It Is Very Much an "E" and "POD" World

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Having been involved in the bookselling business since the mid 80s I have done my share of the world’s book fairs. Frankfurt looms large in my experience and not just because of the strangely unappealing German food, or the moans from the large British contingent about the price of hotels or the impossibility of getting a decent cup of tea.

The thing that always sticks in my head are the endless rounds of seminars, roundtables and presentations where the collective minds of the world’s book trade denizens get up on their hind legs, switch on the PowerPoint slides and attempt to predict what is going to happen to the book, and the trade that revolves around it.

I know. I am one of those denizens and I too have done my fair share of predicting and more than my fair share of getting it badly wrong. I may be about to do it again in what follows but you and time can be the judges of that.

Anyone who attended the Frankfurt Book Fair around the year 2000 will recall the intense and almost feverish excitement that accompanied what might be called the first eBook wave. Disciples of the new technology vied with each other to predict the death of the physical book or “tree ware” as some wag coined paper books. There was also the most fantastically lavish eBook awards ceremony that lasted I think for about three or maybe four years. Lashings of drinkables and plates of clearly very expensive nibbles as the Brits call them, were eagerly consumed before the devotees were ushered into the awards ceremony where a succession of unrecognized authors were awarded prizes for the best eBook fiction and so on. The worth of the content subsumed in the format of its delivery. All very odd I thought. The event petered out after it became clear to all that the expected promised land of a paper book free world was simply not going to turn up and the Frankfurt trenchermen went in search of alternative fodder.

As 2009 draws to a close, eBooks are coming to the fore again, powered by improved technologies, the introduction of devices like the Kindle and the Sony reader and a more sober and informed understanding by both publishers and booksellers about how content should be packaged for consumers who want to read it. The simultaneous release in both the e-book and print format of Dan Brown’s The Lost Symbol will probably be looked back on as a key event in this trend, for consumers are being offered that oldest of options: choice. This is all a little different from the early insensitivities of the eBook pioneers that consumers should be weaned from their odd notions of wanting to have a paper book. Consumers tend to make up their own minds.

The book trade world of 2009 is not a world that is seeing eBooks as a replacement technology for the vast majority of content that is currently in a physical format. Although there are clearly areas of publishing that fit the eBook format better than others such as high end academic and scientific titles. The world of 2009 is one in which content, the stuff that authors produce, is increasingly being offered into the market in both e format and paper format. The major shift however is that the technology of print-on-demand is moving to the very centre of how a publisher offers content in the traditional physical paper format. This shift is happening hand in glove with increasing interest in the offering of content in a variety of different ways. “Either and” has replaced “either or.” This is not an audio cassette being replaced by a CD moment or CD’S being replaced by downloads.

I have been involved in the world of print-on-demand (POD) at Lightning Source for a little over six years. In that short time, the technology of digital printing has leapt forward. POD produced books are no longer derided as inferior quality. POD correctly defined is the ability to produce a single copy of a book from a digital file; it is not, despite the best efforts of some digital printers, about ultra short run digital printing because that is still premised upon the production and holding of speculative inventory in the hope that it will be sold. Pure POD allows a book to be sold and then printed, and that has truly radical implications for the book business if you start thinking about it on a global scale.

There is another factor that has played here though. The welding of scalable single copy production capability to large scale global distribution via wholesalers, distributors and Internet booksellers has the potential to effect massive change on the book publishing business. This is the model of supply that has been pioneered by Ingram via the marrying of Lightning Source with its wholesaling and book distribution capabilities. It is this combination that is driving some very radical thinking in some of the world’s largest publishers and distributors.

The advantages of POD for a traditional publishing business are very well understood: the ability to reduce inventory, to keep books and associated revenue alive, to reduce the risks of over printing and excess inventory and so on. POD has also given rise to whole new types of publishing models from self-publishing, to the resurrection of public domain books that have long been unavailable to buy.

What we are now starting to see is an awakening realization amongst publishers, partly fuelled by the economic downturn that this marriage between POD and global distribution is going to allow a fundamental shift in the very way that they get their content into global markets. Further, the improvements in digital printing and finishing, and the promise of further shifts to come with the advent of digital ink based rather than toner based printing are going to allow even more of their titles to come within the remit of the POD production model. Now we are not just talking about POD allowing long tail titles to remain in print or authors to self-publish; we are talking about a shift from a global book supply chain that is based on warehouses filled with speculative inventory to one based on minimal inventory or no inventory at all. The distribution centre full of books printed speculatively is going to be replaced by much smaller footprint centres only holding those titles in a preprinted format that POD cannot currently manufacture. Increasing numbers of titles are going to be printed only when a sale is made. In addition, the idea of printing books in one location in a large print run and then shipping them around the world to sit in regional warehouses waiting for an order is becoming a defunct one. Lightning Source has already demonstrated the attractiveness of this model of production and distribution via...
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Content will be increasingly outsourced to organizations with a global footprint with capabilities in POD, book distribution and e-content distribution. And all of this, I would suggest, is good news for the book in whatever format you wish to read it in.

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PROFESSIONAL CAREER AND ACTIVITIES: 25 years of experience in the U.K. and international book trades in a wide range of senior management positions including online bookselling, retail bookselling and library supply. Started in bookselling in 1983. Former Director of Blackwell’s international library supply business. Served on the Booksellers’ Association of the UK and Ireland’s Council for several years and a former Chairman of the College and University Bookseller’s Group and the Internet Bookseller’s Group, the latter of which I founded. Regular speaker at book trade conferences and have published a number of articles on the impact that new technologies are having on the book trade supply chain. Member of the Society of Bookmen. Diploma in Management Studies (1988) from the University of Westminster and an MBA (1992) from Oxford Brookes University.

FAMILY: Married to Caroline, two sons, Harry (19) and George (15).

IN MY SPARE TIME: My wife doesn’t normally allow me to have any but when I do, watching Wolverhampton Wanderers football (soccer) club, taking my dog Tara on long country walks via old English pubs, reading, cycling, gardening, spending time with the family, Indian food, single malt whisky.


PET PEEVES: Management jargon. Pomposity. Animated powerpoint slides. Losing to Germany on penalties in the World Cup (soccer).

PHILOSOPHY: Never make the mistake of thinking you are always right. Never stop learning.

MOST MEMORABLE CAREER ACHIEVEMENT: Becoming President of Lightning Source in 2008.

GOAL I HOPE TO ACHIEVE FIVE YEARS FROM NOW: Personally – to have read Proust’s In Remembrance of Times Past. Started it twice now! Professionally – to have helped Ingram Content Group grow into a global player.

HOW/WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS: Content will be increasingly available in a wide variety of forms, both printed and electronic, and delivered to customers via service and distribution organizations who have a genuine global footprint. Print will remain the dominant form of delivery for the majority of titles that are published but the method of production and distribution will have shifted much more to an on demand model rather than one based upon printing for inventory and selling from that inventory. There will be many millions more books available for people to buy and read, largely thanks to the combination of mass digitization and a global print-on-demand model. The book will not be dead but will be available in lots of different formats.

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