

The Future of Electronic Publishing

By Sam Vaknin, Ph.D.

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UNESCO's somewhat arbitrary definition of "book" is:

""Non-periodical printed publication of at least 49 pages excluding covers".

The emergence of electronic publishing was supposed to change all that. Yet a bloodbath of unusual proportions has taken place in the last few months. Time Warner's iPublish and MightyWords (partly owned by Barnes and Noble) were the last in a string of resounding failures which cast in doubt the business model underlying digital content. Everything seemed to have gone wrong: the dot.coms dot bombed, venture capital dried up, competing standards fractured an already fragile marketplace, the hardware (e-book readers) was clunky and awkward, the software unwieldy, the e-books badly written or already in the public domain.

Terrified by the inexorable process of disintermediation (the establishment of direct contact between author and readers, excluding publishers and bookstores) and by the ease with which digital content can be replicated - publishers resorted to draconian copyright protection measures (euphemistically known as "digital rights management"). This further alienated the few potential readers left. The opposite model of "viral" or "buzz" marketing (by encouraging the dissemination of free copies of the promoted book) was only marginally more successful.

Moreover, e-publishing's delivery platform, the Internet, has been transformed beyond recognition since March 2000.

From an open, somewhat anarchic, web of networked computers - it has evolved into a territorial, commercial, corporate extension of "brick and mortar" giants, subject to government regulation. It is less friendly towards independent (small) publishers, the backbone of e-publishing. Increasingly, it is expropriated by publishing and media behemoths. It is treated as a medium for cross promotion, supply chain management, and customer relations management. It offers only some minor synergies with non-cyberspace, real world, franchises and media properties. The likes of Disney and Bertelsmann have swung a full circle from considering the Internet to be the next big thing in New Media delivery - to frantic efforts to contain the red ink it oozed all over their otherwise impeccable balance sheets.

But were the now silent pundits right all the same? Is the future of publishing (and other

media industries) inextricably intertwined with the Internet?

The answer depends on whether an old habit dies hard. Internet surfers are used to free content. They are very reluctant to pay for information (with precious few exceptions, like the "Wall Street Journal"'s electronic edition). Moreover, the Internet, with 3 billion pages listed in the Google search engine (and another 15 billion in "invisible" databases), provides many free substitutes to every information product, no matter how superior. Web based media companies (such as Salon and Britannica.com) have been experimenting with payment and pricing models. But this is besides the point. Whether in the form of subscription (Britannica), pay per view (Questia), pay to print (Fathom), sample and pay to buy the physical product (RealRead), or micropayments (Amazon) - the public refuses to cough up.

Moreover, the advertising-subsidized free content Web site has died together with Web advertising. Geocities - a community of free hosted, ad-supported, Web sites purchased by Yahoo! - is now selectively shutting down Web sites (when they exceed a certain level of traffic) to convince their owners to revert to a monthly hosting fee model. With Lycos in trouble in Europe, Tripod may well follow suit shortly. Earlier this year, Microsoft has shut down ListBot (a host of discussion lists). Suite101 has stopped paying its editors (content authors) effective January 15th. About.com fired hundreds of category editors. With the ugly demise of Themestream, WebSeed is the only content aggregator which tries to buck the trend by relying (partly) on advertising revenue.

Paradoxically, e-publishing's main hope may lie with its ostensible adversary: the library. Unbelievably, e-publishers actually tried to limit the access of library patrons to e-books (i.e., the lending of e-books to multiple patrons). But, libraries are not only repositories of knowledge and community centres. They are also dominant promoters of new knowledge technologies. They are already the largest buyers of e-books. Together with schools and other educational institutions, libraries can serve as decisive socialization agents and introduce generations of pupils, students, and readers to the possibilities and riches of e-publishing. Government use of e-books (e.g., by the military) may have the same beneficial effect.

As standards converge (Adobe's Portable Document Format and Microsoft's MS Reader LIT format are likely to be the winners), as hardware improves and becomes ubiquitous (within multi-purpose devices or as standalone higher quality units), as content becomes more attractive (already many new titles are published in both print and electronic formats), as more versatile information taxonomies (like the Digital Object Identifier) are introduced, as the Internet becomes more gender-neutral, polyglot, and cosmopolitan - e-publishing is likely to recover and flourish.

This renaissance will probably be aided by the gradual decline of print magazines and by a strengthening movement for free open source scholarly publishing. The publishing of periodical content and academic research (including, gradually, peer reviewed research) may be already shifting to the Web. Non-fiction and textbooks will follow. Alternative models of pricing are already in evidence (author pays to publish, author pays to obtain peer review, publisher pays to publish, buy a physical product and gain access to enhanced online content, and so on). Web site rating agencies will help to discriminate between the credible and the in-credible. Publishing is moving - albeit

kicking and screaming - online.

Sam Vaknin is the author of "Malignant Self Love - Narcissism Revisited" and "After the Rain - How the West Lost the East". He is a columnist in "Central Europe Review", United Press International (UPI) and ebookweb.org and the editor of mental health and Central East Europe categories in The Open Directory, Suite101 and searcheurope.com. Until recently, he served as the Economic Advisor to the Government of Macedonia.

His web site: <http://samvak.tripod.com>

THE FUTURE OF ELECTRONIC BOOKS

By Craig Lock

THE FUTURE OF ELECTRONIC BOOKS by Craig Lock

I believe ebook publishing is the way of the future (as shown by Steven King's "Riding the Bullet"), though I believe there will always be a place for traditional publishing with paper books. People will always love holding a real book out in the sun for their holiday reading. I just believe electronic-publishing is way cheaper and immediate compared to "hard copy" publishing. Thus it has many benefits for the reading consumer, as well as talented new authors, who may find great difficulty in getting their work accepted by traditional publishing houses- especially the well-known ones who rarely take on new authors in the current harsh publishing environment.

In addition, things are moving so fast with reading aids in electronic publishing. New technology is constantly developing the hand-held reader, so soon you may be able to down-load novels at the beach.

May the two forms of publishing work in tandem in the future, to the benefit of the consumer. In time all of Craig Lock's 17 books will be available both electronically, as well as paper copies.

We have an ultimate vision (or dream) of Gisborne on the East Coast of the North Island of scenic and tranquil New Zealand being a "renowned and recognised" centre of electronic, as well as conventional publishing, a world-renowned centre in providing quality courses in distance education and adult online teaching. perhaps one day even a centre of excellence in developing technology in the South Pacific.

(Thanks to my "technogeek" associates, Stefan Van Lingen, Bill and Erich for all their help, drive, talent and vision, as I don't understand modern technology).

We believe an idea, a big helping of enthusiasm, together with a great deal of time and effort in implementing it, belief, faith in yourself and persistence (not necessarily in that order) is the key to marketing success and seeing a vision turn into reality.

That is our ultimate vision and something we at Eagle Productions in association with Bill Rosoman of Nugrow Technologies here in Poverty Bay (oops er sorry, Eastland) and Stefan Van Lingen

of Gauteng, South Africa are daily striving towards with all our energies and creative endeavours.

Craig Lock

" Whatever the mind can conceive, can be achieved."

- Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe

"We can all use the internet to reach out to the "global community" and build a better world in this new "Information Revolution" that is upon us. Let's use it wisely, respect our diversity and unique cultures; but celebrate a new world in union. One where, like your founding forefathers in America, you can first celebrate the Independence Day of the strong burning creative spirit that is within you. If set alight, it is a flame that will burn brightly and make your personal VISION of the future a REALITY...and perhaps even your unique DESTINY."

"Life is about finding, then following the dream... and one's dream/vision comes to reality through believing in yourself, making the commitment and then creating it."

Craig Lock <http://www.craiglock.com> Craig's various books* (hard copies, CD's, "talking books" and e-books) are available at: <http://www.novelty-gift.com/> and <http://www.bridgeniche.com/CLOCK/zaniestbooks.htm>

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