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The Torah in Transition: Imitative Aspects from Codex to Database

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Abstract

Because the significance of a sacred text comes not only from its content but also its format and materiality, the rise of digital formats is especially a concern for the Jewish community, the ‘people of the book’ (*Am ha-Sefer*) whose identity is rooted in the Torah. Drawing together scholarship on the history of the book in its changing formats and an illuminative case study of the Jewish Torah in its digital iterations, the Jewish case presented here is instructive but certainly not unique. Despite dramatic changes in reading technology throughout history, readers have time and again used a new technology to perform the same functions as that of the old, only more quickly, with more efficiency, or in greater quantity. While taking advantage of the innovation and novelty which characterize digital formats, a concerted effort to retain much older operations and appearances continues to be made in this transition as well. The analysis in this article aims to further dispel the misguided notion of technological supersession, the idea that new reading technologies ‘kill’ older formats in a straightforward model of elimination.

About the author

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1. Introduction

A number of scholarly studies and essays, particularly those in the early 1990s, saw the drastic changes that the digital format engenders – skimming, filtering, interactivity, de-authorization, intangibility, and the like – as the beginning of the end of the printed book (Bolter, 1991; Coover, 1992; Kurzweil, 1992; Sosnoski, 1999). Some of these studies do mention (often briefly) that it is unlikely that these new hyper-reading experiences will displace print reading. By emphasizing the differences between the two, however, many often failed to see the ways in which religious reading and tradition are maintained across platforms. Drawing together scholarship on the history of the book in its changing formats and an illuminative case study of the Jewish Torah in its digital iterations, my aim is to reveal imitative aspects which counter alarmist warnings about the demise of the book.¹

Because the significance of a sacred text comes not only from its content but also its format and materiality, the rise of digital formats is especially a concern for Jews, the 'people of the book' (*Am ha-Sefer*) whose "religious identity [is] rooted fundamentally in Torah" (Jeffrey, 1996, p. xiii). The Jewish case presented here is instructive but certainly not unique; despite dramatic changes in reading technology throughout history, readers have time and again used a new technology to perform the same functions as that of the old, only more quickly, with more efficiency, or in greater quantity.

2. The History of Sacred Text in Transition

It is for this reason that reference to insights from the considerable body of scholarship in the history of the book is both necessary and informative. A backwards glance at previous transitions can better inform our understanding of the present; as scholar of modern Judaism Jeffrey Shandler has noted, the emergence of new media situates book culture in a context of “constant evaluation of older communications technologies in relation to newer ones” (Shandler, 2010, p. 378; Dewar, 1998). Aspects of online Torah which are imitative of older formats participate in and reflect a much longer history of replication and maintenance of older formats upon the advent of new technologies. At first glance, the ability to share, compile, and arrange individually chosen material appears to be an example of the interactivity and lack of authority that characterize online textual practices (Meyrowitz, 1986; Mullins, 1990; Bolter, 1992; Nunberg, 1993; Chartier, 1995; Chartier, 1996; Mitchell, 1999; Dawson, 2005). While taking advantage of the innovation and novelty which characterize digital formats, however, a concerted effort to retain and imitate much older operations, appearances, and practices continues to be made in this transition as well.

In using the term “imitation”, I do not mean to imply any of its negative connotations. It functions instead as a useful descriptor to temper the numerous observations of dramatic innovations in books and book culture in the digital age, however accurate they may be. Part of the impetus for conducting such an analysis is also to further dispel the “mistaken doctrine” (Eisenstein, 2011, p. 228) of technological supersession, the idea that new reading technologies ‘kill’ older formats in a straightforward model of elimination. Geoffrey Nunberg (1993), Elizabeth Eisenstein (1995), and Marilyn Deegan and Kathryn Sutherland (2009), among others, have already begun the effort to counter these deterministic ideas.

This argument against models of outright replacement dovetails with other established ideas regarding the uses of new technology for the reinforcement or maintenance of tradition, especially religious authority (Cheong, 2013). To be sure, textual tradition is not the only aspect of Jewish life and culture which is being adapted to the new technology. Other phenomena such as internet *responsa*, online dating, and Jewish recipe databases recreate traditional religious and cultural practices of textual interpretation, in-marriage, and kosher cooking in a digital format (Steinitz, 2011; Feinberg and Crosetto, 2011; Markoe, 2012).

While the discourse of online religion could include the reading of sacred texts, this project will refrain from discussing religious community-building or ritualizing online, focusing

on the use of electronic devices or computers primarily as pieces of reading technology. Religious reading *as* ritual is the contact point between community, ritual and reading technology, as in the exclusive maintenance of the scroll format (*sefer Torah*) for ritual use. The scroll became, according to journalist Lev Grossman and others, “the prestige format” (2011). The Jews converted to the new codex format only for study, and the scroll remained in use long after outlasting its advantages as a matter of familiarity, identity, and ritualization. Why this occurred primarily for Jews is a matter of much debate, considering the fact that the fledgling Christian movement, in a near wholesale fashion, adopted the codex for all purposes. For various arguments within the discussion, see Gamble (1995), Millard (2000), Cavallo and Chartier (1999), Clanchy (1982), Grossman (2011), Newman (1997), and Mullins (1990).

The symbolic significance of the spiral scroll format is so strong in some traditionalist communities, like those who identify as ultra-Orthodox, that if a Torah scroll is not available for rituals, the book is simply not read publicly at all. Scrolls are central symbols of Jewish worship – meticulously constructed, ritually read and revered, and subject to certain codes of conduct and decorum (Alexenberg, 2011; Sawyer, 1999; Jacobs, 2007; Sabar, 2009; Shandler, 2010). The analysis conducted here is concerned largely with non-ritual (i.e. non-scroll, or *chumash*) uses of Torah – study, exegesis, reference, and private reading – but will engage with the ritualized scroll format as an important indicator of the themes of preservation and imitation.

3. Online Reading and E-Books

We can also draw a distinction between reading online (or more generally on a computer screen) and the newer phenomenon of reading an e-book. This is not a cut-and-dry dichotomy of electronic versus print media. There have been two stages of new technology in recent years, each with their own benefits and disadvantages. While discussions of both formats overlap in many ways, one important difference remains: it seems that the e-book represents a kind of return to a more traditional book format. It preserves the market system for books that is otherwise lost in their migration to the internet, requires more attentive reading (as compared to skimming or watching), and reimposes the author’s role onto the text. Citations are made more conventional with an e-book rather than an online source, and that author-title-publisher formality carries with it a sense of authority that online sources are perceived to lack.

It is interesting to note that the e-book in some ways returns to the dynamic of the scroll format by removing the reader's power, originally provided by the printed book, over the flow of the reading experience. When readers 'scroll' electronically through an e-book, they resemble readers of antiquity reading a scroll, albeit one that retains print inventions such as pagination or tables of content and introduces keyword searching (Cavallo and Chartier, 1999, p. 27). This is a further testament to the ways in which new formats imitate, reincorporate, and revive the functions and styles of older ones.

Online and e-book versions of texts, despite the aforementioned distinctions, raise similar issues and represent two points in the same field of study. For example, both imply a new economy of writing, in which the traditional publishing and printing model is wholly altered. Once-distinct tasks in the writing, publishing, and dissemination process are united in ways unheard of in classic industrial printing models (Cavallo and Chartier, 1999, p. 27).

Readers, however, seem to be executing the same actions with e-books or online texts as they did with printed books. They can buy and store more books, and more quickly than if those same books were in print, but the activities of choosing, buying, and reading originally conceived with codex or print forms are maintained with the new format. The e-reader also mirrors the formatting of printed books in many ways, from simulating the sound and animations of turning a paper page to including tables of content, pagination, appendices, and illustrations. With specific reference to the Hebrew Bible, digital versions maintain the pagination and division into books and chapters that were standardized upon the introduction of the printing press. English professor Stephen Bernhardt recognizes this dependence of digital texts on the design and strategies of print, and frames his analysis of the two media as one not of categorical or essential difference but of "dimensions of variation in texts across the two media." It is in this spirit of "crossbreeding" and heavy borrowing that I begin an analysis of the imitative aspects of online Torah editions (Bernhardt, 1993, pp. 151, 173-4).

4. The Torah Online

The nature of studies of digital formats and the internet prohibits most analyses of this type from being exhaustive. A simple search term like 'Torah' will return a seemingly endless variety of online Torah sites, and so this study will only highlight a few revealing examples. The

Open Siddur Project, a collaborative online venture that allows users to create their own liturgical books (*siddurim*) by freely choosing from digitized open source literature, seems to represent an innovative technique exclusive to the digital format. The Open Siddur Project does allow for new combinations and individualized liturgy, primarily because it relies on the existence of Free Cultural (Public Domain) Licenses which allow for unrestricted access and modification to works.

A closer look, however, reveals that the contingencies, designs, and features of print are still hard at work even in the electronic sphere. The Open Siddur Project (following Creative Commons policies) qualifies its open source guidelines by requiring the user to cite authorship and to note any modifications they make to the original content. Author-text formality (that is, the association of a work with a single author who possesses rights to the material) is in fact an attribute that was established and formalized by the mechanics of the printing press.

Additionally, the Open Siddur process of collecting texts refers to scanning and sharing primarily those materials which exist in print but are not yet widely available online. Thus the basis of the Open Siddur project is not in creating new texts but in allowing for new arrangements of texts already extant in print. The user activities of remixing and organizing liturgical texts have their ultimate end in the binding and printing of hard-copy prayer books; the creators imagine this project as a “digital-to-print publishing application.” Indeed, the homepage urges the user to “imagine a printing press and book arts studio shared by everyone in the world looking to design and craft their own siddur,” a clear demonstration of the ways in which the print imagination and its conventions persist in the age of digital technology (Open Siddur Project, 2014).

The Unicode/XML Westminster Leningrad Codex (also known as the CCAT or eBHS version), available on its own dedicated site, is another instance of an online Torah version which displays imitative aspects of older ‘hard-copy’ formats. This text is an electronic version of the Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia (BHS), completed by J. Alan Groves in 1987 and maintained by the center which bears his name. The original Leningrad Codex, on which the BHS and thus the digital WLC is based, is widely considered to be the oldest complete and extant manuscript of the Hebrew Bible, dating to the eleventh century. This alone speaks to the relevance and imitation of older formats on digital platforms, although some of the reliance on the Leningrad Codex is surely a result of its antiquity. Still, the dependence on and confidence in

the hard copy version is evocative of the manner in which the codex, upon its emergence, “imposed its form” but “did not render obsolete” the older scroll and its uses (Brown, 2007, p. 19). This was largely because, like the Unicode/XML WLC, the codex simply bound together in a different way the same pages, illustrations, and conventions of the older scroll format. This historical legacy of imitation is also apparent in the introductory material to the digital WLC, which states that any ongoing modifications to the text, aside from the addition of book names and abbreviations from two other print sources (the JPS Tanach and the NRSV translation), have only been made in order to correct any discrepancies between it and the photo facsimile of the actual Leningrad Codex held at the Russian National Library in St. Petersburg.

This retention of the print format and its editions in the religious context is further evident on the website of The Society for the Preservation of Hebrew Books. The self-stated mission of the site is to preserve and catalog American Hebrew books (*seforim*) which are out of print and/or circulation, making available texts for study and reference which would otherwise not be accessible to the majority of Jewish readers (Society for the Preservation of Hebrew Books, 2012). In this way, the new electronic format is being used as a vehicle for the fulfillment of a much older preservation impulse that was stimulated in the context of older formats (Chartier, 1995; Blair, 2010). Recognizing the benefits of the printing press, for example, printers and readers began to employ the new technology to satisfy this impulse for an extensive library or an anthology to demarcate and preserve important texts. There was a marked increase in average library size at the same time that more and more material was being produced. Printing was credited with “restoring ancient wisdom and preserving it for posterity” and “spreading letters and learning” in a way that had been impossible previously (Eisenstein, 2011, p. 13, 86-9; Eisenstein, 2005, p. 80). As print became more and more standard, the impulse to collect and preserve, and then eventually to demarcate the importance or superiority of certain texts, remained – an impulse born in scribal culture but maintained with print.

Preservation in recent times has become a deeper concern as industrialization and digitalization engenders an explosion of printed material, and the ideal of an extensive library conveniently addresses the concern of what will happen to all of these books and how to distinguish between them. Digital technology, as used by the Hebrew Books website, finally edges toward the much older dream of the idyllic religious library like those at Alexandria or Babel, particularly because preservation and collection no longer involves funding and creating a

60-volume series of encyclopedia but merely posting electronic versions of texts onto servers which can hold virtually unlimited data. The same impulse is evident in the emergence of Torah Database software, like the Bar-Ilan Repsonsa Project, the DBS Master Library, and the Torah Bookshelf, which also convert printed Hebrew texts into electronic versions.

The Mamre Institute of Israel, or Mechon Mamre, is another organization which provides digital versions of a variety of Jewish texts, including the Hebrew Bible in both HTML and downloadable editions. While the site takes advantage of the newer innovations of the new technology, such as hyperlinks, pop-up windows, and vowel points which appear when the cursor hovers over individual words, the commentaries and translations available are based on established print translations and conventions. Perhaps because of the perceived transience and unreliability of online sources, the Mechon Mamre site reassures the reader that its translations “are as accurate as found in the very finest printed editions” (Mechon Mamre, 2014). The authenticity of the online version is derived in this case from the authority of its print counterpart; the new technology is legitimized by the recreation of the language and appurtenances of the old. This is evident also in the notations for the Hebrew-English version provided on the site, which assures readers that the electronic text has been checked and corrected for accuracy by comparison to various print versions.

The retention of older conventions and styles in this context is reminiscent of similar concerns about the corruptive nature of commercial printing that accompanied the advent of movable type (Eisenstein, 2011, p. 32). Until at least the sixteenth century, the format of the printed book reproduced that of its predecessor, the codex. Professor of medieval history Michael Clanchy, among others, reminds us that early print endeavors did not diverge from the manuscript in terms of appearance or content. The printed book was dependent upon the layouts, fonts, conventions, finishing touches, corrections, titles, and miniatures which were characteristic of the manuscript format (Clanchy, 1982, p. 174; Chartier, 1995, p. 14).

The Chabad-Lubavitch Media Center website, as another example, provides a daily and a weekly (*parshah*) Torah reading alongside both its Hebrew rendering and the associated commentary of celebrated eleventh century rabbi and Talmud scholar Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki (or Rashi). Rashi’s commentary has purportedly been included in every edition of the Talmud since it was first printed in 16th century Venice by Daniel Bomberg (Gersh, 1986, p. 9), and it is Bomberg’s pagination and layout which were standardized in the 19th century Vilna edition of

the Babylonian Talmud. Chabad.org's inclusion of Rashi's classic commentary preserves this legacy, established in print, in the history of Jewish textual study. It should be noted that early digital versions of the Talmud did not (and could not) attempt to imitate other elements of Bomberg's layout which have traditionally been duplicated, such as the exact word placement on the original printed page (*tzuras ha-daf*). Speaking to the persistence of the impulse for the imitation of the old in the new, however, more recent digital editions and mobile apps have indeed begun to reproduce the Vilna pagination idealized by many Talmud publishers, scholars, and readers (Shandler, 2010, p. 383).

The Chabad-Lubavitch daily and weekly Torah readings cannot mimic this format due to their periodical function, although a complete Tanach is also available. Each page does end with an admonition: "The text on this page contains sacred literature. Please do not deface or discard" (Chabad, 2014). This is imitative of the traditional offline requirement for proper disposal (i.e. burial) of any document or artifact (*shaimos*) containing the name of God or discussing the Torah, which prohibits erasing, burning, throwing away, or otherwise destroying any such instances. Such is the commitment to the reality, sacrality, and meaning of the text in *any* format that this reminder appears even in a context in which it has little applicability unless one were to print the page or 'hack' the website. This is a repetition not of an aspect of the Talmud itself per se, but of the reverence with which it has been historically associated.

Many other online Torah versions, like the Breslov (another branch of Hasidism) Bible site, similarly refrain from spelling out the name of God or the tetragrammaton. Although this online Torah has been converted to the HTML format, and has been cross-referenced with the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Massoretic versions, it reproduces nearly wholesale the 1917 Jewish Publication Society's print translation of the Torah, now in the public domain. The Breslov website's digital reproduction of a print Torah, while also maintaining the tradition of "minimiz[ing] the desecration of G-d's name," (Pilant, 1997) demonstrates that the imitation of older formats is manifested not just in translation and layout but also in function.

5. The Implications of Torah Study through Digital Media

Certainly these elements – the Hebrew language, Rashi's commentary, the customary warnings – are partly a product of the Orthodox orientation of many of the site creators, but they

are also illuminative of the adaptation and preservation of older textual conventions in new formats. Thus many of the imitative aspects which appear in online versions of the Torah and Talmud are not just aesthetic; they are also integrations of new textual technology with traditional modes of engaging with the text. It is important to remember that Jewish textual study and exegesis are often understood as holy endeavors, ones venerated in a similar way to the reading of a fixed text (scroll) in an official ritual setting. In some ways, then, browsing or searching a website with Torah content and scholarship, posting blogs or articles of Torah explication, and adding hyperlinks or comments can be seen as a continuation of the discursive methods of textual study so central to Jewish religion and culture. One example of such is the Mamre Institute's acknowledgment of hundreds of letters and emails they receive which have "helped us to improve the site greatly" (Mechon Mamre, 2014). Many of the other sites similarly welcome and appreciate user feedback and suggestions (Unicode/XML Westminster Leningrad Codex, 2013).

Jeffrey Shandler records a discussion with a professor while browsing a digitized version of the Torah: "'This will change everything,' he said, eyes glued to the screen. 'It's the end of erudition. Our professor of Talmud will be out of a job'" (Shandler, 2009, p. 276). Biblical exegetes who memorize passages and perform theological work and rabbis who know the Torah by heart fear a loss of authority when searchable databases do the same work faster and from the comfort of the user's home. Proximity searches, cross-referencing, and hyperlinks present the same kind of benefits as a scholar's memorization. It is unlikely, however, and perhaps a fearful overreaction, that reading a religious text will no longer require expert aid. Having sacred texts in digital, searchable formats has certainly challenged their traditional pedagogy, but Shandler reassured this professor that the ability to read the Talmud's "highly elliptical language" and other elements of study "remains difficult, if not impossible, to master without training" (Shandler, 2009, p. 276). Indeed, it will still require a great deal of scholarship to unpack and make them relevant, which is evidenced by the numerous Q&A sections, audio lessons, and commentaries attached to the digital Torah editions examined here.

Online engagement may actually represent an enhancement of these traditional methods, as a thesis study by Levi Yitzhak Rossler in 2003 concluded. Rossler found that youth learning achievement in Judaic studies was in fact higher through hypertext study than conventional (non-computer-aided) teaching methods, in part because newer technology allows for the efficient

synthesis of complex and disparate fragments into a whole (Rossler, 2003, p. 126). This characteristic of computerized learning is perhaps especially appropriate for the kinds of textual study conducted in the Jewish tradition.

The appropriateness of digital formats for traditional Jewish modes of study has also been suggested elsewhere. Computer & Information Sciences professor Laurence Boxer believes that the technique of hypertext (hyperlinks) actually resembles the ancient methods of Torah study in that the primary impetus is to make intertextual connections. In the techniques of Midrash and figures like Nachmanides (Ramban) and Elijah Ben Solomon (the Vilna Gaon), as well as the statement of early second century Talmud scholar Shimon Ben Azzai (“I link the words of the Torah to those of the prophets, and those of the prophets to the written words”), Boxer finds evidence that the system of hyperlinks in modern computer software actually originated in the associative methods of ancient Torah study (Boxer, 1999).

Others have agreed with this sentiment. Artist and interdisciplinary scholar Mel Alexenberg has noted that the design of the Talmud and the hypertext linking in the design of the Internet are both “structured so that they facilitate and encourage creative, associative, and multiple perspectives” (Alexenberg, 2011, pp. 22-24; see also Rosen, 2001; Bonder, 2010). While this idea may be a somewhat overstated apologetic, it is certainly true that if the text of the Torah is a sea (*yam*), then perhaps the best way to “surf a little Torah” (according to the Israel Koschitzky Virtual *Beit Midrash*) is to use the premier ‘surfing’ tool in the modern world: the internet. In this way, the historical methods of Torah study, which have never been silent, independent, or linear, appear to be particularly well-suited to the interactive nature of e-format reading.

Not all Jewish teachers agree with these parallels; the process of adapting and imitating traditional modes of textual activity and formatting of course comes with its own set of problems. Yoel Cohen recounts the responses of some Jewish scholars who find that the traditionally arduous exegesis and one-on-one teaching of Torah are compromised by the insular, effortless nature of online Jewish study (Cohen, 2012, p. 148).

For law-observant Jews in particular, the issues of the use of electricity on Shabbat (Etzioni, 2000; Wecker, 2007; Fishkoff, 2010a; Fishkoff, 2010b; Friedman, 2010; Simon 2012-2013) and the distractions it may present to the spiritual contemplation of God are significant issues. The hypertext and searchability which make an e-text so interactive dissolve boundaries,

homogenizing the differences between texts by displaying them in the same way regardless of their characteristics. This is especially concerning when anything from pornography to neo-Nazi support websites are only a click away. Not only in content but in function, there is a mix of the Eliadean sacred and profane at work in the use of the e-texts (Brasher, 2001; Meyrowitz, 1985; Apolito, 2005).

The freedom of access to online sources also brings up questions surrounding gender, orthodoxy, and social status. Women, for example, can utilize technology for Torah reading or Talmud study, an enterprise from which they are otherwise excluded in some Orthodox communities (Shandler, 2010, p. 382). The new technology is less likely to divide people according to categories of age, sex, religion, class, or education level because they are not necessarily barriers to its access; the internet provides the same information to everyone publicly and simultaneously. In other words, the “conditions of attendance” are different with a computer than with a printed book, not least in a religious context (Meyrowitz, 1985, p. 88-9). But the homogenization of access, a parallel to the aforementioned homogenization of content, calls into question the role of authority (Campbell and Teusner, 2011).

Despite these thorny issues, however, and the potential of the digital age to transform Jewish culture, society, and religion, many are working diligently to “maintain established approaches to the text” (Shandler, 2010, p. 383). These efforts are worth noticing as historical occurrences, but are also important because they provide several insights into the nature of technological transitions.

Firstly, the theory that the history of reading has fallen into a trend from intensive (the reading of a few books intensely in the time of manuscripts) to extensive reading (the reading of a myriad of texts more quickly) is challenged somewhat by the imitative aspects of digital Torah. According to this model, the intensive reader in the early stages was one who “faced a narrow and finite body of texts” which were memorized, recited, and repeatedly read, while the extensive reader of modernity is “one who consumes numerous and diverse print texts, reading them with rapidity and avidity and exercising a critical activity over them that spares no domain from methodical doubt” (Chartier, 1995, p. 17; Brown, 2007). Essentially, intensive reading is most often synonymous with the in-depth study and memorization of a small canon of texts (traditionally the Bible), while extensive reading has come to mean the consumption of a wide variety of texts for a similarly wide variety of reasons: not just for spiritual edification but for

entertainment, secular education, or even curiosity. This model understands new digital reading as representing the extensive or consumerist style of modernity *par excellence*; the old formats retain the traditional, intensive study perceived as appropriate for sacred texts.

The persistence of supersessionist predictions of ‘the end of the book’ rests in part upon the assumptions of media determinism, which posits the radical changes brought about by new media as having a formative influence on culture (McLuhan, 1964; Ebersole, 1995). Technological determinism and its advocates understand the contemporary reader as one who will not (cannot) devote sustained attention to a single text, and who does not discriminate between texts – supposedly to the detriment or destruction of traditional reading practices (Anderson and Rainie, 2012).

Fears of technology’s deteriorating effect on sacred texts may seem legitimate, then, considering the ubiquity of new communication technologies and the drastic differences in reading practices which they seem to impose. Those fears, which remain for religionists and lovers of the codex today, may seem reasonable as the digital word seems poised not to replace but, at the very least, to heavily reduce the influence and instances of printed books (Levy, 2012; Stevens, 2012). A 2013 Pew Research study found that three out of ten Americans adults read an e-book last year and about half own a tablet or e-reader, and yet it also discovered that only 4% of people exclusively read e-books. Seven out of ten Americans had read a print book in that same year, a sign that, for now, “print remains the foundation of Americans’ reading habits” (Zickuhr and Rainie, 2013).

While my goal has not been to deny the evolution of new reading techniques as a result of digital technologies, what can be seen in the Pew survey data and in the case of the Jewish Torah online, is that there is no outright replacement of a certain reading technology and its characteristics upon the advent of a new one. As historian and director of the Harvard library Robert Darnton once told the *Wall Street Journal*, “It’s misguided to think that one medium displaces another and we have a choice of either analog or digital. The history of communication is that new technologies reinforce rather than displace the old” (Crovitz, 2010, p. A15). Media determinism is challenged by the social, cultural, and religious practices of a community whose use of new formats incorporates the characteristics and styles of older ones. Religious communities in this context can play a substantial role in the preservative, imitative, and adaptive processes of media technology.

6. Conclusion

The homogenization of content and access that accompany digital media mean that the only restrictions are those that users impose upon themselves (Bolter, 1992). The proliferation of sites which operate independently of or lack official sanction from rabbinic supervision compounds these concerns about authority (Cohen, 2012, p. 150). Despite the perceived flight from authority and the difficulty in creating a discrete online canon in the digital age, Jewish readers seem to be imposing some boundaries by incorporating older formatting and design characteristics into their digital texts. Religious readers, as Paul Griffiths suggests, do not differ much from regular readers in the limited extent to which their use of the internet is constrained by some authority. The key distinction, however, is in their acknowledgment of those religious constraints, and “in the substance of the convictions underwriting the exercise of authority” (Griffiths, 1999, pp. 63-4). In this way, the individual believer is given the power to determine the manner and mode of religious reading, but to assume that those determinations will only harm religious practice is to deny the agency, intelligence, and devotion of the religious believer in the contemporary period. Historical trends during periods of technological transition teach us that outright replacement of older formats, and textual authority, are uncommon. Off-line Torah study and its conventions retain importance, despite their enhancement online (Cohen, 2012, p. 154).

Perception and intention seems to be the most important factors: the sentiments and message are the same, even if dressed in new clothing. It is possible even in the digital age for people to remain “committed to the experience of *reading* the word – serious, contemplative reading” (Nord, 2004, pp. 159; see also Dawson, 2005). Remembering, for example, the admonition of several Torah sites to refrain from destroying or discarding the daily *chumash* online, this does not seem so hard to believe.

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¹ An excellent review of these warnings can be found in Muri (1999).