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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) <kfranklin@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 formatted, each of which presents 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 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 permissions 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 copyright 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 pay the extra cost of enhanced content creation. Time will tell.

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eBooks Two Years Later: The North Carolina State University Perspective

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Two years ago publishers, librarians, writers, critics, and customers very much doubted that eBooks would be an alternative or an addition to print books, let alone a viable product. Perhaps not in the form we view them at this moment, but eBooks are here, part of our academic collections, and fill a need for our patrons in this Internet-accessed world. We have opened the bottle and we can’t put the genie back in — and would we want to?

At North Carolina State University we investigated, initiated, and introduced both eBooks and hand-held readers to our patrons. Initially, many in the academic community questioned those decisions based on untested products. But librarians on our staff saw this new venture as a viable alternative to bring online access of some of our monographs collection to our patrons, much as we had done

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