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How to Publish Without Perishing

by JAMES GLEICK • NOV. 30, 2008

THE gloom that has fallen over the book publishing industry is different from the mood in, say, home building. At least people know we'll always need houses.

And now comes the news, as book sales plummet amid the onslaught of digital media, that authors, publishers and Google have reached a historic agreement to allow the scanning and digitizing of something very much like All the World's Books. So here is the long dreamed-of universal library, its contents available (more or less) to every computer screen anywhere. Are you happy now? Maybe not, if your business has been the marketing, distributing or archiving of books.

One could imagine the book, venerable as it is, just vanishing into the ether. It melts into all the other information species searchable through Google's most democratic of engines: the Web pages, the blogs, the organs of printed and broadcast news, the general chatter. (Thanks for everything, Gutenberg, and now goodbye.)

But I don't see it that way. I think, on the contrary, we've reached a shining moment for this ancient technology. Publishers may or may not figure out how to make money again (it was never a good way to get rich), but their product has a chance for new life: as a physical object, and as an idea, and as a set of literary forms.

As a technology, the book is like a hammer. That is to say, it is perfect: a tool ideally suited to its task. Hammers can be tweaked and varied but will never go obsolete. Even when builders pound nails by the thousand with pneumatic nail guns, every household needs a hammer. Likewise, the bicycle is alive and well. It was invented in a world without automobiles, and for speed and range it was quickly surpassed by motorcycles and all kinds of powered scooters. But there is nothing quaint about bicycles. They outsell cars.

Of course, plenty of other stuff is destined for obsolescence. For more than a century the phonograph record was almost the only practical means of reproducing sound — and thus the basis of a multibillion-dollar industry. Now it's just an oddity. Hardly anyone in the music business is sanguine about the prospects for CDs, either.

Now, at this point one expects to hear a certain type of sentimental plea for the old-fashioned book — how you like the feel of the thing resting in your hand, the smell of the pages, the faint cracking of the spine when you open a new book — and one may envision an aesthete who bakes his own bread and also professes to

prefer the sound of vinyl. That's not my argument. I do love the heft of a book in my hand, but I spend most of my waking hours looking at — which mainly means reading from — a computer screen. I'm just saying that the book is technology that works.

Phonograph records and CDs and telegraphs and film cameras were all about storing and delivering bits — information, in its manifold variety — and if we've learned anything, we've learned that bits are fungible. Bit-storing technologies have been arbitrary, or constrained by available materials, and thus easy to replace when the next thing comes along. Words, too, can be converted into bits, but there's something peculiar, something particularly direct, about the path from the page to the brain.

It is significant that one says book lover and music lover and art lover but not record lover or CD lover or, conversely, text lover.

There's reading and then there's reading. There is the gleaning or browsing or cherry-picking of information, and then there is the deep immersion in constructed textual worlds: novels and biographies and the various forms of narrative nonfiction — genres that could not be born until someone invented the codex, the book as we know it, pages inscribed on both sides and bound together. These are the books that possess one and the books one wants to possess.

For some kinds of books, the writing is on the wall. Encyclopedias are finished. All encyclopedias combined, including the redoubtable Britannica, have already been surpassed by the exercise in groupthink known as Wikipedia. Basic dictionaries no longer belong on paper; the greatest, the Oxford English Dictionary, has nimbly remade itself in cyberspace, where it has doubled in size and grown more timely and usable than ever. And those hefty objects called "telephone books"? As antiquated as typewriters. The book has had a long life as the world's pre-eminent device for the storage and retrieval of knowledge, but that may be ending, where the physical object is concerned.

Which brings us to the settlement agreement, pending court approval, in the class action suit Authors Guild v. Google. The suit was filed in September 2005 when Google embarked on an audacious program of copying onto its servers every book it could get its hands on. This was a lot of books, because the Internet giant struck deals with the libraries of the University of Michigan, Harvard, Stanford and many others. On its face this looked like a brazen assault on copyright, but Google argued that it should be protected as a new kind of "fair use" and went on scanning during two and a half years of secret negotiations (I was involved on the authors' side).

By now the company has digitized at least seven million titles. Many are old enough to be in the public domain — no issue there — and many are new enough to be available in bookstores, but the vast majority, four million to five million, are books that had fallen into a kind of limbo: protected by copyright but out of print. Their publishers had given up on them. They existed at libraries and used booksellers but otherwise

had left the playing field.

As a way through the impasse, the authors persuaded Google to do more than just scan the books for purposes of searching, but go further, by bringing them back to commercial life. Under the agreement these millions of out-of-print books return from limbo. Any money made from advertising or licensing fees will go partly to Google and mostly to the rights-holders. The agreement is nonexclusive: If competitors to Google want to get into the business, they can.

This means a new beginning — a vast trove of books restored to the marketplace. It also means that much of the book world is being upended before our eyes: the business of publishing, selling and distributing books; the role of libraries and bookstores; all uses of books for research, consultation, information storage; everything, in fact, but the plain act of reading a book from start to finish.

In bookstores, the trend for a decade or more has been toward shorter shelf life. Books have had to sell fast or move aside. Now even modest titles have been granted a gift of unlimited longevity.

What should an old-fashioned book publisher do with this gift? Forget about cost-cutting and the mass market. Don’t aim for instant blockbuster successes. You won’t win on quick distribution, and you won’t win on price. Cyberspace has that covered.

Go back to an old-fashioned idea: that a book, printed in ink on durable paper, acid-free for longevity, is a thing of beauty. Make it as well as you can. People want to cherish it.

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