

The Future of the Book

In June 2009 the Future of the Book conference was held at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Auckland. Its purpose of the conference was to allow key members of the publishing industry in New Zealand the chance to understand more about the emerging consumer and education markets for digital content. Four NZSA members who were able to attend give their impressions of the conference.

Diane Brown

Two days in a room full of 150 people speaking of PDF, XML or HTML and using words like monetised left my head spinning. It was what I feared, I hadn't kept up, I was a threatened species; a writer who thought her ability with words made her a superior beast. Instead I was redundant. The world was now full of people blogging and twittering, and none of them were going to pay for my precious words.

In some ways it's an updated message from the '60s when Roland Barthes was talking about the Death of the Author, meaning the reader was more important than the author. Authority and authorship had been severed. In 2009 it hasn't worked out as postmodernists predicted, but certainly one way of interpreting the rise of e-publishing and e-books is that the arbiters of taste and worthiness, namely publishers, are no longer able to prevent all the wannabe writers getting their work out to an internet-savvy audience. Whether that audience will actually want to pay for copyrighted work is a matter of debate, which was not resolved over two days of presentations.

In his presentation, Sherman Young, author of *The Book Is Dead, Long Live The Book*, said that the book culture was confused with the print culture: "Print is where books go to die." He suggested that 'the Internet age' meant citizens were empowered and information was free to all (but not to those who had no internet access or power!). This also means a loss of unquestioned wisdom. As the author of an expensive hardcover book himself, Young was clearly having a bob both ways by claiming the authority and the privilege to declare, "The Book is Dead".

In fact most of the speakers maintained that both newspapers and books would continue in their present form for the foreseeable future anyway. Some people, such as myself, were called insistent readers. We are the ones who still get the paper delivered in the morning, such is our addiction to the physicality of paper. Maybe I should feel guilty about the trees being pulped but computers use power don't they? I also feel some responsibility to support local newspapers and journalists.

What was clear to me was digital publishing is a reality all of the publishing industry will have to confront and embrace if they wish to survive. Perhaps the sector that should feel most threatened is the printing industry. I don't recall there being any representatives. Perhaps they've

already moved into graphic arts and web design. In New Zealand we are still some time off being able to walk into a bookstore, choose your book and get it printed on demand within 10 minutes but clearly the technology will soon be here. What this means for the average reader who likes to stroll into a bookshop and be seduced by the cover or the first page was not discussed. Bookshops presumably would welcome having to maintain a smaller stock.

Libraries are already embracing the electronic age by making databases available to library members. There was some talk of them also having print on demand machines, which might be a source of revenue or might mean they could simply print books for members on demand.

No doubt digital publishing is of enormous benefit to educators who will be able to distribute texts and teaching materials in electronic form. Protecting copyright and getting paid have not been resolved. These obstacles also apply to publishers and writers. Some people at the conference thought publishers might be under threat with the breakdown of authority. It seems to be easy enough for writers to convert their texts into e-publishing-ready formats, providing of course that they have the time and resources to promote their own work and convince e-readers that the work is worthy of payment.

I feel that publishers prepared to embrace digital publishing can use it to their advantage if they maintain their high standards in editing and continue their role of being the gatekeeper of good writing. Even if I were to download a book to read on my iPhone I would be more prepared to trust an established publisher than a writer I'd never heard of before. That said I do believe that poets could certainly make good use of digital publishing. The format suits either readers or e-phone and it is difficult to get poetry published, let enough to make money so why not e-publish? All that needs to be resolved is how to make money. That is, I believe, a problem not just for writers but for any producer of original work.

The message I got out of the conference was that writers should keep an open mind about the possibilities for digital publishing and be cautious before signing electronic rights clauses.

Adele Broadbent

It would be impossible to show everything in a report that I saw over the two days in Auckland in June. But I will do my best to cover the main points.

The Future of the Book Conference brought together authors, academics, web designers, publishers, teachers, librarians and IT consultants. They were present to learn, discuss and debate the future of the book.

I attended knowing nothing about e-readers, ebooks, digital rights management (DRM) or how this technology all linked together – but I came away from the conference with one word – WOW!

There were many speakers, of course beginning with an introduction from Martin Taylor of Digital Publishing NZ. Along with the NZSA and CLL, they worked together to bring all interested parties together for this event.

Neelan Choksi, the CEO from Lexcycle was the 1st speaker of the conference. Lexcycle has written an application (a program) for iPhones that reads e-books purchased from the Apple iTunes Internet site. The program is called Stanza and has nearly 5,000 users in NZ alone, with 1.8 million users in 60 different countries in total. This means 8 million books, loaded in 35 languages.

E-books are taking off in the USA. They made up 0.5-0.6 percent of books purchased in 2008. These sales have jumped to 2.9 percent in 2009. Not big numbers you might say, but the growth is huge.

The Stanza program is easy to use, with lots of bells and whistles – 21 fonts, 35 different colours, a night option where you change the backgrounds, or change it from portrait to landscape for easy reading anywhere.

It's as easy as going into the Apple iTunes store, clicking on apps store and downloading the book you want. There are over 50,000 free books, as they are all out of copyright. Publishers such as Pan McMillan, Random House and Harlequin are offering free downloads to encourage the e-book. There have been 40 million iPhones purchased throughout the world – and every one of them can read e-books purchased from iTunes.

Positives to the e-book

- E-readers don't have the same type of reading experience as a normal screen. The screen looks just like a page of a book.
- Nobody knows if you're reading a raunchy book on the train or the bus.
- You can read (especially on an iPhone) when you've got time, waiting in queues/commuting etc.
- There is no physical evidence of the purchase of another book – until the visa bill comes in.
- You don't need a light to read at night in bed.

Dr Sherman Young from Monash University in Australia was the second speaker. He approached the subject from the human nature point of view where people don't like change.

There have always been stories – once only told within family groups. Then people began writing them down – there was an uproar that memories would be lost. Then people began publishing stories – there was talk of anarchy amongst the academics of the time. Then the Electronic Age was upon us – according to some, everyone would become zombies never leaving the screen to read a book again. Then the Internet arrived with the digital age – no one would ever go to the movies if they could hire/buy their own, people

wouldn't leave their homes because they could order everything they needed online...

But, in fact, more and more people are reading with the convenience of the Internet and more and more people are reading with the convenience of the e-book purchased over the internet.

Convenience brings me to Richard Siegersma, who spoke from a distributor's point of view. Convenience is King! The more convenient something is, the more likely a consumer will purchase it. Compared to going to a bookstore and choosing a book (in-store hours only), purchasing an e-book any time day or night on the iPhone in your pocket is much more convenient.

The Digital Age will stop the high transport costs of importing books – no air fuel required, no airport or fuel levies for the distributors. No freight charges. All good for the carbon footprint of a company, not to mention that it takes 300-400 tons of water to make one ton of paper – and of course the trees that are felled to make the pulp in the first place.

From a publisher's point of view, e-readers can speed up the process of reading manuscripts because when using a Kindle e-reader, the manuscript is on the server and can be read by other parties – eg not having to wait for it to come back from their readers.

Buzzword.acrobat.com is an online word processor that can have multiple users to a document – the same document can be viewed by the author and the publisher.

Libraries have moved with the times being reinvented as places to meet and discuss ideas and not just as places or research. They also have to provide the consumer/reader with the convenience factor.

The question was raised – “Should libraries have e-books to lend?” The answer was they already do. Books are being transferred to digital media in greater numbers everywhere. An option for lending would be a time-out system where the book hire would be for a set period of time and when it expires it times out.

There is no book to have to be returned in order for the next person to borrow it. This would all be built into the lending rights of the authors. An interesting comment was made by a publisher asking why the publishers don't get part of the lending right!

Authors were called 'content providers' and the general consensus was that authors were treated quite badly regardless of the medium they were published in. But this seemed an accepted fact!

When signing a contract with your publisher, ask if they do digital. If they don't, it is possible to sub-license to a digital publisher. Your book can be put on their website and marketed within it along with the normal avenues of marketing selling your book.

DRM ensures that your book is encrypted to prevent your book being copied. A site called Smashwords was given as a self publishing tool, where you download it, it is changed to the relevant format then put on the web for purchase. If your book is on the Apple iTunes site as an e-book, the sales are broken up as follows:

50% to you

30% to Apple

20% to App developer, eg Stanza

Contracts are made between the parties and Apple provides sales reports – of course there is an element of trust with this, the same as you have with your publisher. You would then promote your book through Twitter, Bebo, You Tube and Facebook.

With the help of software such as Adobe In Design, and Adobe Flash, publishers can do amazing things with your book. For example, instead of photos in a book, there could be a video inserted within the book instead.

We were given an example of non-fiction books where we visit a museum. We begin at the front door and see everything as if you were standing there yourself. When you enter the museum and move through the corridors and any direction you wish to take, it's as if you were really there. You may enter a room and zoom up onto a piece of art. The information is then available for your perusal. It was amazing!

So among all the interested parties, there are many e-readers, applications and formats vying to be industry standards for the future of the book. But no matter what – the reader is the most important part of this future. Whether or not the providers are right in saying that more people are reading than ever, there will be the choice of paper, screen, or e-readers. The fact that more people are reading must be good for authors!

Jean Gorman

Authors comprised only one percent of those at the conference and the first thing to strike us was the fact that no-one mentioned us. We are the primary producers supporting a feeding chain of people and yet we are not considered. You might think we are the nourishing green plant, but I tell you, we are the mud at the bottom of the pond!

This technology is exciting, not least because it might just enable authors to reach the public without sacrificing 90 percent of the potential income – publishers get hot under the collar at the mention of this. They aren't the only ones to feel the change in ecological balance; at the end of a presentation by a librarian and publisher a braw Scots voice behind us commented loudly, "You realise you're both redundant."

There was nervous laugh from 200 delegates, but in a traditional sense this could become increasingly true. Libraries are transforming their function; they're becoming portals to the Internet. Booksellers have the real problem, although the cynical among you might think "Only until the Internet goes down".

Those present ranged from publishers to experts in XML. You have just encountered one of the first stumbling blocks to understanding speakers at this conference. Everyone speaks their own version of Three Letter Acronym. What is XML? Extensible Mark-up Language – are you any wiser?

The future of the book is digital, mobile and global. The biggest change in how we read since the invention of the printing press is upon us. This is already apparent in newspapers and magazines with online subscriptions becoming more common (see zinio.com). Think of the 35 million trees that could be saved if we all read our papers and magazines online.

Stanza is the leading application for reading on Apple's iPhone. It's also one of the phone's most downloaded applications, now Amazon-owned. If you think you can't read from a phone... you read a newspaper column and the screen is a similar width. The eye finds a way of running down rather than flicking across. A netbook also has a pull-out flexible screen that makes a paperback-size reading surface. Books are no longer dead trees and glue.

The author of *The Book is Dead: Long Live the Book*, Sherman Young, talked us through the history of information transfer. He pointed out that at every change there were the Luddites.

- Talking round the cave-fire – one to several.
- Writing on the cave wall – transfer to anyone at any time they walk past.
- Writing on paper – transfer to others through time and to any place.
- Printing on paper – one to millions.
- Broadcasting – you eat what they feed you.
- Internet screen – anybody to everybody. Along with CDs, DVDs, iPods.

A single e-book can hold hundreds of books. Take your library tramping!

At the moment publishers can make money. As one speaker said they should, "reach beyond print to monetize their existing content investment as they open up new digital channels." In other words, publishers should make their back catalogue available via the internet. There are now eight million books available online, and about 100,000 are free.

Publishing on the Internet is not easy. There is a lot to be learned. This body of knowledge is where publishers will increasingly live in the future.

The international distribution of digital content – channels, formats, devices, marketing, digital rights management. However, one feels that an author could master all this and be personally responsible for getting it out there in a way that is impossible with the dead tree and glue model.

For the author the marketing is the time-waster – time one could spend writing – and DRM is the killer.

“DRM is a generic term that refers to access control technologies that can be used by hardware manufacturers, publishers, copyright holders and individuals to try to impose limitations on the usage of digital content and devices.” Thank you Wikipedia.

There is no way you can stop your work being ripped off by a determined hacker. As soon as it's out there, it's meat for the vultures. Fortunately there are many other honest birds out there and encryption will keep them honest.

Authors usually get ten percent of (say) a \$40 price tag, so \$4 per book. Books could be sold directly to the public at \$4 and reach as many as want to read it digitally. Without the paper and transport overheads, authors should expect a better deal. After all mud is the primeval ooze from which life and creativity springs.

Will the publishers and booksellers wear it?

Janine McVeagh

My overall impression from the various – mostly very informative and stimulating – presentations was that authors and publishers need to understand and embrace the technology, to make it work for them, not to fear and shun it. There also needs to be a lot of co-operation and collaboration between authors, publishers and techies – we all need each other, though most of the presentations tended to not mention writers. When asked about writers, one presenter, Sherman Young said: "Oh, they'll be treated crappily as usual."

Neelan Chokri (Lexcycle) gave an overview of the current state of e-books. It is still a new technology but huge companies are getting into it. ☺The US market is currently the biggest in the world, but there are international partnerships forming with books being translated into 35 languages. For those who have grown up with computers, the e-book is an immersion reading experience, like a book – a point echoed by Sherman Young.

Chokri's company has created a software programme called Stanza for the iPhone that manages the online library, a truly amazing beast that can do everything from bookbinding to adding and editing text and extras (video and audio for example) virtually. On his own iPhone Chokri had an out-of-copyright *Pride and Prejudice* (everybody used P and P as their sample book) and Maurice Sendak's very much in copyright *In the Night Kitchen* as well as several hundred other titles. His advice to authors: make sure your publisher is making your books available electronically.

Sherman Young spoke about the cultural impact of technologies and considered what place books might have in this future. He reads books and e-books indiscriminately – the point being that a book is a reading experience. He described writing and reading as a process that places a premium on time: books are to other media as French cuisine is to the Big Mac. Books create space to be negotiated with the reader – about slowing down, thinking instead of talking. Book culture is not dead, just resting.

Creators of books are reconfiguring – working out how to integrate the book experience to the digital world. He talked about the Heavenly Library – the importance and power of thoughtfully written words. Books have to be there, where the readers are – not sequestered in libraries.

Richard Siegsma is in the business of selling 'commercial content' not books – 30-40 percent of his revenue is e-books. He gave examples of this, including student textbooks. He believes that the quality of our future will depend on the quality of our thinking.

It is important to reinvent yourself. Do things that aren't being done today. Collaboration is the key to the future – depends on communication. Flexible delivery options are things like print on demand and electronic delivery – software for protection against plagiarism.

Karl von Randow also talked about iPhone applications and self-publishing options through existing platforms, promoted through social media. Some big publishers have their own platforms.

Simon Rowell talked about the protection of IP and copyright issues in the digital environment – there are many possible models for the author to retain control over their copyright. It was all very technical and can no doubt be researched, but the bottom line was: don't sign away your digital rights.

Richard Pipe talked about DRM and formats that authors and publishers could use to speed up the process and keep costs down: pdf and XML. He said it was important to keep it simple, and not to get trapped into proprietary formats.

Michael Ross, educational publisher, put Encyclopaedia Britannica online. He believes that the up and coming markets are places like Korea and Japan. He also said that e-books should be as exciting as print, zoomable, shareable, accessible, cheap. The Encyclopaedia Britannica online is a massive database, and is continually updated, not static like previous printed versions. Online content can provide solutions, not just information. All of them mentioned that the internet itself may become obsolescent.

Michael Carney spoke about the secrets of successful selling online. Some of his suggestions were useful for writers with books they can sell themselves. The most important one was to use word of mouth – through blogs, Facebook and Twitter.

Stuart Shepherd mainly spoke about the magazine market and the trend to web-based content and e-zines and there was a section on online teaching of English as a second language, writing and development of resources.

There are still many issues to resolve including ensuring the universality of sites,

so that paper size and screen resolution are the same, and providing access for paying customers without too many security issues. They also said that attitudes to paying for online material are changing, people learning to accept they have to pay, where previously have demanded that everything be free.

In summary, publishers who don't accept the world is changing will not last. Writers can take a lot more control of what happens to their work if they take the trouble to acquaint themselves with the social changes that the media brings. The book is not dead – it has just put on modern clothes and bought itself a new car.