

Books Forever! Thoughts on the Future of Publishing

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Good afternoon, everyone.

First, let me say how grateful I am to have the opportunity to present a publisher's view, in a very general way, of the role the latest technology might play in our venerable industry.

When I began to think about what I might say to you this afternoon, I was reminded of a novelist friend of mine who once complained to me that every time — *every time* — he was invited to speak, the topic was “The Death of the Novel”. He said this was like being asked to speak publicly — every time he did so — about the *fait-accompl*i of his own, imminent suicide. Naturally, his talks were all given to great crowds of people who were there because they loved novels. All he could do was shake his head, and carry on writing.

I had to reply to my friend that for nearly thirty years in the business I had likewise been approached more often than not to discuss “The Death of Publishing”. Of course this is not the case today — but there you are, I've already mentioned it.

The fact is that every technological leap has had publishers wondering, on the one hand, ‘Is this the end?’; and on the other, of course, ‘What's in it for me?’

If you were a European monk 500 years ago and you heard of Guttenberg's great invention, you might have thought it meant the end of culture. Only by the grinding labour of copying texts could true culture be absorbed and passed on — or so it was widely thought. For the same material to be printed, distributed and sold — well, to many it seemed like the end of a long-enduring tradition, the end of true knowledge.

Now, if you were to travel back in time and show that monk this fabulous machine . . . [hold up Tablet PC]. . . you would probably be burned at the stake.

I don't think many of us have been particularly monk-like in our reactions to different technologies over the years, but there has always been worry. Just in the course of my own publishing career there have been infinitely more changes in the way information is disseminated than there were in the half-millennium after Guttenberg's time.

Radio was going to be the end of reading. Film was going to be the end of radio. Television was going to be the end of film. Videotape was going to be the end of television. The Internet was going to be the end of *everything*.

Where was the humble book during this tumultuous time? Going from strength to strength. The book has always had unexpected ways of asserting itself. I would argue that this phenomenon is owed to the physical and psychological properties of the object itself — the book.

Physically, the book is improvable only by its content. Psychologically, the book lends its text an irreplaceable stamp of authority and permanence. The book, in all its variety, remains the uncontested mainstay of our intellectual and literary cultures.

Today's scientists and historians – and countless others in any field one cares to name – may wish to make their discoveries known widely and instantly on the Internet, but none would forego the weight that publishing confers on their work.

Today's novelists may be tempted to publish fiction on the Internet, but need only look to Stephen King's failure to attract even his multitude of devoted readers to an entirely electronic medium. There is something insubstantial, even *ersatz*, about digitized literature.

Publishers can take heart from this, as well as from other developments over the past decade or so. For example, what did readers do the moment they figured out that the Internet actually worked, that it was secure and reliable? *They bought books*. It could be argued, with Amazon and others to the fore, that books – our books – have been the commercial heroes of the Internet Age so far.

Publishers have not yet faced the serious problems the music industry now confronts in terms of widespread and apparently unstoppable piracy. I wanted to talk a bit about this issue because, while trying to think more deeply about the opportunities and challenges we face with wonderful devices such as the Tablet PC – and those the future promises – I managed to scare the *hell* out of myself.

I know that all of us in this room could mount the strongest defence of the physical and psychological merits of the book, but consider this: We know that very soon technology will provide the means to manufacture the digital facsimile not just of a book's text, as can already be done, but of the *book itself*. E Ink and Xerox are the companies most often mentioned as being at the forefront of this inevitable development; they have already made great strides in the technology that will give us electronic ink and electronic paper.

No one acquainted with technology's leaps and bounds over the past twenty years should be at all surprised by the suggestion that the perfect, commercially available digital book will exist in about ten years, if not sooner.

Let us say that we meet again at that time, and I am holding in my hand what appears to be a conventional paperback novel. On demand, wirelessly, from anywhere in the world, a colourful, beautifully designed jacket appears on the front, back and spine. Inside, all the comforts of antique publishing are instantly there: author biography, publishing history, author photograph, review blurbs. The text of the book is unchangeable in our hands, like an old-fashioned book. It is coffee-proof, can be thrown on a bedside table, can be reloaded again and again with whatever books are available on-line. Most important, it is the definitive version, as much as downloaded, digital Louis Armstrong is the real thing.

There will also be one poignant number included on the jacket – and that's the price. There exists the threat that once unleashed, and despite the strenuous efforts of the publishers behind such a product, this digital content will eventually be 'shared' just as millions today share MP3s. An impatient reader at home or in a hotel or in an airport on the other side of the world will in seconds be in possession of the genuine article – and there may be nothing but his conscience in the way of his getting the book for free.

There, for what it's worth today, is the nightmare scenario. You will be relieved to know that I bring it up mostly to shoot it down.

The easiest place to start doing so is by taking a glance at one's private library. All readers are collectors of books. A reader who moves house packs books first. A reader's books are shelves full of memories and illumination. Books are literally part of the furniture. If a book is good enough to buy and to enjoy, it is good enough to keep. Most readers would agree with John Updike's remark that a life without books would not be worth living.

It is entirely possible that this view will someday be seen as sentimental. I hope not. But quite apart from sentimentality, I believe that for publishers, if we are vigilant, there are practical reasons why books simply cannot go the route of recorded music.

I would argue that while music is recorded digitally, books are fundamentally *analogue*. I know I am using the term 'analogue' in an unscientific way, but I am trying to get across the point that the representation of text is still not so far away from the laborious copies of the monk's 500 years ago. Sound is not text. Of course it would be possible – in fact it is already done – for a writer to email his manuscript straight to a printer. With the advent of digital books the text would never see paper from the writer's computer all the way to its reader in the airport lounge. If I may be slightly metaphysical for a moment, my view is that such a book, no matter its qualities, does not really *exist* until it is also available in printed form.

If books are to be kept and treasured, they are also to give, they are to be inherited, they are to last. An exclusively digital book would be an ephemeral object. Once its contents are deleted and replaced, such a 'book' ceases to exist for its owner. The digital book is the disposable book.

Of course, it might be said that much of what is published is disposable anyway. This is not a complaint about modern publishing – I'm sure it has always been so. By all means, I say, download digital entertainment in any form, even a book. But books are not just entertainment – we would not be so attracted to this business if they were.

Still, even if we are confident of the book's permanence in people's lives, copy protection will still be an area where symbiosis between software companies like Microsoft and traditional publishers will be crucial. We will not work with any partners if we don't believe that they are up to date on copy-protection techniques. Just as importantly, we will be reliant on companies like Microsoft to pursue every legal recourse to protect intellectual property from the fate that has begun to befall the music industry.

If these problems are addressed – and there is time to do so – then there will be a growing market for digital books. There will be books that are perfectly suited to a digital format – technical and professional texts, cookbooks, how-to-books, travel and entertainment guides, and so many more. Reference books will be handy to have on the road – but I, of course, have the strongest personal reasons for wanting to believe that traditional dictionaries will never go away.

So-called ‘airport novels’ might become exactly that – downloaded at the airport, read on the plane, deleted from the digital book’s memory as quickly as, in former times, the ‘airport novel’ would have been forgotten and discarded by its reader.

Different media will coexist. They will have to. People happily eat a simple café breakfast, a hasty Macdonald’s lunch, and a gastronomic extravaganza of an Italian feast for dinner. In the same way I will be happy to carry business documents digitally, download an airport novel, and preserve literature on my bookshelves.

I can already envision a day when I will own an electronic device that will contain books, my entire CD collection, every letter, memo, article and book I have ever written or received, the whole Internet, streaming audio and video – but wait... I already have one of these things. It’s called a notebook computer, or now a Tablet PC.

We are seeing this device for the first time. I can already see that it is flexible, convenient, extremely intuitive – and this is only its first incarnation. People will be comfortable with such a machine. And it does all of the things I’ve just mentioned except one: it doesn’t, and it can’t, change into a book that I can keep for ever on my shelves, borrow from a library or hand out to pupils in school.

Let’s hope that it is not too optimistic, nor self-serving, to assert that *all* of the technological advances – radio, film, television, the Internet – have fallen back on the book for the vast majority of their serious material. Name a great film, and it will first have been a far superior novel. Name a television documentary, and it will have been a far superior history book or the culmination of a scientist’s entire published output. Name a wildly popular cooking show, and it will have been a far superior book that the amateur can consult on the kitchen counter.

Books are for the most part the product of one individual’s concentrated labours. This makes them unique among all of the media I have mentioned just now, and explains why we may be more than hopeful that *the book is a medium apart*, without which none of the others have anything to say.

I have to add that the topic of digital books has begun to sound like the ‘paperless office’ revolution that was going to change all of our lives starting about twenty years ago. The ‘paperless office’ concept is now a bad joke, and only the paper and printer companies are laughing.

People quite obviously prefer information in black and white. What is more, there is a very human mistrust of electronics that is not at all irrational: we are afraid that with all the changes in electronic media, what works today will be unreadable on the devices of the future. Our children will wonder what mysteries are contained on

'floppy disks' – and why we called them 'floppy' in the first place. For all I know there are Microsoft employees who have never even seen the quaint 'C-prompt' of MS-DOS. Books, on the other hand, have been materially unchanged for generations.

Even if we can convince ourselves that the printed book is indispensable, we must also address the overarching worry of publishers: What will become of the reading culture in the face of so many competing forms of more passive entertainment? Any of you who are parents of younger children may be wondering if the next Harry Potter book will be the last fiction your child ever reads...

If a home without a library is a rather sickening thought, what about a bookless culture? Is such a thing even conceivable? Can any language simply do away with its literature? I bring this up because I am convinced that if the future holds in store a decline in the reading culture, technology will not be to blame – we will be.

That is why I wanted to take this chance, at the unveiling of the Tablet PC, which surely represents the next step along the road towards wireless access to a vast store of information, to suggest that publishers must learn from and cooperate with software developers – especially titans such as Microsoft – not to know our enemy but to know our opportunities. If publishers stick to fundamentals – and if I am right about the book's being culturally indispensable and technologically analogue – then technology will continue to follow us and not the other way round.

In the category of fundamentals I would include the cultivation of authors over time, the attention paid to quality, a trust in traditional markets and the willingness to think in the long term. It is precisely because the book is a medium apart that we must not be too enticed by what only appears to be a faster-moving world. If we stick to what we have always done best it will be new technologies that look to us for sophistication, refinement and reliability, and we will remain the backbone of much of what the new media wish to provide.

If all goes as I expect, a few years from now I will still be speaking about the death of publishing, my friend will still be speaking about the death of the novel – and both of us will happily be addressing audiences who profit from publishing and who long to read.

Thank you very much.