Book to the Future: Can you Judge a Digital Book by its POD Cover?

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The first decade of the twenty first century has witnessed a revolution in communication unparalleled since the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century. As in the fifteenth century, however, there is a time lag between technical innovation and the impact on society of changes in the publishing and distribution of knowledge.

Initially, the first printed pages of incunabula replicated the physical lay out of manuscripts, and in the same way digital journals and books have remained largely influenced by historical print practice. In the monastic scriptorium, the dissemination of knowledge was limited by the productivity of the output of the scribes and then public accessibility to appropriate libraries or personal collections. Books generally impacted little on the general public, for whom, oral transmission (perhaps now called social networking) was the norm for the transmission of knowledge and gossip.

Now, in the digital era, we are overwhelmed with a surfeit of information. New methods of textual output and sharing have an impact on modes of transmission and attention. Social networking tools, such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube are impacting on attention spans, particularly of Generation Y, and the resulting lack of appreciation of book formats and lengthy texts. Jeff Bezos, Amazon CEO, has stated that “long-form reading is losing ground to short-form reading… we change our tools and our tools change us” Power browsing is the norm for students, the Net’s ‘promiscuous users’, who want instant online access, 24x7, preferably free.
Christine Rosen in a seminal *New Atlantis* article “worries that collaborative “information foraging” will replace solitary deep reading; the connected screen will replace the disconnected book ... Literacy, the most empowering achievement of our civilization, is to be replaced by a vague and ill-defined screen savvy. The paper book, the tool that built modernity, is to be phased out in favor of fractured, unfixed information. All in the name of progress”.

But then, in 1477, the Venetian humanist Hieronimo Squarciafico worried that an abundance of books would lead to intellectual laziness, making men ‘less studious’ *Plus ca change*. Ray Bradbury once wrote in the context of his book *Fahrenheit 451*, “You don't have to burn books to destroy a culture . . . Just get people to stop reading them”. What form of reading will be the prevalent form in the twenty first century is a moot point.

Cambridge academic, George Steiner, has observed in the *Times Literary Supplement* “I would not be surprised if that which lies ahead for classical modes of reading resembles the monasticism from which those modes sprung. I sometimes dream of *houses of reading* – a Hebrew phrase – in which those passionate to learn to read well would find the necessary guidance, silence and complicity of disciplined companionship”. Words reflected by Sir Terry Pratchett when I interviewed him in 2007 in Melbourne .bemoaned the transformation of public libraries into a mix of noisy internet cafes cum social malls. Maybe the wheel will turn and libraries will provide monastic e-cubicles of silence to balance the decline in public space etiquette.
While digital publishing landscapes are evolving rapidly, there is still much confusion and little uniformity in terms of trends for content delivery and access. Debates continue to rage(literally), both at the technical level and increasingly at the public policy level, with regard to issues such as Google Book Search and Amazon Kindle pricing. All these changes are placing significant strain and tensions on the traditional players from libraries to bookshops to publishers. Who will survive and in what form?

While most books are created and published digitally, book distribution patterns reflect the pre-Internet era. Even if the text is transmitted digitally across continents, as is the case with many fiction books in Australia, physical books are still then shipped to customers via bookshops from publisher warehouses. On average, books remain for relatively shorter periods in bookshops. Books unsold are returned and subsequently either remaindered or pulped. So in effect the customer is paying for both the creation and destruction of a book. This is an increasingly uneconomic and inefficient distribution process, which will eventually be overtaken for many titles by digital delivery directly to bookshops and libraries within e-preservation frameworks and POD options. British publishing consultant, John Cox has asserted that with the POD machines, the “future of the printed monograph has arrived”!

If new modes of publishing take off then the opportunities for authors, through wider web distribution, could lead to significant shifts in the marketing of and access to book content. A relevant point in this context is that most authors, despite being the content creators, receive relatively little financial reward for their books, as well as limited print life. If digital distribution patterns change, then the author’s lot can be improved in terms of both remuneration and access.
It is appropriate in a Canberra publication to highlight a local success story, the ANU E-Press. An average academic monograph can take between 3 to 10 years to write and be published. It then sells on average 300 copies with 200 remaindered, (many of which will be seen at the tables of Clouston and Hall in Fyshwick). This process makes little sense in terms of effective distribution of content, let alone the many authors who never get published at all.

The ANU E-Press founded in 2003 with the support of ANU’s Vice-Chancellor, Ian Chubb, has pioneered a new model of production and access for academic monographs in the digital environment. ANU E Press titles are freely available in HTML, PDF, and mobile device formats and are discoverable through Google Book Search and Google Scholar. Total Web downloads for 2009, from only 55 monographs, were a phenomenal 3,090,081 downloads. The ANU E Press Top 10 eBooks downloaded for 2009 were:

2. Ethics and Auditing  55,972
3. Contested Governance (CAEPR 29)  42,461
4. The Islamic Traditions of Cirebon  41,611
5. The Austronesians  41,188
6. El lago español  36,834
7. Myanmar—the state, community and the environment  36,834
8. Islamising Indonesia  36,120
ANU publications focus on access rather than digital lockdowns. Professor Robert Darnton, Director of the Harvard University Library. In *The Case for Books* (2009) Darnton worries that: “Google will enjoy what can only be called a monopoly of access to information”. Darnton believes the “democratisation of knowledge” is possible through digital technologies, but he, like his Harvard colleague, Professor Lawrence Lessig, has concerns for a dystopian future in which books can only be read through a browser, with no individual ownership and all data stored with Google, Amazon and the like. Back then to what book future?