November 2013

Back Talk -- In the X Movie

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Recommended Citation

DOI: https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.5149

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formative device. Let’s revisit this at the 2009 Charleston Conference.

“The ghost of beauty, the ghost of stateliness, the ghost of elegance, the ghost of pride, the ghost of frivolity, the ghost of wit, the ghost of youth, the ghost of age, all waiting their dismissal from the desolate shore...”

To the aforementioned university press. For many years, the university press imprimatur has connoted quality and intellectual vibrancy. The effects of the scholarly communication crisis have been keenly felt by this group over the past two decades. Monographs continue to struggle finding a place within library budgets, as do, increasingly, print books in general. Marketing dollars are scarce, and fixed costs are nontrivial. However, we can clearly observe pockets of innovation emerging over the past few years. Rice University has revived its press in digital only mode, relying on low-cost print-on-demand for those who want hard copy. Columbia University Press has teamed with the library and the IT department to co-found Electronic Publishing Initiative at Columbia (EPIC). EPIC’s goal — to create new kinds of scholarly and educational publications through the use of new media technologies — has already resulted in the development of the Columbia International Affairs Online and Earthscape platforms. Penn State Press and the University Libraries have partnered on an Office of Digital Scholarly Publishing to recognize efficiencies on project management, budgeting, and opportunity evaluation. Will these types of experiments reinvigorate the category? Or is the venerable institution truly in danger of joining Dickens’ ghosts on the desolate shore?

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adoption. There certainly will be more to watch in the coming months related to OOXML.

There are numerous ways that community members may participate in the international standards development process. Although there is an added level of logistical challenges when participating at this level, it can be a truly rewarding experience. Not only is this a great opportunity to interact with colleagues internationally and experience their culture, it is also an opportunity to help shape the future directions of information exchange. If you are interested in engaging more directly in international standardization, please contact the NISO offices at nisohq@niso.org.

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Amazon could be the collector of university presses? Were this to happen, the effects of the POD butterfly might not end here. With Amazon involved, what will happen to academic book vendors? Maybe Amazon could buy one or more of approval vendors and simplify the whole process. We live in interesting times. Watch out for butterflies!

Endnotes
1. Contrary to popular belief, ISO is not an acronym for the name in a different language. Because the organization name would have different acronyms for each language, the short name of ISO was chosen — derived from the Greek iso, meaning “equal” — to be the all-purpose name in any language.

Endnotes
In the movie, Jurassic Park, one of the characters talks about the so called chaos theory “butterfly effect” and how life is not as chaotic as it seems, but there are causes not always seen by those at the blunt end of the effect. I have often thought back to this fictional conversation: That a butterfly in the Amazon could with the flutter of its wings set in motion a change/trend in our interrelated ecosystem which is then experienced world-wide. I have found this interesting because I have wondered about the consequences of behaviors or developments we are observing today — are they butterflies or inconsequential moths?

Recently, at an American Library Association (Anaheim, CA 2008) panel on library public relations and fund raising, the experience of the New York Public Library’s exhibition of the print on demand Expresso Book Machine by Lightning Source was discussed. It set me to thinking about the butterfly effect and whether print on demand (POD) was another butterfly which would change that corner of the world inhabited by Against the Grain readers? Specifically, would POD change the publishing world totally forever? Would POD’s ability to cost effectively generate a few hundred copies of X title super fast cause the demise of university presses, for example, which volume wise, seem to be the specialists at this level of non-fiction publishing.

We have, at the reading consumer’s end of the information chain, of course long had photocopying as a sort of POD option. In the ink on paper world, readers have printed what they wanted/ demanded by pumping sufficient dimes into a photocopying machine to purchase that segment of a journal or book which they needed to fulfill their information needs. In the land of full text electronic information, photocopy POD has been replace by USB memory sticks, hard discs, and/or the ability to save as much as we want and to email it to ourselves for later consumption. While some publishers seem obsessed with limiting the amount of text that can be easily saved for later reading, in general, photocopiers and personal electronic memory devices have not changed the publishing landscape: readers still need a range of publishers to publish interesting books and journals to do their part before readers can grab that part of what is published to meet their research/information needs.

Some publishers themselves have long employed a range of alternatives to 20th century typesetting to produce books. The technology of printing has been in continuous change and evolution since the advent of woodblock printing nearly 2,000 years ago. But POD is more than changing the technology with which ink is put on paper; the magic of POD — if it exists — is the speed with which it can help information providers meet the demands of readers. The kind of speed with which an Expresso Book Machine can churn out a book is very impressive. I have tried to imagine what it would be like for someone like me in Hong Kong to be able to go to a bookshop, or my library lobby, and select what book I want and then be able to pick it up a half hour or so later.

But my wanting to get instant gratification is at the consumer’s end of the information chain. In the publishers’ segment of the process, POD is already beginning to shake things up. In a recent Economist article it was noted that “Stephen DeForge of Ames On-Demand says his POD business, which specializes in printing small runs of customised books for schools and universities, has been growing by 45% a year since 2001. Last year his firm printed more than 800,000 books in runs as small as ten copies at a time.” In that same article, the impact of Amazon’s use of POD was also highlighted: “In March Amazon announced that it would require all the POD books it sells to be printed by the company at its warehouses. Mr Bezos [Amazon’s founder and chief executive] says that this enables Amazon to have a book ready to ship within two hours of an order being placed online. Between POD and the Kindle [also discussed in this article], Mr Bezos thinks he can sell ‘any book ever printed in any language.’”

In a similar vein, a recent news story reported in The Bookseller.com noted that while “Publishing output in the US grew only slightly in 2007, according to the US bibliographic provider Bowker, there was a “staggering rise” in the number of print-on-demand titles published with Bowker now reporting these books separately.” This article quoted Kelly Gallagher of Bowker saying that “The most startling development last year is the reporting of ‘On Demand’ [p.o.d.] titles, leading to a stunning five-fold increase of new titles in the unclassified category, which mostly consists of reprints of public domain titles and other short-run books.”

It is intriguing to think about the potential side effects of short run publishing. Melissa Tetreault of Digital Publishing Solutions indicated that “Statistics from InfoTrends, Inc., show that short run printing is the way of the future. Runs of 250 to 499 are seeing a 40 percent increase in print frequency, as opposed to runs of 50,000 plus, which are seeing a 44 percent decrease in frequency.” Thomas Baker, in a comment regarding the revival of the Rice University Press which is using short run printing, indicated that “Many presses now print first runs of less than 150 copies, make print-on-demand an option and sell eBooks.” His point was university presses, many of which would have died out long ago without direct or indirect subsidies from their host institutions, could survive employing short runs. But I wonder what is to prevent commercial presses from simply expanding their purview into the narrow interest academic book business previously dominated by university presses.

Previously, an author whose book would only be sold to a hundred or so academic libraries plus the same or less number of academics and students could only resort to a university press because commercial press runs had to be in the thousands of copies to break even. But now? I wonder whether or not a large commercial publisher couldn’t rely upon the same POD technology to make academic book publishing profitable. Such monographic publishers could then go around like major European periodicals publishers collecting university presses. Each of these university presses could reduce their staffs to one or two people to recruit manuscripts regionally and then all the rest of the work would be picked up by the “mother publisher” whose distribution channels are much more extensive than those enjoyed by university presses. Maybe