that the government should intervene with some sort of publishing industry bailout.

One often overlooked aspect of the bookstore quandary is that brick-and-mortar stores actually help online retailers. As I noted, I'm frequently guilty of browsing at a bookstore but then ordering my selections online. Writing for Bloomberg.com, Virginia Postrel noted that readers may purchase more online, but they rely on bookstores to discover what they want to purchase. According to Bowker Market Research, bookstore shoppers are more than twice as likely as online shoppers to buy books on impulse. A survey by the Codex Group stated that in-store displays are the second most common way for buyers to find new books and account for 20 percent of purchases. The most common way to discover new books is through personal recommendations, and the online world has tried to tap into that through online reader reviews and recommendations on ecommerce sites and sites such as www.GoodReads.com.

The issue for bookstores now becomes not just “how do we lure readers out of their homes and into our stores,” but also “how do we turn those browsers and samplers into buyers?” This is where bookstores have to learn to adapt and come up with creative solutions. They have to give shoppers a reason why purchasing in-store is better than purchasing online. Maybe this means special editions of books only available in-store; maybe special discounts tied to purchases at events; maybe personal shopper services similar to those in high-end department stores; maybe bundles offering the print, e-book, and audiobook versions of a title together when purchased in-store.

Conclusion:

Connie Scott helped me understand how college librarians are helping students transition from high school to college as many enter with a large information literacy gap. Learning how to find and gain access to information, understand how it is organized, and use critical inquiry skills to conduct research is a requirement today to be successful in school. During my research for this paper I stumbled upon a number of articles regarding major cities struggling with the cost of renovating integrated libraries in New York, even our own in Indianapolis have had or are having these experiences. Buildings with grand facades present ornate entrances but are very difficult to renovate for the new technologies for the spaces needed for the library of today and tomorrow. Our own Jeff Krull and the committees that were formed in the late 1990s to address these issues in Fort Wayne did a wonderful job. When I asked Krull about the library's mission, he shared a number of areas. For one, to use community money to provide what people cannot afford on their own. Our main library in Fort Wayne is an outstanding example of why and how libraries will exist and not become obsolete. Libraries that provide a great hall or a heart create a concourse that is inviting to all. Having a children's department, early learning center, public computing center (in our case with more 200 computer workstations), and a silent reading room, meets the needs of our diverse group of library attendees. In a speech that library director Krull made to the Ohio Library Council, he closed with these words:

“We are social creatures and we crave humane interaction. Our libraries will be the social and intellectual anchors of our community, essential gathering

places that will never be replaced by internet chat rooms, web sites, or other virtual environments.”

Krull’s crystal ball seems to be quite accurate as we look to the future. During the early 1960s, President John F. Kennedy made a plea for the sanctity of our libraries. He said, “If this nation is to be wise as well as strong, if we are to achieve our destiny, then we need more new ideas for more wise men reading more good books and more public libraries. These libraries should be open to all except the censor. We must know all the facts and hear all the alternatives and listen to all criticisms. Let us welcome controversial books and controversial authors, for the Bill of Rights is the guardian of our security as well as our liberty.” It seems that every day I hear someone say, “Nobody reads anymore.” This doesn’t seem accurate. People seem to be reading all the time, on Facebook, blogs, Wikipedia, Googling all sorts of different subjects. People are downloading articles, newspapers; others are reading on eReaders. And yet, the book remains the epicenter of the public library for so many years. People are reading books with paper pages and bindings. Fact is the library of today provides not only this ancient resource, but also media of all different types and all different formats. No, the library is not destined to be obsolete, just different.

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