The Battle of the Books

In the long history of the book, the mass-produced volumes of our time constitute only a single chapter. More remain to be written.

BY ALEX WRIGHT

In 1704, Jonathan Swift imagined a literary contest for the ages, in the form of a "battle of the books" between the Ancients and the Moderns in the royal library at St. James, where the works of Aristotle, Virgil, and other classical giants were struggling to maintain their place on the shelves against a barbarous onslaught of new books, pamphlets, journals, and other literary ephemera. Almost 300 years before the first Web browser appeared, Swift seems to have anticipated the age of information overload.

Imagine what Swift might have made of our present era, when every year human beings disgorge an amount of data equivalent to more than 30,000 times the contents of the Library of Congress? Perhaps the closest corollary to Swift's heroic Ancients today may be our old ink-on-paper books, those time-honored relics whose cultural supremacy now seems under siege by a binary blitzkrieg of blogs, tweets, social networks, and other emerging forms of digital dross.

Scarcely a day goes by without some writer or other penning a wistful rumination on the decline of books in the digital age. The usual culprits include all things Internet, of course, but also the consolidation of the publishing industry, the decline of modestly selling midlist books in favor of blockbusters, the shuttering of newspaper book review sections, and so on. Whatever the causes and conditions, one fact seems clear enough: Books are on the decline.

From 2007 to 2008, the number of U.S. book titles fell by three percent, to 275,232. While that scarcely qualifies as a Detroit-scale meltdown, it nonetheless represents a painful contraction for an industry that has historically operated on paper-thin profit margins. So it should come as no surprise that the Web has ushered in wave upon wave of literary hand-wringing.

Almost invariably, the defenders of the book invoke a passing golden age that dates back to Johannes Gutenberg's invention of moveable type. The conventional narrative goes something like this: Before Gutenberg, books were locked away in the monasteries, available only to the educated few; after Gutenberg, printed books—liberated from the confines of the monastic scriptoria—spread like wildfire across Europe, the Age of Reason dawned, and there followed a halcyon era of literary harmony.

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Alas, like many "golden ages," the golden age of books turns out be an oversimplified historical conceit. Books as we know them today—mass-produced popular literature in the form of novels, nonfiction, and other "trade" publications—certainly owe a debt to Gutenberg, but they may owe even more to the Industrial Revolution, during which a confluence of social, economic, and technological change created the conditions that gave rise to the modern book trade. And just as 19th- and 20th-century books took shape in the crucible of industrialization, so their 21st-century descendants are starting to reflect a long-term historical shift away from the manufacturing economy and toward a postindustrial society. We are entering the age of the postindustrial book.

Until the early 19th century, producing a book remained a costly proposition—less costly than generating an illuminated manuscript by hand, to be sure, but far more costly than, say, publishing a dime novel. Books were typically printed one sheet at a time on corkscrew presses that had barely changed in the 400 years since Gutenberg was alive; then they were carefully folded into quartos and octavos, stitched together, and bound by hand. While a handful of books—such as the Bible—received widespread distribution, most were published in small batches. Often, a wealthy book buyer contracted with a printer to buy the pages of a book, then have the pages bound by a professional binder in a custom cover that would signal the buyer's social standing. For many buyers, books served as status objects as much as they did vehicles for personal enlightenment.

The age of the modern book began in 1810, when a German inventor named Friedrich Koenig patented a steam-powered press that for the first time could create a printed page through mechanical means. In 1833, the American engineer Richard Hoe improved on Koenig's machine with a rotary press that could turn out millions of pages in a single day, helping to spawn the penny press that dominated American journalism for much of the 19th century. A Victorian information explosion was under way.

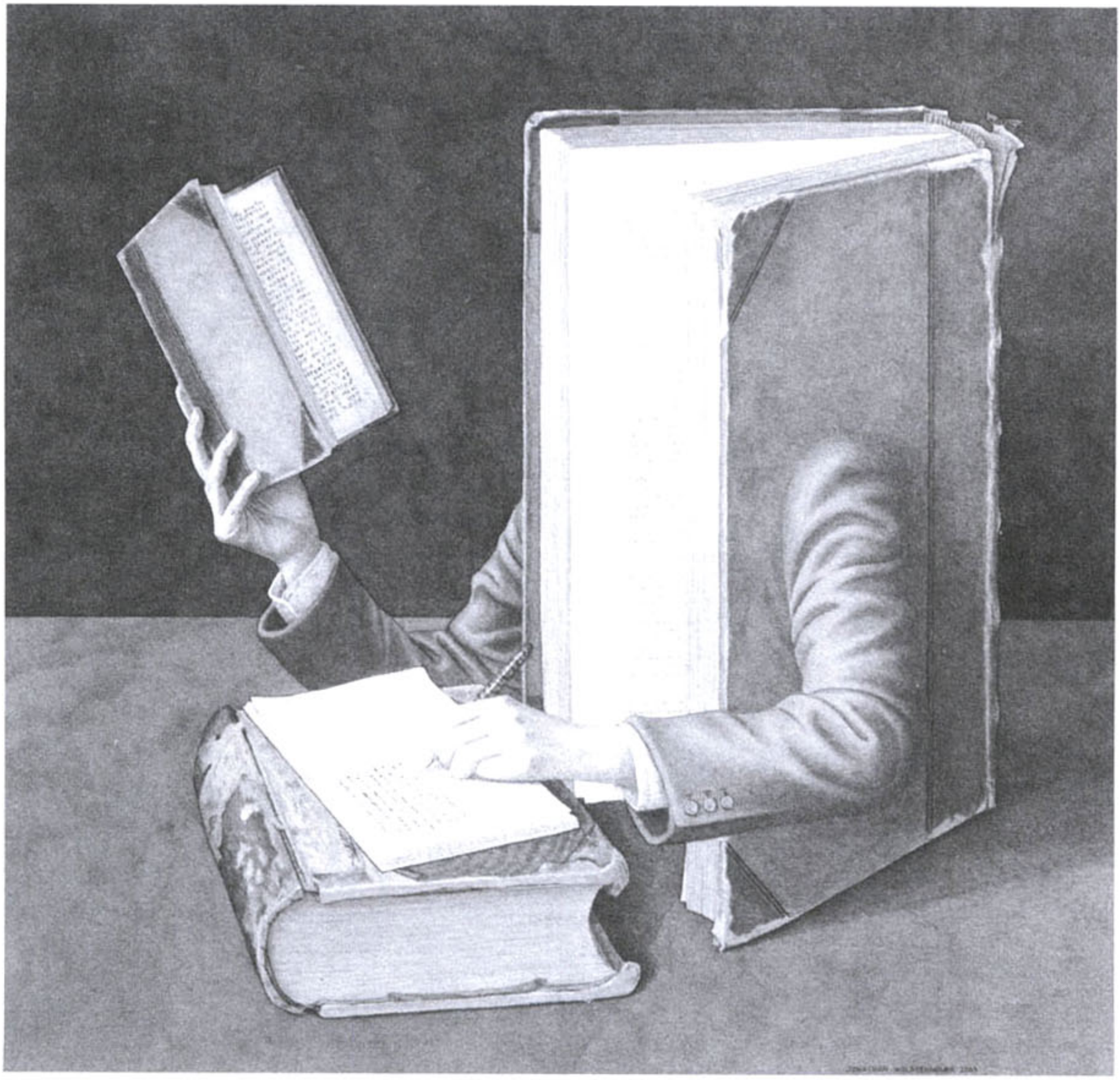
By the middle of the century, books, magazines, pamphlets, and all manner of printed artifacts were sluicing through the literary mills, as publishers turned out new literary products at an astonishing rate. Popular novels, how-to books, cookbooks, pamphlets, and modern textbooks all came into their own during this period thanks to the economics of mass production.

In 1800, the library of the British Museum (precursor to the modern British Library) held 48,000 volumes. By 1833 the collection had quintupled, to more than a quarter-million. By 1900, it had surpassed four million (still a far cry from the 150 million items in today's collection).

Thomas Carlyle, then probably the most famous writer in England, railed against the rapid proliferation of cheap literature. He detested the popularization of literature, which libraries were accumulating with an "eye to the prurient appetite of the great million, [furnishing] them with any kind of garbage they will have. The result is melancholy—making bad worse—for every bad book begets an appetite for reading a worse one."

Carlyle's complaint hardly seems out of place today. But from this great literary effluvia emerged some of the jewels of European literature. Charles Dickens, Jane Austen, William Wordsworth, and other popular writers of the day might never have found their audiences if not for the advances of the industrial age. Yet this was also the age that gave rise to cheap, mass-produced pornography, "penny dreadfuls" (such as *Sweeney Todd*), and thousands of forgotten pulp novels.

How did industrialization shape the modern book? First, the technologies of mass production meant that texts could be standardized. Whereas at one time small publishers had turned out books in modest runs for scholars and bourgeois readers, now the economics of production demanded a more market-driven sensibility. Books no longer went from author to printer to buyer. Now they had to move through the stages of industrial production: acquisition of raw materials, manufacturing, marketing, distribution, and sales. The growth of the book industry thus spawned a vast literary supply chain in the form of literary agents, publishing houses, libraries, public schools, scholarly societies—an interlocking system of institutional gatekeepers that would control the production of literary capital for the next 150 years.



Will the book endure? That's a question of definition.

Today, the industrial model of publishing is undergoing a rapid reconfiguration. In a world where anyone can publish freely—and millions do—the old supply chain is coming undone, as publishers see both their economic power and their cultural authority erode. Institutional gatekeepers are giving ground to bottom-up, self-organizing networks of readers and writers.

While the Internet has a great deal to do with these changes, it may be instructive to take a deeper look at the historical forces at work. In 1974 Daniel Bell predicted the rise of the postindustrial society, correctly forecasting the decline of the manufacturing sector and the rise of a service-based economy. Francis Fukuyama has since argued that this era might more accurately be dubbed the information society, as individuals begin to take advantage of new information technologies to renegotiate their relationships with institutions. Trust in institutions has steadily eroded in recent decades; meanwhile, new technologies are providing consumers with the means to create and remix their own cultural artifacts.

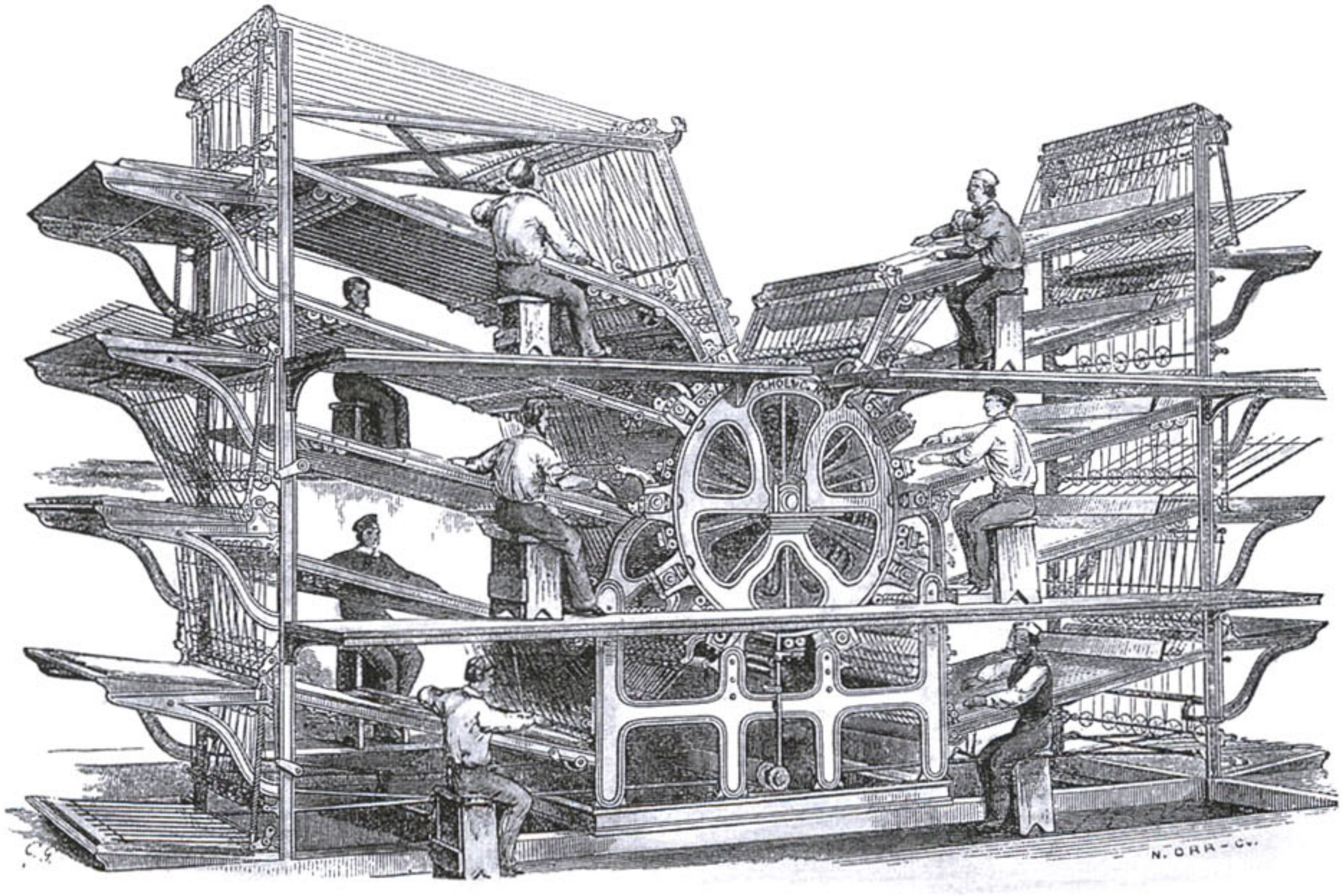
As the means of production pass into consumers' hands, book buyers are demanding more control over

what they read and how they read it. Just as the music industry has seen a rapid disruption of its supply chain as listeners increasingly bypass record companies to interact with musicians and with other fans over the Web—streaming music and sharing files—so readers can now exercise unprecedented control over their choice of reading materials and delivery mechanisms.

While the removal of gatekeepers may create a short-term boon for consumers, the rapid disruption of a long-established economic system is wreaking havoc with the livelihoods of those who depend on the old ways of doing business, such as editors, literary agents, and pressmen. Meanwhile, the creators—musicians, writers, and artists—have started searching for new revenue sources in the online economy.

This is not to say that ink-on-paper books are about to disappear. Last year, even as the total number of books sold declined, the number of print-on-demand titles—books stored electronically and committed to paper on an as-needed basis in small batch runs or even just one by one—more than doubled from the year before, to 285,394. Textbook publishers, for example, now produce custom editions for individual school districts to support local permutations of educational standards. And the growth of public-domain literary repositories such as Project Gutenberg, a long-running volunteer initiative that has digitized more than 30,000 out-of-copyright books, has made vast swaths of classic literature freely available to anyone with a Web browser and a printer.

The Web has also given would-be authors a direct pipeline to industrial-scale printing technology, thanks to self-publishing services such as XLibris, Lulu, Blurb, and iUniverse. Using these services, anyone with a credit card can publish a professional-looking book with custom layouts, typefaces, color printing, dust jackets, cover blurbs, ISBN numbers, and even an order page on Amazon.com, where authors can peddle their newly minted books in



In the 19th century, the invention of the mechanical printing press revolutionized publishing. Men feed paper into a 10-cylinder revolving newspaper press, conceived by engineer Richard Hoe, in this 1847 engraving.

printed form or offer a Kindle download—all without the intervention of agents, editors, or publicists.

The book, then, is becoming less of a fixed industrial commodity and more of a fluid entity on the network, capable of flowing into any number of vessels—paper, Web browsers, eBooks, iPhones—depending on a particular confluence of author, reader, and technology.

Given these permutating platforms, it's natural to wonder at what point a book is no longer, well, a book. The U.S. Postal Service defines a book as a "bound publication having 24 or more pages, at least 22 of which are printed and contain primary reading material, with advertising limited only to book announcements." What, then, of a book purchased on a Kindle, which doesn't count pages, but only words? Or an out-of-print title found on Google Books, accompanied by keyword advertising in a corner of the screen? What of the Buffy the Vampire aficionados who upload their fan fiction to the Buffy Fiction Archive (http://archive.shriftweb.org)? Perhaps our definition of what constitutes a "book" needs to evolve.

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Even as the book's technological underpinnings shift, however, the book itself still seems to take shape in readers' minds as a kind of platonic object, regardless of the delivery mechanism. In other words, it is more than just a string of text. There is a kind of "thingness" to it (to borrow a term from a colleague, *New York Times* design director Tom Bodkin). Thingness means more than physical solidity; it implies a certain fixity of time, space, and meaning—a stable reference point in an increasingly ephemeral world of electronic texts. As more and more data get lost in the great miasma of the Web, readers may come to assign growing value to the comforting virtues of thingness.

That value may not always translate into hard sales, however. Even as publishers, clinging desperately to the old industrial model of mass production, scramble to stay afloat, untold thousands of readers and writers are finding new ways to negotiate their relationships with books.

For decades, the major publishers functioned something like the big car companies, turning out the literary equivalent of production-line products. Sure, there were products targeted at particular market segments (Ford Escorts and Stephen King for the masses, Volvo wagons and Joyce Carol Oates for the MFA set), but by and large they relied on the old industrial model of manufacturing, marketing, sales, and distribution. Now we live in an era when the old model is coming unhinged and the product lines are contracting (GM scrapping its underperforming brands, publishers paring their midlists to focus on a dwindling number of bestsellers) as consumers exert more choice in a post-industrial economy.

Even traditional mass-produced books now come to market in an increasingly open, networked environment where their fates are determined not by newspaper reviewers alone, but also by the collective judgment of readers on Amazon and social networking sites such as GoodReads, LibraryThing, and Shelfari, where visitors upload and share lists of books in their libraries, post reviews and ratings, and find like-minded readers, all in a vast Borgesian labyrinth of visible hyperlinks.

As the Web continues to evolve, spurring the transition from mass-market economies of scale to bottom-up networks of interlinked communities, so the book is changing from a fixed unit of commerce into a virtual marker of social capital. Book authors can now measure their success not just in terms of royalties, but also in terms of Google PageRank, Twitter followers, blog traffic, and other forms of attention that not only boost their egos but in some cases lead indirectly to monetary

compensation (such as invitations to speak at conferences). In his 2003 novel *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom*, science fiction writer Cory Doctorow coined the term "whuffie," an imaginary currency based on reputation. In the postindustrial economy, whuffie is the coin of the realm.

Whuffie alone doesn't pay the bills—as any working author can attest—but the virtual currency of attention and reputation can nonetheless translate into real money: Nonfiction authors who master the art of online self-promotion may parlay their whuffie into speaking fees, consulting gigs, and other forms of paying work. Successful fiction writers, meanwhile, often supplement their dwindling publishers' advances by accepting teaching positions in the booming market for MFA programs and writing workshops. For many writers, the book is more than just their "product"; it is becoming a totem of accomplishment, a form of social capital that gains its creator entrée to other opportunities.

So will the old dust-jacketed hardcover give way to a virtual facsimile, traded in an ephemeral economy of attention? Not entirely, at least not anytime soon. Some 275,000 titles in print form are unlikely to disappear overnight. But alongside them, a new kind of book is likely to emerge: a unit of intellectual capital that develops from the bottom up, through a dialogue between readers and writers, one that can take physical or electronic form but doesn't necessarily require the intervention of a traditional publishing company. While that object may sometimes differ in form from the traditional bound volume we know today, it will still embody the virtues of thingness.

Fans of the sci-fi writer Jack Vance recently banded together over the Internet to create the Vance Integral Edition, a 45-volume compendium of the writer's works, accompanied by a Web site dubbed Totality (pharesm.org) that serves as a virtual concordance to his published works. Here, a self-organizing community of readers coalesced into a network that was able to accomplish a literary feat bridging virtual and physical texts, creating a product that likely never would have found its way to market through traditional publishing channels. And while a self-organizing network of fans with Web browsers will never produce the same kind of work as a solitary author, in this case the network complemented the work of the individual, creating a virtuous circle of literary productivity.

As the Web matures, we will continue to see new models of production emerge, so that over time the distinction between physical and virtual bookmaking may start to blur. And we may yet see a kind of reconciliation between online and offline reading experiences, in which even electronic books start to find new forms of expression in the physical world. The Kindle and other e-readers may mark the first steps toward a new kind of literary object that combines the physicality of the printed book with the lightweight efficiencies of software. When that happens, entirely new literary forms will appear, as the boundaries between one book and another start to shift.

There have been several occasions in our history when a new information technology transformed the intellectual landscape: the advent of alphabetic writing, the papyrus scroll, the codex book, and the printing press, to name a few. In each case, the full effects of the technology took centuries to unfold. A hundred years after Gutenberg, only a relative handful of people had seen a printed book. Yet a mere 20 years after Tim Berners-Lee invented the Web, more than a billion people have used a Web browser.

While it may be too early to make long-term predictions about the Web's effect on our social, intellectual, and economic landscapes, it hardly seems like an understatement to suggest that we are witnessing the dawn of an epochal transformation. None of us know how any of this will turn out. But perhaps it's useful to reflect, in closing, on what drew us to books in the first place. There seems to be a particular kind of anxiety that brings readers and writers together on the page, a need to find a shared point of understanding in an uncertain world. In an age of technological transformation, that anxiety is likely to grow. And so our impulse to read and write books—in whatever form they may take—will only intensify. As Swift put it, "A restless spirit haunts over every book." ■