

Publishing's G20: the digital debate over the future of the book industry (guest-blog)

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"I believe that anybody who wants to publish a book should be able to...There will always be a publishing industry...books represent civilization. People will write books, and books will still exist in physical form."

Jane Friedman, Open Road Integrated Media

Polis Intern Lauren Sozio reports on a New York conference on the digital future of book publishing

In the past few months, New York's publishing industry has been hit by its own version of the Wall Street crash. But problems run deeper than the recession's domino effect and puncture an age-old business model ruled by barons chasing the bestseller, tossing out advances, and collecting royalties. Then along came Google Book Search—certainly not the only harbinger of the industry's (as we know it today) demise—but the company that altruists love to defend and anti-trusters love to blame. In the advent of the Internet, writers don't have to play by the rules as PC's have eroded the formal barriers to publishing and replaced them with a deceptive free-for-all where confusion over copyright, representation, and of course, revenue loom overhead like the Google's grey computing cloud.

Days after [William Styron's family divorced Random House](#) in favour of marketing his timeless novels in digital format with new media platform, Open Road and bestselling business writer, Stephen R. Covey cut a "highly effective" deal to [publish exclusively with Amazon](#) for the next year, the industry's visionaries gathered at the New World Stage in New York to discuss a matter as critical as climate change: the evolution of e-books.

Collaborators from the BBC, Google Books, Sony Digital, and Adobe, along with top-agents, writers and consultants paneled a [two-day summit produced by Mediabistro](#), a news forum for media professionals. But this discussion of new iPhone apps, social networks, and innovative business models seemed but a front for group therapy over the fate of the industry.

Was Nook a digital saviour or mere stocking stuffer? Was Google creating a utopia or crowding out? And should we listen to the alarmist cries of William Morris telling writers to "Opt Out" before they became victims of free content? A new media conference would not be complete without "Jobsian" app demos and Venn diagrams, while catchwords like snippet, sweet-spot, agnostic and secular dominated conversation. Not to forget "interstitial space" that [Open Road Integrated Media](#) proposed as integral to its strategy to align books with film including tv and web-isodes.

Styron as mentioned above, Iris Murdoch and Pat Conroy are just a few of the authors who will be resurrected by this new content marketing company headed by ex-HarperCollins' CEO Jane Friedman and producer Jeffrey Sharp (Boys Don't Cry, You Can Count on Me). Hot on the trails of Tina Brown's announcement that her imprint, Beast Books, would expedite publishings turnover from ebook to paperback, Friedman, branded "Queen of the Backlist," proposed 750-1000 titles in 2010 including both rediscovered tomes and "e-riginal" or "born digital" books, while emphasized—lest the crowd forget—that the "author is the asset". Watch out for a twittering frenzy to whip up a whole new generation's interest in *Darkness Visible*.

Well, perhaps not as visible to optimistic Google Books' product manager, Brandon Badger. But what does an empire whose partner program includes 2 million books, 30, 000 publishers and 70 domains have to be gloomy about? After dodging questions about fair use and Android, Badger attempted to convince a tough crowd that

Google was not out there alone to make money, but to help partners help themselves. Could Amazon make the same argument?

Unfortunately, there was no representative to defend the largest independent e-bookstore, Books on Board's, Bob Livolsi's dig at Amazon's "predatory pricing" and monopolistic practices. But back to Badger's justification, "We're not trying to squeeze everyone out," he pacified, "but be the glue to stitch together the different components." The idealistic part of me wants to believe in his altruistic vision of this "democratizing process of distributing information" into an "open and healthy" marketplace. But skeptic challenges feel-good. Badger stresses collaboration with users to build upon pre-existing platforms, and the importance of compatibility with devices. Why should we pin hopes on a Nook when updated versions are emerging with better backlighting, batterylife and likeness to-well-reading an actual book. Job's Tablet is whispers away from release.

The President of Sony Digital, Steve Haber, fortuitously sharing Apple guru's first name, tried valiantly to defend his Sony reader but sealed his lecture with the fatalistic advice that "we have to cannibalize our own business because if we don't, someone will do it for us." This forecast comes from a man who's seen a cycle of technophobes and paradigm shifts from LP to CD, now paper to digital over his past twenty years in consumer electronics. "Fighting evolution doesn't stop it," he continued, "if you don't allow content, people will find a way to get it." Most panelists merely tiptoed around the grave issues of piracy and DRM, perhaps for fear of opening Pandora's box; however, even with the lid on, these caustic issues are certain to come to the fore in discussions over free versus paid content.

To cap off the event, brilliantly eccentric writer, Douglas Rushkoff (Life Inc.) a self-described member of "cyber-punk culture" who believed in P2P and free access. But the issue wasn't as black and white as Google versus Murdoch, good versus evil. "There are writers on both sides of the screen," he argued, "and you can't give away everything for free" if you want to uphold quality of content and the standards of a writer—for which he trademarked the term, a "capital R writer."

The source of the problem, according to Rushkoff, was an outdated industrial economic model made obsolete by the "nowness" of the Internet. His solution was as hazy as his distinction between good and evil, but resembled a move from commodity to cultural exchange. This two-day forum wasn't about the new devices being heralded as saviours of the print industry because if we've learned anything about new technology, change doesn't simply rest on a gadget. It is the social use of the new gadget that determines its longevity, and the business model behind the content fueling its use.

One thing is clear: physical books will never go away, like Friedman argues, but the methods of production and their portals of access have been irrevocably altered by the internet and its strange bedfellows: Pirates, agnostics and cannibals, oh my! Who ever said digital publishing was boring?

This report by Polis Intern Lauren Sozio.



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