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eBooks ex machina? Dispatches from the New Digital Information Order

Miriam Gilbert
MxGilber2@aol.com

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Against the Grain

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Against the Grain

c/o Katina Strauch
209 Richardson Avenue
MSC 98, The Citadel
Charleston, SC 29409

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eBooks ex machina? Dispatches from the New Digital Information Order

by **Miriam Gilbert** (Consultant, 3121 Seventh Street, Boulder, CO 80304; Hm. Phone: 303-444-5240; Cell: 303-818-7187) <MxGilbert2@aol.com>

"It is not the strongest species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the ones most responsive to change."

— **Charles Darwin**

"The future just isn't what it used to be."

— **Woody Allen**

When I accepted the role of "guest editor" of the *ATG* eBook issue at last January's ALA, the job seemed relatively straightforward. While this would be my first time serving as an official "editor of record," I had worked on edited collections—many on "political hot spots"—during my career as a book publisher and felt equal to the task. With twelve months to craft an issue on an expanding eBook marketplace, my goal was in easy reach.

I knew the drill. I first assembled a team of interested and willing contributors. I determined a schedule for submissions for concept paragraph, first draft, and final article. With so much lead time, the interval between the steps was generous

enough for the most over-committed member of the group, yet motivating enough for the most eager. I looked forward to my role as the project's "Jewish mother," administering a fine mix of intellectual cheerleading and mind-focusing guilt. One writer completed her piece months before the final deadline, while another pulled out and a substitute was found. Since I was then Senior Director, Publisher Relations at **netLibrary**, I was in a prime position to observe (and help influence) the growth of the nascent eBook industry and help guide the issue to a meaningful and nuanced conclusion. What I had not anticipated was that our theme was on a collision course with one of our

industry's most disruptive, if not defining, "cultural hot spots" of the year.

And what a difference a year makes. Between the hype and the hope, all of us in the information industries are now struggling to define (or redefine) a strategy for eBooks and the digital environment. We are all aware (some of us painfully so) of the trajectories of many eBook, rights management, and conversion companies that have impacted the landscape of scholarly communication.

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If Rumors Were Horses

It was Thursday, October 25, nearly five o'clock in the afternoon. I was cutting through the **College of Charleston** main classroom building, Maybank Hall, when what to my wondering eyes should appear but — **Colin Day** <colinday@hkucc.hku.kh> once of **University of Michigan Press** and now **Publisher of Hong Kong University Press**. Colin looked fit as a fiddle and younger than ever. He was in Charleston for a **Biosis Board** meeting at which he told me they were discussing the recent review in *The Charleston Advisor of Zoological Record* (see www.charlestonco.com)! Pretty awesome! Plus Colin said that he is working closely with

Tony Ferguson <ferguson@hkucc.hku.hk> so we know that Tony is in good hands or maybe it's vice versa! Anyway, it's a small world, isn't it?

I can't help myself. One of the most wonderful women in the world has won a richly deserved award. Congratulations to **College of Charleston History Professor and Associate Provost Amy McCandless** who has won a national award for her book, *The Past in the Present: Women's Higher Education in the Twentieth-Century American South*. <http://www.cofc.edu/about/news/20011119-1.html>.

Confidential report! Shhh, he's

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No one has escaped the effects of the value gospel of the new "liberation technology" that was the signature of the dot-com era. For five crazy years we were awash in concepts and measures like "numbers of eyeballs," "percentage of click-throughs," and my favorite "EBE (earnings before expenses)." It was a sign of the time that nobody knew whether EBE was an inside joke or was actually serious. With the dramatic correction taking place in our national economy, we all "get the joke" now.

No longer coddled by an Internet marketplace that accepted, indeed encouraged, a large margin of error, we are a nation and an industry gone back to basics. But did we ever lose sight of our core mission as academics, publishers, librarians, and distributors—the creation and dissemination of knowledge? **Niko Pfund of Oxford University Press** observed in the November issue of *ATG* that "the strategic planning of everyone in the industry has been influenced

in one way or another by the advent of eBooks, and by the creation of content and delivery systems far larger than the extant market for eBooks (and CD-ROMs before them) would seem to merit." If we imagine the Internet as the electricity of the information age: everywhere, never fully understood, but forever changing our lives, **Niko** reflects on what is a positive trend. Forced adaptation is better than no adaptation at all.

The printed book is a mature technology and a stunningly successful vehicle for communication. Yet how do we practically and affordably harness the digital medium to enhance that power of communication? When **Katina** insisted that I attend this year's **Charleston Conference** and speak on the subject of eBooks, I did so with trepidation. What would be the response of the community to the changes at companies like **netLibrary**, **Adobe**, **Reciprocal**, and **Intertrust**? Would there be a chorus of "I told you so's" and "I knew we never should have's" delivered with a measure of anger and a dose of disappointment? To my great relief, the mood at the conference was one of

problem-solving and deep engagement. In the lively public forums that are the hallmark of Charleston, as well as in innumerable private conversations, publishers, librarians, and distributors had performed the necessary course correction and were proceeding with on-line projects and current eBook experiments. The "sky had not fallen" and while there was concern from many about "protecting investments of time, capital, and good-will" there was widespread confidence about grappling with and defining a new electronic future.

What are the forms of this new future? Perhaps the most significant is the broad-based cooperation and constructive dialogue between publishers and librarians about the role and future of eBooks and networked information. With this year's well-publicized clashes between the leadership of the ALA and AAP, it has too often appeared, as is said about the separation of Americans and British by a common "language," that librarians and publishers are all often separated by a common object—"the book." Issues that stir the hearts of librarians, can stir the stomachs of publishers. But there was none of that in evidence among the hard-working and dedicated **Charleston Conference** attendees. The over 500 committed librarians and publishing professionals debated and spoke passionately about their service to the academy and its students. Could the authority of the printed book be lent to the new format of the eBook? Would this provide the bridge between the accuracy and completeness librarians value and the speed and 24/7 convenience students expect and demand?

The astute contributors to this issue of *Against the Grain* have attempted to address these questions and others central to the development of a vital eBook market. Publisher, university library, national library, consortia and distributor are all given voice. **Kelly Franklin of John Wiley & Sons** outlines the obstacles and promises of digital book creation, dissemination and consumption. **Franklin** describes the new **Wiley** on-line scholarship program which will, via subscription, make monographs available and searchable alongside that publisher's own on-line journals and select major reference works. **Nancy Gibbs**, now of the **Duke University Libraries**, describes the **North Carolina State University** commitment to providing both eBooks and hand-held readers to patrons. **Mary-Alice Lynch**, Executive Director of **Nylink**, details the consortial experience of grappling with the purchase and integration of eBooks among its broad membership. With growing pains came great eGains, and both **NC State** and **Nylink** had their fair share of both as they pioneered new pricing models, collaborative collection development, and confronted the timely integration of eBook MARC records and the direct impact on usage. **Kim Richardson** and **Mark Bide of Rightscom** examine the strategic visions of both the **British Library** and the **Library of Congress** to incorporate the Web and eBooks as part of the mission "to make accessible the world's intellectual, scientific, and cultural heritage." The developments in the distribution channel are clearly articulated by **Sherry Thompson of Majors** and **Rick Lugg** and **Ruth**

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MIRIAM GILBERT BIO

Miriam Gilbert is a consultant to the information industries. During her career in the publishing and eBook industries she has held a range of positions. As **netLibrary's** Senior Director, Publisher Relations, Miriam was responsible for forging relationships with the publishing community and acquiring the content that serves as the foundation for **netLibrary's** on-line eBook collection.

A long-time leader in academic publishing, Miriam held a wide-variety of editorial and marketing roles at **Westview Press**. She was VP and Director of Domestic and International Sales and Marketing at the time of Westview's acquisition by **HarperCollins**. At **HarperCollins**, she served as VP and Associate Publisher for **Westview Press**.

Miriam Gilbert is a faculty member of the **Denver Publishing Institute** and a frequent speaker at information industry events.

The Shot Heard 'Round the Publishing World

by **Kelly Franklin** (Director, e-Business Development Professional & Trade Division, John Wiley & Sons, 605 Third Avenue, New York, New York 10158-0012) <kfrankli@wiley.com>

Stephen King's *Riding the Bullet* was the shot heard 'round the publishing world. It forced a generation of authors, editors, readers, and librarians who grew up loving the portable, reasonably permanent, and endlessly enriching world of physical books to confront the obstacles and promise of digital book creation, dissemination, and consumption.

As those in my generation, who grew up learning some of our American history from the **School House Rock**, know the "shot heard 'round the world" was the start of the revolution. But when it comes to eBooks, **Mr. King's** experiment is more akin to the beginning of an evolutionary process. It seems unlikely that eBooks will replace physical books in the foreseeable future. But over time, digital books may well develop into a new medium which complements and extends our existing modes of communicating knowledge, wisdom, entertainment, and inspiration. Most publishers, including **Wiley**, feel a sense of obligation to their authors and customers to support the development of this evolution — even though the costs, at present, far outweigh any potential return on investment.

Decades ago **Marshall McLuhan** raised questions of matching medium to message. Most of today's eBooks don't yet constitute a new medium; rather they offer a new delivery mechanism for a 500 year-old medium. But, by working together to clear the hurdles to delivery of today's print analog books through

digital channels, we are building the infrastructure and market necessary to support the eventual realization of the promise of interactive digital books. Among the challenges we must sort through:

- eBook file formats
- editorial and production workflow
- intellectual property protection, fair use and availability
- cost structure, author compensation, and pricing
- eBook and metadata delivery and distribution
- component packets and custom publishing
- archiving and evolving content

File Format

File format has been, perhaps, one of the most perplexing elements of the eBooks world. Despite the **Open Ebooks Initiative**, there is no one common file format that meets the promise of interoperability among the various hardware and software eBook readers. Instead, there are a variety of page-based and text reflow / XML formats, each of which present different reader benefits and obstacles. Page-based e-book readers (e.g. **Adobe eBook Reader**) have the benefit of preserving print book formatting, but they can force unacceptably small displays, which can be particularly problematic for double-column or triple-column works. Presenting images, tables, and scientific notation in structured reflow formats, such as XML, is generally quite labor intensive, and can be prohibitively costly. In short, choosing the right formats for the right content is no small matter.

In addition, publishers and eBook buyers would like to be assured that today's file formats will be readable in 5, 10, and 50 years from now, but no such guarantees can be offered. This poses significant archiving challenges for both publishers and librarians charged with maintaining access to a collection of content.

Editorial and Production Workflow

At **Wiley**, where we've committed to offering all of our frontlist professional and trade titles, and many of our scientific / technical frontlist books in eBook format, we've struggled not only with matching the right file format(s) to each book, but also with the high human resource demands of providing production oversight and quality assurance for each book in each format.

On the editorial side, the burden relates to permissions. Because many of our books are technical in nature, they incorporate tabular and illustrative material from a variety of sources; and securing permission to display this content in eBook form is a significant

hurdle. **Wiley** has recently changed its permission policy to grant print and eBook reprint rights simultaneously for content taken from our publications — we hope other publishers will soon follow suit in establishing dual "p" and "e" book permission grants.

Intellectual Property and Rights

In addition to the permissions puzzle, eBooks pose the "hot button" issue of secure file dissemination. Even in a post-Napster era, file swapping services such as **Gnutella** pose a significant threat to intellectual property. Most publishers feel a strong sense of obligation to protect their authors' intellectual rights. The appropriate degree of digital rights management is a more open question. There are a number of options relating to whether content from eBooks can be printed or copied, shared or passed along, archived for use by the purchaser on multiple devices, accessed by multiple users at an institution, etc. Publishers and librarians, both of whom must balance copy-right protection versus fair use, need to maintain a dialog in order to craft digital rights management guidelines that are workable for all parties.

In addition to content protection, eBooks raise questions related to territorial rights that are firmly ingrained in the print book world, but which are rendered less distinct when content can be delivered to anyone anywhere on the planet with access to the Internet. This issue has yet to be resolved, but cannot be ignored as eBooks become more commonplace and online retailing grows around the globe. The complications this raises are underscored by **Rolf Janke**, Vice President and Publisher, **Sage Publications**, "Just when we thought we had the domestic market figured out as far as electronic rights are concerned, we now look at the global market as a tremendous challenge that presents a different set of issues."

Pricing and Cost Structure

Publishers, authors, agents, and online book retailers have puzzled over fair pricing and compensation for eBooks. In some arenas, readers point to potential paper, printing, and warehousing savings, and expect that eBooks should be priced lower than related print books (of course, at this stage, these savings are theoretical — the eBook market is too narrow at this point in time to have any impact on print runs, and in fact, conversion and eBook fulfillment systems have added significant new costs for publishers). In other genres, multimedia and embedded tools and links could endow eBooks with greater utility than "p" books — the question is when and if readers would be willing to defray the cost of enhanced content creation. Time will tell.

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Fischer of R2 Consulting. Thompson focuses on concerns particular to health sciences content and the suitability of eBook formats for its delivery. Finally, **Lugg and Fischer** in their felicitously titled "The Host with the Most" offer a thorough review of hosting and distribution by the "new" eBook aggregators and the "traditional" book vendors, including co-operation between them.

Our dispatches from the new digital information order demonstrate that there is service, potentially profit, and, yes, real virtue to be had in our emerging virtual reality. With the turbulence in this year's eBook market, there is plenty of drama, as well. But dramatic or not, "the sky is not falling" and none of us expect the perfect eBook scheme to descend miraculously from the heavens. However, if we continue to work together, we can expect a solution to our drama more satisfying, if not more elegant, than that afforded the Romans and Greeks by a costumed god lowered from above by a bit of creaky stage machinery. 🐼