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sotto voce — The Book is dead. The book is dead. Long live the Book!

by **Bob Schatz** (Vice-President of Sales, Academic Book Center) <bobs@acbc.com>

Hey y'all! Bob Schatz has been whispering in my ear over email and — guess what — he is going to give us his thought“s” regularly! Welcome, Bob. Pronto! — KS

Like **Tom Leonhardt**, I too have been thinking about “the Book” (see “Oregon Trails — Books” in the June *ATG*, p.66). I’m a person whose professional and personal lives both revolve around books. The company of which I am a vice-president, supplies books to university libraries throughout the world, so my pondering whether books will or won’t survive is more than idle speculation. Of course, no one knows for sure, but based on a revelation I had the other day, I’m now fairly convinced that books are here to stay, at least a significant number of them.

Remember how television was going to spell the death of movies? Well, newsreels died because they couldn’t keep up with the timelessness of television news, and weekly serial films gave way to daily soap operas that could be viewed from home for free (unless you want to factor in the psychological cost of watching the ads that came with them). In general, though, instead of destroying movies, television forced movies to improve: better photographic techniques, more exciting special effects, and improved theater sound systems were all developed to keep movies attractive to audiences that could more easily stay home and watch their TVs. Full length movies were never really endangered by TV. These cinemas remain the devices that feed our imaginations more masterfully than anything television can provide. The success of home video rentals and movie channels notwithstanding, most people find watching movies in a theater more enriching than seeing the same work on a television set.

As I recently finished reading **Stanley Karnow**’s wonderful *Paris in the Fifties*, I realized, as I always do when I read prose or fiction, that this is bright, that great books make me rejoice in reading as a human activity. At such times I, like Tom, wonder how books could ever be replaced by electronics.

The problem with predictions about the future of computers and the way they will impact books, is that we always lump books together in a single category: BOOKS. If we

look at the role books play, it becomes more apparent that there are two types of books — those which are highly replaceable by computerization, and those which are not.

In education, books (and journals for that matter) act as delivery systems. That is, they are devices for bringing information and information-seekers together. In this mode, books are not terribly efficient. They come out long after events take place, due to the time it takes to write, evaluate, and produce them as artifacts.

They cannot be conveniently used by simultaneous users and, since they are static, they cannot be manipulated to produce different kinds of information than already exist in their printed forms. These kinds of books will most likely disappear, and perhaps should. Computers, undoubtedly, are better delivery systems than books.

What we too often fail to take into account in our ruminations about the future viability of books, is that they also work as transportation systems. When I am not seeking information from a book, I am using it to transport me from my current reality to some other reality. Sometimes it may be through works of fiction, or, as with my recent reading, through memoirs and history. In this mode, there are no more perfect artifacts than books. They are compact and portable, and they are the best model yet devised to allow us to partake of that uniquely human act of reading. While works that are meant to transport us can be delivered via computer, why would we want them to?

While the Bill Gateses of the world would have us believe that books are our generation’s horse-and-buggy, books still represent the best means, to me, of packaging transporting writing. While there’s little I can do to slow down the rate at which computers will affect books as information delivery systems (nor should I try to, my own selfish professional concerns notwithstanding), I take comfort in a belief that my life will continue to be filled with books that enrich my soul and overflow the already cluttered shelves I devote to their storage.

The challenge, I suppose, to those who would replace these kinds of books with their computerized counterparts, is to make the electronic version even more transporting. Perhaps some future electronic version of *Lolita* will have a “click here” icon that will cut to a saucy live-action clip to illustrate the prose being read. Unfortunately, like most readers, my imagination already does a much better job of that. (Hmm, perhaps I should have chosen a book other than *Lolita* to illustrate my point; my reputation is already suspect enough without this kind of speculation.)

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