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Ranganathan Reformatted

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Ranganathan Reformatted

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I am uncomfortably in the middle of “The Format Wars.” There are folks on either side of me saying “Print Forever!” or “Digital Only!” The more I consider the print vs. electronic wars the more I come back to our library science foundations, in particular, the theories of S.R. Ranganathan. Ranganathan proposed his Five Laws of Library Science in 1931.



“Print forever!” Digital only!” “Print!” “Digital!”
Illustration of men fighting from the *Luttrell Psalter*

- First Law: Books are for use
- Second Law: Every reader his or her book
- Third Law: Every book its reader
- Fourth Law: Save the time of the reader
- Fifth Law: The library is a growing organism

Others have proposed variations on Ranganathan’s Laws, but what I find ripe for updating is the many formats that “books” now take. In using “books” I mean not just books, but any information the user desires such as text, music, and film. If we are to (re)claim our user-centered and service-centered orientations, then the user experience should be in the format the user desires. In classic librarian style I say, “It Depends.” Here is how I would reformat Ranganathan’s Laws”

- First law: Items are for use
- Second Law: Every user their format
- Third Law: Every format its user
- Fourth Law: Save the time of the user
- Fifth Law: The library is always evolving

First law: Items are for use

As a child in my parent’s house, there were books for reading, and books that sat on the shelf and were never touched except for dusting. I do believe that items should be for use, but there is something to the idea that some items are too precious as artifacts in their own right to be used very often. For example, I love medieval manuscripts. The artistry and craftsmanship that goes into making a handmade book, let alone an illuminated manuscript, is just breathtaking. As an amateur calligrapher and illuminator, I have an understanding of the work involved in creating one of these masterpieces.

A Psalter is a book of the Psalms from the Bible. In medieval times these books were commissioned by lords and ladies to display their wealth and privilege. Around 1325, Sir Geoffrey Luttrell commissioned a Psalter be made. It took nearly a decade to complete and is considered the finest showcase of scenes of rural life from the English Middle Ages. I would love to be able to visit and touch the Luttrell Psalter, but the book lives in London at the British Museum. This medieval book is a unique masterpiece and I can never hope to touch it. It is simply too precious. What about the First Law; items are for use? This is where I believe print and digital support each other best.

The British Library has digitized the Luttrell Psalter and made it available in both facsimile format and via the Internet. At \$3,000, the 2006 hardbound leather facsimile



edition remains out of my price range as well as the paperback facsimile edition at a mere (cough) \$700. With a broadband connection however, the British Library's Turning the Pages tool allows one to view the Luttrell Psalter digitally and turn the pages as if you were right in the room with it. The explanatory text and magnification features amplify the user experience. The British Library could have put this magnificent work in a secure facility, sharing it only with the most privileged of scholars, but with today's digital technology, it is shared with everyone who has access to the Internet. Thus, cultural institutions can use digital mediums to share the world's great works.



The Luttrell Psalter

Second Law: Every user their format

If we look to the Betamax/VHS wars and now DVD vs. Blue-Ray, we learn the lesson again that just because a format is useful (or even better quality) doesn't mean it will win in the marketplace. I don't want to cuddle up with an electronic reader in my bathtub. If I ruin a \$3 paperback by dropping it in the water, no big deal. Dropping a \$200+ electronic device in water is bad for its health and mine. For some disciplines, access to the original item is an important part of their work. An art historian would best be served by handling the actual Luttrell Psalter in order to examine its vellum, goldleaf and pigments firsthand.

Third Law: Every format its user

The best preservation format is still print. You may need to translate the language of the print, but you don't need someone to find the right file format to open the pages. After nearly 700 years, the Luttrell Psalter is still as readable as the day it was created. Will we be able to say the same thing about the digital items we are creating today? I love electronic access but I worry greatly about digital archiving and our ability to store items long-term in competing file formats. I want libraries to be inclusive about incorporating both print and electronic in their collections until we find a good long-term digital storage solution. Will we regret spending the money on back-up print today when the digital items are deleted tomorrow?

Fourth Law: Save the time of the user

You might think that the electronic format would win when it comes to saving the time of the user. Again, it depends. If you're already familiar with electronic formats and how they are generally delivered, then it might be quicker. I'm glad to have technical manuals available electronically as I can't afford to buy new manuals as fast as the information changes, but I hate it when it takes me more time to surf for the right pdf document than it would to just open the paper book and find the information. How do we make the digital interface emulate the best of print while giving us new and unforeseen opportunities to interact with information electronically?



Illustration of a grotesque
from the *Luttrell Psalter*

Fifth Law: The library is always evolving

The Psalter's first home was Luttrell's private library. Nearly seven centuries later, the British Library launched the digital version via their Turning the Pages program, allowing anyone with Internet access to view this beautiful prayer book. Technology keeps pushing us to do more for our users but we need to continually ask our users for their priorities in order to inform our collection development choices. By reformatting Ranganathan's Laws our profession continues its historical mission of meeting the ever-changing needs of our users. 🌿

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