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Op Ed — What is a Book?

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One of my most valued possessions is a copy of **Pliny the Elder's *Natural History***, sometimes also called *The History of the World*. Note, not called *A history of the world*, but *The history of the world*. It was translated into English in 1601, and is an important book in two particular ways, apart from being one of the great works of Elizabethan prose. It was one of the seminal works that opened up the ancient world to the modern world, and was part of the rebirth of knowledge and science. **Pliny** died in 79 CE during the eruption of Vesuvius. He is reputed to have written continually, day after day, throughout his life and accumulated a huge collection of information. So the second particular significance for me is that **Pliny's *History of the World*** was in effect the last time in history when it was conceivable that one man could record all the information about the known world in one lifetime.

He could not, of course, carry it all in his head, though undoubtedly he carried a great deal of it in his head. The ancient art of rhetoric required disciplined memory training, and the mnemonic tradition of **Cicero** and **Quintilian** that originated in that era resurfaced in medieval and renaissance times also as an aid to learning and information retrieval. Even if some ancient writers thought that this constant scribbling was undermining the art of rhetoric and coherent thinking on one's feet, books, in effect, became the essential form of extended memory, permanent records of thinking that have become artefacts of cultures and civilizations.

Once information is transferred to objects outside our own mental storage capacity, whether as manuscripts or as printed books, they no longer sit in our minds where we can call them up at will. They are out there in the world of other physical objects, and if we want to call those extended memories back to mind we have to venture out into the world and find the physical objects themselves. In past times this has been something of a haphazard adventure. The correspondence of **Erasmus** reveals the uncertain and random state of information about what books may be had, printed or in manuscript, where copies might reside, who they were last lent to. He speaks of disputes with merchants who swear they have shipped them, the books lost and stolen in transit, the rumours of new translations and the despatch of trusted friends across dangerous seas to go and buy them or borrow them.

In the early history of the printed

book there was not the separation of printer, publisher and bookseller in the way we are used to now. The enterprise of collating manuscript works and making them available as printed copies was dependent for its success on the circulation of information about books within the smallish learned communities of those who wanted to read them, and who of necessity must go to some trouble to find them and buy them from the printer, or borrow them from a friend, or travel to sit in front of them and read them in a library.

The modern book trade has grown up out of the need to manage the effective distribution of physical copies of books, whose successful format of words printed on paper and permanently bound together in a fixed sequence has served the world of learning and scholarship for more than 500 years. And it has grown out of the need to manage information about the existence of these objects and where to find them.

So now we all have segregated but inter-related roles in what we like to call the supply chain. The links in that chain are the author, who has created and owns the intellectual property. The publisher, who owns the right to sell and license it. The printer, who is simply paid to make the object. The distributor, who takes the book from the printer on behalf of the publisher and does the physical shipping. The wholesaler, who acts as the aggregator of publishers' lists so that physical booksellers have an efficient way to stock control a wide range of products across many publishers. Bookshops themselves, which are places to go to find and get hold of books — but not all books, because, as publishing has expanded, a bookshop can't meet every possible need from inventory.

In this chain also are the bibliographic agencies, who are offshoots of the publishing industry and who form part of the information supply chain for both booksellers who aggregate them and readers who want to discover them. And, of course, librarians and libraries, the gateways to and the permanent archives and depositories of all those books and all the routes to the discovery of books that I began by describing as extended forms of memory. It works, and it works very well.

But there is a lot more information in the world than ever before, and it grows at incalculable rates, bursting the bounds of the printed page and spilling out

into a 100 billion Webpages. We are moving into a new publishing era, and just quite where it will go and what the future will look like is probably no easier for us to guess than it would have been for **Erasmus** to predict the modern developments in publishing when he wrote to **Aldus** in Venice, in 1507: "I am told you are editing **Plato** in Greek, a book expected with the greatest interest by the learned world. I should like to know what authors you have printed on the subject of Medicine."

"It is probably the bookseller who has the most to come to terms with in the new digital era."

If books can truly be described as forms of extended memory, then so can computers and other mass storage and retrieval devices. The traditional form is not the only form, and as with any technological advance old forms are being replaced by new forms. Does that mean the era of the book is over? No one seems to think so. There aren't many horse-drawn carriages around these days, either. But there are a lot of horses. We're very fond of them, even if they are not the best vehicles for people in a hurry. Books are so much a part of our lives, and the vested interest in the business model is sufficiently robust to ensure that, like the horse, the book still has legs, so to speak.

I have a view that the book niche will grow, but in differentiated ways that build on the intrinsic value of the physical object. There are plenty of people like myself who like books for their own sake. The online sale of used books is growing, there is still a collector's market for fine books, nicely produced books, and illustrated books, that I hope will sustain an interest in high production values for books we want to own. And people will still want to browse books and buy books for their convenience. If **Gutenberg** had been able to start with digital content, whoever then thought up the idea of printing out the content and sticking it all together into pages you can carry around would be right now at the beginning of a new revolution. We have had the benefit of that revolution, and it's not one I can see easily being relinquished.

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But if we keep in mind that, irrespective of the formal nature of the book itself, books are extended forms of memory, when I just want to recollect some information and add it to some other information I've recollected from some other place, then the book as object is not what I want. I want to recall information from a more effective extension of the collective memory than a stack of books on a shelf that may or may not contain what I want supposing I can (a) first find the book and then (b) find the bit in it I want to read and (c) be sure it's not in a book that should be on the shelf but is being read by someone else.

To see how this need is currently evolving, let's look at the supply chain from the author to the reader and see what sort of changes are taking place and what sort of tensions are being created in that process of transition.

The poet **Thomas Wyatt** was one of the founders of the English poetic tradition, but he never published a book. He wrote out his poems and gave them to people he knew at court. It was an early form of social networking but with less inane content, and the added pleasure of a lute accompaniment. But the point is, he reached all the readers who appreciated his work, he didn't need a peer review of his work to get it out in the market, there wasn't a commercial model to be defended, and clearly he wasn't interested in money, only in reputation. Since his reputation mattered to him, he didn't put anything out there he wasn't prepared to put his name to.

It sounds like there might be a parallel here with arguments about why authors publish journal articles and publish books. Is it for money, or for prestige? For influence, for job preferment, or simply altruistic, to make a contribution to knowledge, to human welfare, to the advancement of scholarship? Once you take out mercenary motives and the interests of authors in the best or better selling categories, now that you can get your work into the hands of anyone interested in it via the Web, why publish? Hence we are seeing an increase in and a lot of debate around creative commons and open content for the sharing of information. To get published "properly" of course, material has to get by peer review and will come with the added prestige and the authority of the journal or the publishing house. But how much of that argument is a cry from the publisher and part of the pain of transition, and how much is a genuine threat to quality and authority? Can't we conceive, in the age of Wikis, of open access publishing *and* authoritative provenance coexisting?

Publishers already hold digital content in order to produce the printed book, and they are now increasingly publishing simultaneously in electronic and in print formats, and releasing backlist in electronic format. There's no overhead for publishing backlist electronically in quite the way there is for printed books, so on the one hand you can expect to see some reasonably priced offers being brought to the market — but on the other hand publishers are

still working from pricing models based on producing, warehousing and shipping physical copies, and it will take some time to balance the opportunity with the threat to traditional margin models. And, of course, right at the immovable foundation of the publishing industry lie the laws of copyright, which are themselves based on the concept of the "copy" and its rights of reproduction, and there is of course tension between the technological vision of easily reproduced and universally accessible digital copies and the older business model of corporate rights to revenues.

The most difficult and contentious area is the market for textbooks. Adopted texts are the

foundation of most courses, and every student is supposed to buy a copy. It's a copy based revenue model. In the digital era you don't need copies, just universal

access. The very concept of a textbook breaks down, to be resurrected as a range of associated texts, chapters, excerpts, citations, all of which belong to a more complex learning environment that is no longer book-based. Will the future textbook become more like a playlist on a student's **iPod**, the parts taken from the whole, the album itself never taken off the shelf? Is the future business model a commercial relationship between the producer of learning resources and the provider of learning environments? If the time comes when students no longer need to budget for books, will we see a different commercial model where the institution pays for the use of content and recovers the cost from student fees? A new model of publishing has not yet fully emerged, but it will — and it is unlikely to look like the current model of multi-copy sales of physical books that are piled high on the floor of the local bookshop at the beginning of term.

It is probably the bookseller who has the most to come to terms with in the new digital era. As the intermediary between the publisher — who owns the content — and the library or the end user — who gets value from the end product — once you take away the need to place physical copies in the hands of the buyer it is hard to see where the value that booksellers currently add to the supply chain can be added through any intermediary process. This question arises for the traditional wholesale distributor too. New models of distribution for digital content are evolving where, instead of the inventory management of physical copies, we have digital asset management where companies manage digital content and digital rights on behalf of publishers, including audio content, and develop the channels to market, whether these are to traditional retailers, to libraries, to other publishers of learning resources, via print on demand production lines, or direct to consumers as downloads. While trying to maintain a role for traditional booksellers sometimes seems a little contrived, it is also throwing up interesting innovations, such as the provision of kiosks, in the retail market and in public libraries, for on demand download and printing of books.

It is taking time for our thinking to make the transition from copy-based concepts of a book to the idea of aggregated content from all publishers sitting in the same space. You can buy an individual eBook from a publisher just like a print book, and put it in the catalog as though you were putting a book on a shelf. Or you can move on and ignore the artificial boundaries of the book and treat them all as "information" held in one searchable database.

If we are to think clearly about the future of the book we need to draw a distinction between books that need to be read from the front to the back, so you don't lose the thread of the argument or lose the plot, and books from which

you just need to draw down authoritative information in context. You could argue that it is the way that information is used, and the needs of the user, that will shape

both the future of the *book* and its routes to market, and the future of information *content* that has escaped from the confines of the book as an object.

One of the great benefits of the printing press was in establishing definitive texts — every copy of the book is the same, unlike manuscript copying and the scribe's slip of the pen or his personal elaboration or correction of a text that has led to numerous theological debates. The history of the book is in fact a history of copies of books. Easily reproduced copies of books have meant that knowledge has been able to spread in authoritative ways across the globe. That history is now changing direction, and those of us grown used to publishing, printing, buying, selling, storing, filing, cataloging and talking and writing about books have to rethink our most familiar subject as books lose their identity and become transformed into linked resources. Those resources need to remain searchable and discoverable not only outside the confines of the covers of the book itself, but outside the library as a building where that discovery up until now has taken place. So the transformation of the book is accompanied inexorably by a transformation of the role of libraries, and particularly of library buildings, as more information goes online. I am inclined to think that the interesting debate we have been having in recent years about libraries being "more than" books and instead, especially in the debate around public libraries, community meeting spaces and activity centers, may finally be coming full circle. The value of libraries in this age of diffused information channels has to be, first and foremost, content, and then, increasingly, routes to discovery. I never thought that I would find myself entranced by metadata, or thinking of catalogers as heroes of the information age. But I do. 🐾

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