A Brief History of the Book

By Sam Vaknin, Ph.D.

A Brief History of the Book

by: **Sam Vaknin, Ph.D.**

"The free communication of thought and opinion is one of the most precious rights of man; every citizen may therefore speak, write and print freely."

(French National Assembly, 1789)

I. What is a Book?

UNESCO's arbitrary and ungrounded definition of "book" is:

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

But a book, above all else, is a medium. It encapsulates information (of one kind or another) and conveys it across time and space. Moreover, as opposed to common opinion, it is - and has always been - a rigidly formal affair. Even the latest "innovations" are nothing but ancient wine in sparkling new bottles.

Consider the scrolling protocol. Our eyes and brains are limited readers-decoders. There is only that much that the eye can encompass and the brain interpret. Hence the need to segment data into cognitively digestible chunks. There are two forms of scrolling - lateral and vertical. The papyrus, the broadsheet newspaper, and the computer screen are three examples of the vertical scroll - from top to bottom or vice versa. The e-book, the microfilm, the vellum, and the print book are instances of the lateral scroll - from left to right (or from right to left, in the Semitic languages).

In many respects, audio books are much more revolutionary than e-books. They do not employ visual symbols (all other types of books do), or a straightforward scrolling method. E-books, on the other hand, are a throwback to the days of the papyrus. The text cannot be opened at any point in a series of connected pages and the content is carried only on one side of the (electronic) "leaf". Parchment, by comparison, was multi-paged, easily browseable, and printed on both sides of the leaf. It led to a revolution in publishing and to the print book. All these advances are now being reversed by the e-book. Luckily, the e-book retains one innovation of the parchment - the hypertext. Early Jewish and Christian texts (as well as Roman legal scholarship) was written on parchment (and later printed) and included numerous inter-textual links. The Talmud, for example, is made of a main text (the Mishna) which hyperlinks on the same page to numerous interpretations (exegesis) offered by scholars throughout

generations of Jewish learning.

Another distinguishing feature of books is portability (or mobility). Books on papyrus, vellum, paper, or PDA - are all transportable. In other words, the replication of the book's message is achieved by passing it along and no loss is incurred thereby (i.e., there is no physical metamorphosis of the message). The book is like a perpetuum mobile. It spreads its content virally by being circulated and is not diminished or altered by it. Physically, it is eroded, of course - but it can be copied faithfully. It is permanent.

Not so the e-book or the CD-ROM. Both are dependent on devices (readers or drives, respectively). Both are technology-specific and format-specific. Changes in technology - both in hardware and in software - are liable to render many e-books unreadable. And portability is hampered by battery life, lighting conditions, or the availability of appropriate infrastructure (e.g., of electricity).

II. The Constant Content Revolution

Every generation applies the same age-old principles to new "content-containers". Every such transmutation yields a great surge in the creation of content and its dissemination. The incunabula (the first printed books) made knowledge accessible (sometimes in the vernacular) to scholars and laymen alike and liberated books from the scriptoria and "libraries" of monasteries. The printing press technology shattered the content monopoly. In 50 years (1450-1500), the number of books in Europe surged from a few thousand to more than 9 million! And, as McLuhan has noted, it shifted the emphasis from the oral mode of content distribution (i.e., "communication") to the visual mode.

E-books are threatening to do the same. "Book ATMs" will provide Print on Demand (POD) services to faraway places. People in remote corners of the earth will be able to select from publishing backlists and front lists comprising millions of titles. Millions of authors are now able to realize their dream to have their work published cheaply and without editorial barriers to entry. The e-book is the Internet's prodigal son. The latter is the ideal distribution channel of the former. The monopoly of the big publishing houses on everything written - from romance to scholarly journals - is a thing of the past. In a way, it is ironic. Publishing, in its earliest forms, was a revolt against the writing (letters) monopoly of the priestly classes. It flourished in non-theocratic societies such as Rome, or China - and languished where religion reigned (such as in Sumeria, Egypt, the Islamic world, and Medieval Europe).

With e-books, content will once more become a collaborative effort, as it has been well into the Middle Ages. Authors and audience used to interact (remember Socrates) to generate knowledge, information, and narratives. Interactive e-books, multimedia, discussion lists, and collective authorship efforts restore this great tradition. Moreover, as in the not so distant past, authors are yet again the publishers and sellers of their work. The distinctions between these functions is very recent. E-books and POD partially help to restore the pre-modern state of affairs. Up until the 20th century, some books first appeared as a series of pamphlets (often published in daily papers or magazines) or were sold by subscription. Serialized e-books resort to these erstwhile marketing ploys. E-books may also help restore the balance between best-sellers and midlist authors and between fiction and textbooks. E-books are best suited to cater to

niche markets, hitherto neglected by all major publishers.

III. Literature for the Millions

E-books are the quintessential "literature for the millions". They are cheaper than even paperbacks. John Bell (competing with Dr. Johnson) published "The Poets of Great Britain" in 1777-83. Each of the 109 volumes cost six shillings (compared to the usual guinea or more). The Railway Library of novels (1,300 volumes) costs 1 shilling apiece only eight decades later. The price continued to dive throughout the next century and a half. E-books and POD are likely to do unto paperbacks what these reprints did to originals. Some reprint libraries specialized in public domain works, very much like the bulk of e-book offering nowadays.

The plunge in book prices, the lowering of barriers to entry due to new technologies and plentiful credit, the proliferation of publishers, and the cutthroat competition among booksellers was such that price regulation (cartel) had to be introduced. Net publisher prices, trade discounts, list prices were all anti-competitive inventions of the 19th century, mainly in Europe. They were accompanied by the rise of trade associations, publishers organizations, literary agents, author contracts, royalties agreements, mass marketing, and standardized copyrights.

The sale of print books over the Internet can be conceptualized as the continuation of mail order catalogues by virtual means. But e-books are different. They are detrimental to all these cosy arrangements. Legally, an e-book may not be considered to constitute a "book" at all. Existing contracts between authors and publishers may not cover e-books. The serious price competition they offer to more traditional forms of publishing may end up pushing the whole industry to re-define itself. Rights may have to be re-assigned, revenues re-distributed, contractual relationships re-thought. Moreover, e-books have hitherto been to print books what paperbacks are to hardcovers - re-formatted renditions. But more and more authors are publishing their books primarily or exclusively as e-books. E-books thus threaten hardcovers and paperbacks alike. They are not merely a new format. They are a new mode of publishing.

Every technological innovation was bitterly resisted by Luddite printers and publishers: stereotyping, the iron press, the application of steam power, mechanical typecasting and typesetting, new methods of reproducing illustrations, cloth bindings, machine-made paper, ready-bound books, paperbacks, book clubs, and book tokens. Without exception, they relented and adopted the new technologies to their considerable commercial advantage. It is no surprise, therefore, that publishers were hesitant to adopt the Internet, POD, and e-publishing technologies. The surprise lies in the relative haste with which they came to adopt it, egged on by authors and booksellers.

IV. Intellectual Pirates and Intellectual Property

Despite the technological breakthroughs that coalesced to form the modern printing press - printed books in the 17th and 18th centuries were derided by their contemporaries as inferior to their laboriously hand-made antecedents and to the incunabula. One is reminded of the current complaints about the new media (Internet, e-books), its shoddy workmanship, shabby appearance, and the rampant piracy. The

first decades following the invention of the printing press, were, as the Encyclopedia Britannica puts it "a restless, highly competitive free for all ... (with) enormous vitality and variety (often leading to) careless work".

There were egregious acts of piracy - for instance, the illicit copying of the Aldine Latin "pocket books", or the all-pervasive piracy in England in the 17th century (a direct result of over-regulation and coercive copyright monopolies). Shakespeare's work was published by notorious pirates and infringers of emerging intellectual property rights. Later, the American colonies became the world's centre of industrialized and systematic book piracy. Confronted with abundant and cheap pirated foreign books, local authors resorted to freelancing in magazines and lecture tours in a vain effort to make ends meet.

Pirates and unlicenced - and, therefore, subversive - publishers were prosecuted under a variety of monopoly and libel laws (and, later, under national security and obscenity laws). There was little or no difference between royal and "democratic" governments. They all acted ruthlessly to preserve their control of publishing. John Milton wrote his passionate plea against censorship, Areopagitica, in response to the 1643 licencing ordinance passed by Parliament. The revolutionary Copyright Act of 1709 in England established the rights of authors and publishers to reap the commercial fruits of their endeavours exclusively, though only for a prescribed period of time.

V. As Readership Expanded

The battle between industrial-commercial publishers (fortified by ever more potent technologies) and the arts and craftsmanship crowd never ceased and it is raging now as fiercely as ever in numerous discussion lists, fora, tomes, and conferences. William Morris started the "private press" movement in England in the 19th century to counter what he regarded as the callous commercialization of book publishing. When the printing press was invented, it was put to commercial use by private entrepreneurs (traders) of the day. Established "publishers" (monasteries), with a few exceptions (e.g., in Augsburg, Germany and in Subiaco, Italy) shunned it and regarded it as a major threat to culture and civilization. Their attacks on printing read like the litanies against self-publishing or corporate-controlled publishing today.

But, as readership expanded (women and the poor became increasingly literate), market forces reacted. The number of publishers multiplied relentlessly. At the beginning of the 19th century, innovative lithographic and offset processes allowed publishers in the West to add illustrations (at first, black and white and then in color), tables, detailed maps and anatomical charts, and other graphics to their books. Battles fought between publishers-librarians over formats (book sizes) and fonts (Gothic versus Roman) were ultimately decided by consumer preferences. Multimedia was born. The e-book will, probably, undergo a similar transition from being the static digital rendition of a print edition - to being a lively, colorful, interactive and commercially enabled creature.

The commercial lending library and, later, the free library were two additional reactions to increasing demand. As early as the 18th century, publishers and booksellers expressed the fear that libraries will cannibalize their trade. Two centuries of

accumulated experience demonstrate that the opposite has happened. Libraries have enhanced book sales and have become a major market in their own right.

VI. The State of Subversion

Publishing has always been a social pursuit and depended heavily on social developments, such as the spread of literacy and the liberation of minorities (especially, of women). As every new format matures, it is subjected to regulation from within and from without. E-books (and, by extension, digital content on the Web) will be no exception. Hence the recurrent and current attempts at regulation.

Every new variant of content packaging was labeled as "dangerous" at its inception. The Church (formerly the largest publisher of bibles and other religious and "earthly" texts and the upholder and protector of reading in the Dark Ages) castigated and censored the printing of "heretical" books (especially the vernacular bibles of the Reformation) and restored the Inquisition for the specific purpose of controlling book publishing. In 1559, it published the Index Librorum Prohibitorum ("Index of Prohibited Books"). A few (mainly Dutch) publishers even went to the stake (a habit worth reviving, some current authors would say...). European rulers issued proclamations against "naughty printed books" (of heresy and sedition). The printing of books was subject to licencing by the Privy Council in England. The very concept of copyright arose out of the forced registration of books in the register of the English Stationer's Company (a royal instrument of influence and intrigue). Such obligatory registration granted the publisher the right to exclusively copy the registered book (often, a class of books) for a number of years - but politically restricted printable content, often by force. Freedom of the press and free speech are still distant dreams in many corners of the earth. The Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA), the V-chip and other privacy invading, dissemination inhibiting, and censorship imposing measures perpetuate a veteran if not so venerable tradition.

VII. The More it Changes

The more it changes, the more it stays the same. If the history of the book teaches us anything it is that there are no limits to the ingenuity with which publishers, authors, and booksellers, re-invent old practices. Technological and marketing innovations are invariably perceived as threats - only to be adopted later as articles of faith. Publishing faces the same issues and challenges it faced five hundred years ago and responds to them in much the same way. Yet, every generation believes its experiences to be unique and unprecedented. It is this denial of the past that casts a shadow over the future. Books have been with us since the dawn of civilization, millennia ago. In many ways, books constitute our civilization. Their traits are its traits: resilience, adaptation, flexibility, self re-invention, wealth, communication. We would do well to accept that our most familiar artifacts - books - will never cease to amaze us.

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

GET YOUR BOOK ON THE INTERNET

By Knut R. Enebakk

GET YOUR BOOK ON THE INTERNET by Knut R. Enebakk

Dear friend!

Either you are looking for literature for your children or teens and adults - We get the all. Barnes & Noble.com offer a great literature programme as you are looking for within history - geography - animals - science - diets - biography - medicine - language - bestsellers and much more.

Are you looking for hot used, new and hard - to - find books? Alibris offer you books within great items as biography - children - home - nature - cookbooks - history - religion - science - sport and much more.

Start Now! Click Here http://www.worldwidesaleservice.com/id2.html

None

Related eBooks:

GET YOUR BOOK ON THE INTERNET
Cherokee People Will REturn
Recommended Undergraduate Classes
Insights on Infidelity from Hillary Clinton's Book
Find Your Noble Ancestors!

Get more Free PDF eBooks at FreePDFeBooks.com

Related Products:

101 tips to stay fit and live longer.
How to Use Your Mind for Study
How to Protect Yourself from Crime
All Christian Writings
JavaScript Magic

Malamaal.com: A genuine resource center for Quality Ebooks and Softwares

Co-Sponsored Advertisement: