



The Speed of Light Reading

A New Introduction to Print is Dead

By Jeff Gomez

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The Speed of Light Reading

“Listen; there's a hell of a good universe next door: let's go.” —e.e. cummings

1.

I was a teenager when I first discovered the word *solipsism*. The instant I learned of its meaning I loved the word for its poetic simplicity, silky alliteration, and the fact that a collection of just a few letters could encompass such a big idea. Ever since then, while hopefully never suffering from solipsism (if anything, I usually experience the opposite), I've thought of the word from time to time. It also occasionally surfaces in print or conversation, or else a character in a movie will say it. But while we can all hope to eradicate solipsism—so that no one person thinks that they're the center of the universe—that doesn't settle the question of the universe itself. After all, what kind of universe has none of us at its center?

2.

It's been over a year since *Print is Dead* was first published in paper and electronic formats, and it's been more three years since I first wrote the original essay that led to the writing of the full-length book. A lot has happened in that time.

Since I wrote the essay, Sony has introduced the first (and then second) version of its eBook reader. In December 2008, Sony reported they'd sold over 300,000 eReader devices, and work continues on yet another version (this time incorporating wireless connectivity). Apple has similarly introduced the iPhone, touted by many in the press as the "God device." Its sales are already well into the millions and, as of April 2009, more than a billion applications have been download to iPhones around the world. In fact, they're now so ubiquitous on the streets and on busses and commuter trains that, whenever someone's cell phone rings, the chances are pretty good that they're going to pull out an iPhone. In addition to this, Apple has introduced a half-dozen new iPod models (all of them smaller, cheaper, and with larger memories than their predecessors), not to mention Apple has begun selling TV shows, movies, and audiobooks from iTunes. Electronic books—for reading on an iPhone—also appear in iTunes, but so far only clumsily, as stand-alone apps in the app store. Rather than being seen truly as content, books are sold alongside gimmicky fare like video games.

Even in just the last year or so there have been immense changes. Amazon's Kindle has appeared (with a sleeker 2.0 version already available, as well as a deluxe model with a larger screen), and Google has settled its lawsuit with authors. Meanwhile, more and more people are engaged in the delivery and consumption of electronic content and online participation, getting their news and entertainment from blogs or websites. Recent studies have shown that people spend more time on Facebook than with email, and Twitter is so popular that Ashton Kutcher has more people "following"

him than CNN does. Think about that: he's one person; they're a news network. In a lot of ways, it's a pretty amazing time.

However, while digital media continues to proliferate, physical formats are becoming more and more rare. As newspaper circulations continue to shrink, along with advertising income, many American papers are going out of business (to list them all would be too depressing). In addition, a number of magazines—from *Domino* to *Portfolio*—have also ceased publication. In the music world, Atlantic Records announced that in November 2008—for the first time—digital sales exceeded physical sales. Everywhere you look, people are creating and consuming electronic content. And, to add insult to injury, the publishing industry experienced a major contraction when the financial system and stock markets collapsed in late 2008. Many prominent New York publishers had layoffs, closed divisions, fired entire departments, and shuttered imprints.

And yet, despite all of this activity, and all of the good and bad news, the universe of publishing—the way that it does business – has not changed all that much in the past year or so. Big books and authors—the James Pattersons and Stephen Kings of the world—continue to rake in big bucks and keep their numerous fans happy. Celebrity authors are still given huge advances (even in these tough financial times), the bestseller lists are filled with the usual suspects, and *Twilight* has become—more or less—the new Harry Potter. At the same time, publishers in both America and Europe have continued to expand their various digital efforts, digitizing their backlists and embracing new software and reading devices (including the iPhone). But most of this digital activity is still happening at the edges of the larger publishing galaxy; eBooks are still only a miniscule profit center, a tiny star against a backdrop of big names and paper formats.

But if publishing is indeed a universe, what kind of universe is it?

3.

For a majority of the twentieth century, there was a debate about what kind of universe we lived in. Was it dynamic and expanding, or static and eternal? Had space always existed, or had it been—at some point in time—created?

Those who feel that the universe is dynamic and expanding believe in the theory of the Big Bang. In this theory, the entire universe was created from a single “primeval atom,” and ever since that initial explosion the universe has continued to grow and expand in all directions (with the galaxies farthest away from our own traveling the fastest).

The other theory, in which the universe is static and eternal, is known as the Steady State Model. According to the proponents of this idea, the universe is infinite in scope; it has always existed, and always will exist.

The difference between the two theories centers, mainly, around the idea of expansion.

Anytime there’s an explosion, debris is hurled in all directions. In the case of our universe, the matter—all of those elements and all of that energy—that burst forth almost 14 billion years ago is still traveling as aftermath of that first blast. Everywhere we look in the night sky, we can see stars and nebulae moving away from us. And while the proponents of a Steady State Model admit that galaxies are indeed moving, they claim this simply means that we’re doubling and tripling our size within infinity (like adding chairs to a table that never ends; there’s room for everyone, no matter how many people show up). Proponents of the Big Bang are sure that this evidence points to a universe being slowly stretched, like taffy; one day, it will snap.

I think that a mini-version of this debate is happening today in publishing. Some people in the industry think that—like the Steady State Model of the universe—publishing is eternal and infinite.

No matter what happens at a consumer, business, or even a technological level, publishing will withstand each and every challenge. Indeed, this group believes that—in the future—publishing will continue to exist (and even thrive), looking much the same way that it does now. In this scenario, the dogs bark but the caravan stays right where it is.

At the same time, many others think the opposite: that the publishing universe is expanding; growing in size and venturing into unknown territory. They believe that new business models and ways to sell and experience content are created all of the time, like stars and galaxies born deep inside a fiery nebula. We could call this the Big ‘Berg theory, since Johannes Gutenberg created the publishing industry with his invention of the printing press in 1492. Plus, the fact that the first words ever printed with moveable type happened to be *In the beginning* makes for a nicely poetic touch.

What makes many people uncomfortable with the Big ‘Berg scenario is that it means that the industry—like the universe—is finite. There’s going to come a time when even James Patterson and Stephen King will supernovae themselves out of existence. When this happens, the entire publishing universe—and everything in it—will cease to exist (except for, probably, Oprah).

However, it’s not quite time to panic. As Alvy Singer’s mom told a young Woody Allen in *Annie Hall* after he’d been taken to the doctor because of his paralyzing fear of an expanding universe: “You’re here in Brooklyn; Brooklyn is not expanding.” So to just admit that the publishing universe is expanding and changing does not mean that you’re declaring for it an immediate death sentence.

4.

Of course, as persuasive as publishing’s Big ‘Berg theory may be, many people cling to the idea of a Steady State Model for the industry.

They want to believe that publishing has always existed, and always will; that all of the digital activity we've witnessed in the last couple of years has been merely a distraction, if not a smokescreen. Yes, people download music, and listen to their iPods, and have stopped buying CDs (not to mention magazines and newspapers). *The New York Times* may be physically shrinking, along with its circulation, but that doesn't mean anything. It's a blip, a market correction; a bad spell, a downturn. We've had bad times before, seen dark days, but have always bounced back. The shanty towns and Hoovervilles of the '20s and '30s gave way to the sprawling suburban tract housing of the '50s and '60s. So why wouldn't what we're seeing now, in terms of what's happening with publishing, be any different?

And just as brilliant scientists like Fred Hoyle had to keep twisting and tuning their Steady State theory to make it comply with the various revelations that were emerging from the realms of physics and astronomy, some publishing pundits continue to resolutely insist on the sanctity of the page, the brilliance of the book. They explain away any digital revolution as mere child's play. *That*, they say, could never compete with *this*. And they come up with various ideas to back up their claim.

For instance, when Barack Obama won the presidential election in 2008 and everyone rushed out the next day to buy a newspaper so that they could hang on to it as a keepsake, dozens of articles and blog posts were written from the angle of, "See all of this interest in newspapers? That *proves* that print's not dead!" And yet, the very opposite was true. People were collecting the newspapers purely as a memento; everyone heard about the election results from either their TV or computer. The newspapers weren't carrying or relaying *news*; instead, the newspapers were telling us what we already knew. Collecting them was like bronzing baby shoes straight from the box: an instant keepsake (and a wonderful revenue generator for the newspapers), but hardly a sign that newspapers have a future.

5.

I wrote *Print is Dead*, at first, just for myself. As someone who had once written novels, but now worked in publishing, I had more than a casual interest in what would happen to books. I was also curious because publishing is what I'd chosen as a career. But I also loved books and wanted to know—even though I was no longer actively trying to create them (it'd been years since I'd written fiction)—what was going to happen to them; were they going to survive all of this craziness surrounding the Web and the iPod? I wrote *Print is Dead* to answer that question.

Having been an author in the past, I was aware of the various stages of publication: editing the manuscript, correcting the galleys, getting a few good reviews, getting some bad ones (not getting *any* reviews). But what was different this time from any other time I'd published a book was the presence of the blogosphere. Before the Web, whenever anyone's book appeared, it was the critics and the mainstream media who had the power to make or break an author or a book. But now, there's a whole new online world that has the power to either amplify a book's message or else an author's profile.

Print is Dead received very few reviews (a couple appeared in England, the majority of which were derisive). Needless to say, the bad reviews seem to have come from those who believe in the Steady State Model of publishing; all of this digital noise is just that: noise. Computers are for kids; books are amazing technology, they'll never be replaced. No one *I know* reads electronic books. Blah blah blah.

There was also scant notice of my book in any mainstream publications, and when *The Los Angeles Times* recommended *Print is Dead* as a fall book, I could only be bemused since they mentioned it as a fall book for 2008 (even though the book came out in the fall of 2007; better late than

never, I guess). Of course, every author has these gripes. But still, I would have thought that print publications would have been interested in the subject matter, if only to defend their honor and denounce me and my ideas. Instead, there was mostly silence. Even within the publishing industry itself, there was mostly indifference; *Publisher's Weekly* invited me to write something for their Soap Box column, but never wrote a review of the book itself.

The blogosphere was a different story. Dozens of bloggers wrote about *Print is Dead*, and for months after the book came out my RSS feed was filled with various mentions and links. Plus, people from all over the world reached out to me, asking questions, wanting clarification on a point, or just to say that they'd liked it. Also, the fact that I continued to blog about the book and the topic helped increase exposure for me and my book.

Because of this—the dearth of reviews, and lack of any marketing—I was pleasantly surprised when the book actually sold, and went into a second edition. That being said, the book wasn't successful enough that my publisher is allowing me to update or correct the text, not to mention add a new introduction (which is why this essay is appearing here, and not there). I would have loved to have updated the text, if only to fix the numerous typos that appeared due to the fact that the book was rushed into publication (the fact that I managed to misspell *schadenfreude* is a shame I won't ever live down, even though it seems like a dare to someone to point it out). Somehow, my little book managed to do okay, and I'm pleased and surprised to see it getting a second life in paperback.

Of course, what's also happened since the release of *Print is Dead* is that there have been another dozen or so breathless odes on the greatness of books, appearing in various magazines and publications, with writers once again pining for pages and denigrating digital. These kinds of articles go back at least a decade, if not to E. Annie Proulx's original proclamation in 1994 that, "Nobody is going to sit down and read a book on a twitchy little screen. Ever."

One of the more recent articles—and one that attracted a lot of attention—was an op-ed piece in *The New York Times* by *Faster* author James Gleick. Entitled, “How to Publish Without Perishing,” it offered up yet more advice to publishers on how they can survive in a digital world. However, Gleick’s ideas are counterintuitive if not downright archaic. Instead of pushing publishers to digitize their backlists, or explore new business models, he exhorts them to, “Go back to an old-fashioned idea.” The idea being to, well, publish books. Why? Because, as Gleick states, “We’ve reached a shining moment for this ancient technology.” (I think the glare from that “shining moment” has gotten into his eyes and is obscuring his vision.)

The artwork that appeared alongside Gleick’s story said a lot about the mistake of his argument. In the illustration a man, standing in a library amidst stacks and shelves of bound volumes, is intently reading a book. Meanwhile, a glowing computer screen sits impotently on a desk, slowly loading information (as if desperately trying to catch up to all of the knowledge already accumulated in the room). In the picture—as in Gleick’s article—books are a superior technology to computers. This idea is the familiar twisting of Orwell’s words that I find commentators come to time and time again (whether they’re conscious of the connection or not): computers good, books better.

What’s so silly about that picture, and arguments like the one Gleick is making in his op-ed, is that it frames the debate over reading to be a steal-cage death match between a laptop and a paper-back. Sure, when faced with a choice between the page or a computer screen, most would rather read something on paper (even something as quotidian as e-mail; I know plenty of people who print out e-mails and read them like memos). But most consumers *aren’t* faced with that either/or decision. Instead, what we talk about when we talk about electronic reading is, in most cases, the screen as a substitution for nothing at all.

6.

When I'm at home, I rarely listen to my iPod. Instead, I load up my CD player with various discs, choosing from a spindle that holds about fifty or so and permanently lives inside the cabinet that houses my stereo, cable box, and DVD player. That stack of CDs encompasses recent purchases, long-time favorites, and a selection of moods I'm liable to find myself in (jazz for reading, electronica for quiet contemplation, singer-songwriters for Sunday mornings, etc.). And if I get a particular craving to hear a certain record—because a fellow commuter was talking about Blur that morning on the bus, or “Maps” was seeping through a co-worker’s white earbud headphones on the elevator in my office building—then I’ll dig that specific CD out of my stacks.

But it'd be ridiculous to extrapolate from this behavior and say that a physical format is better than an electronic format because I don't listen to my iPod when I'm surrounded at home by my CDs. Instead, that's simply my behavior when I'm at home, under those conditions. When I have the time and chance (and luxury) to utilize a physical format, I do. But that's hardly a victory for physical formats since there are plenty of times—even while I'm at home—when I eschew the physical for the ether of digital.

And, of course, whenever I'm *not* at home—whether it's on a long trip or just during my daily commute, or when I'm at the gym or even going to the store for a carton of milk—I'm listening to my iPod. Why? Well, because carrying one iPod that holds over 20,000 songs is much more handy than being followed around with a U-Haul carrying a stereo and thousands of my CDs. And yet, in terms of the digital versus analog debate, it's still not an either/or proposition. Instead, one format fills in when it makes sense for it to do so. We need to stop positioning this argument—with apologies to the ghost of William Styron—as *Sophie's Choice*, and treat it more like tag-team wrestling.

The same goes for books and general online reading. Give someone a print edition of *The New York Times*, along with a Kindle loaded with the same stories, and most people would prefer to read the physical newspaper. That preference is practically hardwired in our brains; the Kindle is a gadget, a newspaper is gospel.

However, give someone a choice between a laptop with an Internet connection or a physical copy of *The New York Times*. Most people would choose the laptop. They would choose the computer because, with it, they would get not only the *Times* but also the entirety of the Web: e-mail, Youtube, Google, Myspace, Facebook, Twitter. (Plus, the online version of *The New York Times* has audio, video, up-to-the-minute news, and reader's comments). Not only is that a win for the laptop, but it can hardly be considered a fair fight.

True, many people—since it's *not* an either/or decision—choose to read both the newspaper *and* the screen (opting for the paper at home, over breakfast, and then surfing the Web at the office). But for many, many more—people who either do not have access to printed material or physical formats—they spend their time solely with digital content. Therefore, that illustration for Gleick's op-ed would only be credible if everyone's home, office, dorm, car, or escalator at the mall, were lined with all of those books. But, of course, we don't live in a world where we're tripping over free books every step that we walk. However, electronic content is indeed reaching us at all of those points where books cannot.

At the center of all this media—of all of this content—we stand with our various screens: laptops, iPhones, PDAs, etc. These devices can call up any nugget of the world's vast store of knowledge, or else just flash your favorite photo. They are portals to the past, and windows into the future. Satellites (almost like planets) orbit each of us in order to beam into our hands headlines, music, movies, and—yes—even books. The potential now exists to have, at your fingertips (and at your request), almost

anything you'd want to know, have or experience. In an instant. It's enough to make someone feel a little, well, *solipsistic*.



Money for Nothing

Free is funny. You would think that getting everything for free would be great; that a world without price tags would be a world you'd want to live in. But, in reality, I don't think that everything being free would be at all enjoyable. In fact, like one of those *Twilight Zone* episodes with the twist ending (the guy thinks he's in heaven because everything goes his way, but in reality it turns out he's in hell), it would not be a good thing if everything were free.

I'm not necessarily talking about economics, or from the standpoint of a business model, or even a particular industry. Instead I'm talking about something much more basic: the impact "free" can have on the psyche of the consumer. Because—rightly or wrongly—we've all been trained to pay for things. Maybe it goes even deeper than that. Perhaps exchanging money or payment for goods and services is an archetypal aspect of everyday life; thousands of years ago people traded goats for chickens, or bartered services for food, and that's a tougher habit to kick than we thought. I'll even go out on a limb and say that people *like* paying for things. They enjoy the feeling they get after plunking down their cold, hard cash. Because when they do this, they're expressing themselves (it's not for nothing that they say money talks). They're choosing one thing over another, and in that choice you'll

find aspects of a personality, the beginning of values, and even traces of a conscience. So if, one day, all the price tags in the world suddenly disappeared, a lot more would be missing than just the tags.

Here's an example: A few months ago I was reading record reviews on the music website Pitchfork. One of the reviews was for a band I'd never heard of called The Depreciation Guild. The positive review (7.3) led me to visit the band's website. Once there I discovered I could download the entire record (the one that had been reviewed on Pitchfork) for free. The website mentioned being able to pay for things like T-shirts and buttons at their Myspace page, but at the Myspace page I couldn't find any mention of an actual CD (not to mention T-shirts or buttons), so instead I went back and downloaded the MP3 files from the website. (At the website I did notice a *donate* button, but seeing as how I hadn't yet heard the music, I decided to wait on this).

I then downloaded the group's record. What did I have to lose? It was free and I have a fast Internet connection, so it only took a few minutes to download the Zipped files to my desktop. I added it to my iTunes library (which only took seconds), and then synced up my iPod. But when I finally cued it up the next day, standing in the elevator and about to walk outside and head home, I had a funny feeling that's a side effect of *free*.

Because I hadn't paid for the record, I literally didn't have anything invested in the experience. This made me feel oddly light and carefree. The experience didn't seem real. It felt somehow hypothetical, like playing blackjack with fake money. Because of this, I didn't really care about the outcome (would you care much about the outcome of a hand of blackjack bet on with fake money?). I'd been given access to these songs for nothing and, because of that, I felt strangely unengaged and non-committal.

I pressed *play* and started walking up the street toward the PATH train. The songs were good, but not great. By the third one my attention was wandering and I hankered to listen to something

else. And why not? The record had been free. What did I owe it? I hadn't paid anything for it, and therefore I didn't expect to get anything *from* it. When something's free, and has no perceived value, there's nothing that people feel they need to get out of it. I'm positive that if I'd paid for the record—even just a few dollars—I would have listened to the entire thing. Why? Simple: I'd want to get my money's worth.

This experience, and a dozen others just like it, have made me not trust or believe anyone who says (let alone declares) that content wants to be free. I couldn't disagree more. Literature is not a blog entry on *Boing Boing*. A novel is not a newspaper. There's a big difference between David Foster Wallace and a profile of him in *The New York Times*. In fact, I think that choosing *not* to charge for literary content would lead to less reading, and not more; it would kill the careers of writers, instead of giving birth to new ones.

It's simple: when we pay for something, we tend to appreciate it. Or rather, we feel the *need* to appreciate it. We strive to understand; we give it a chance; we're open to the experience. When something's free, none of that happens. After all, I can imagine that books that get picked up off the street aren't read and finished as often as books that people have paid for.

So where does the call for *free* come from? It usually comes from people who can do without the cash that charging for something will bring them. (I guess it's like the old idea that a Liberal is a person who hasn't been mugged; someone who's for ideas being free has never needed to rely on the revenue derived from the selling of ideas.) For instance, authors like Seth Godin, Chris Anderson, and Cory Doctorow, can charge large amounts in speaking fees, but for most authors this is not the case. Even Web 2.0 guru Tim O'Reilly said, during a 2008 keynote speech, "Free is more complicated than you think."

Free is a safety net, allowing people to indulge in their every whim. But when we pay for something, we're not just making a financial investment; we're also making an emotional investment. Because when something costs nothing, you often get what you pay for.



Some Experience Necessary

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In the 1991 film *The Doctor*, William Hurt plays an arrogant young physician who becomes ill with throat cancer. As he begins to go through the health care system—as an ordinary patient and not a hotshot doctor—Hurt is shocked by how clinically he’s treated; he feels like an object instead of a human being. The experience forces him to reflect on how a profession whose stated goal is to help people can end up treating them as little more than a commodity. By the end of the movie, of course, he has acquired a new and added perspective on his profession.

As someone who works in publishing who has recently been through the process of writing and editing a book, I’ve been thinking of this film a lot over the past couple of months. That’s not to say that my treatment during the past year (it was last September that I signed the contract to write the book, and it’s now been printed and will be in stores in November) has been anywhere near as traumatic as what William Hurt faces in *The Doctor*. In fact, it hasn’t been a bad experience at all. But it has indeed been important and instructive, and it’s an experience I wish more people in our industry could have.

One of publishing's dirty little secrets is that, increasingly, it's not about the books. Or maybe, it's too much about the books (meaning books as objects, or even books as a number on a balance sheet). In the publishing process we find ourselves sometimes getting removed from the ideas and stories found in our books; the words that provide the power to deliver amazing and transformative experiences to readers (and are therefore the kinds of books we read growing up that made us want to get into this business in the first place).

One of the reasons this happens is because people who work in publishing, for the most part, have not had the experience of writing and publishing a book. They know the physical process, and they know the business inside and out, but they don't know what it means to slave over an idea, or live with a single character or theme, for a number of years. They don't know what it's like to see their name on a dust jacket, not to mention—after all that hard work—getting a hideous review on Amazon. (Having been through both experiences, I can safely say that one is better than the other.)

They also don't know the feeling of having a signing and showing up to an empty bookstore; reading to just employees and in the end not signing anything but some stock. True, some editors and publicists have witnessed these kinds of things from the wings, while escorting their authors around town, but it's a much different experience when you're the one standing in front of all those unoccupied folding chairs.

In Oliver Stone's 1987 film *Wall Street*, Michael Douglas's infamous character Gordon Gekko at one point says, "Today, management has no stake in the company." What Gekko meant was a *financial* stake; people who were Vice Presidents didn't own company stock, and thus were sometimes not terribly motivated to make the company perform well since it wasn't their own fortunes on the line. In today's literary world I would make the comparison that, in publishing, we are like those Vice Presidents Gekko described.

Not because we don't care whether or not our companies do well (we of course have a vested interest in the well-being of our companies; without them, we wouldn't have a job). But rather, it's not our names on the dust jacket, spine, or title page. Our hopes and dreams don't (usually) ride on the success or failure of any particular book. In fact, the same way that hundreds of sentences create a novel, the dozens or hundreds of books we're associated with throughout our tenure at any single company form our career. Our reputations don't rest on one book or another. And yet, for many authors—especially first-time ones—this is it. This is what they've been dreaming of for much of their lives, and we shouldn't take that for granted or treat it cavalierly in any way.

That's not to say that we don't root for our titles, or that editors don't evangelize their writers internally and externally. They do, and I've seen many editors do everything that they could to get the word out about a book that they loved. But still, at the end of the day, it's a business. It's a business we love, and one we wouldn't trade for anything else, but it's still a business. And the fact is, the books we sell aren't made of our own words.

Because, while we can imagine what it's like, and try to empathize, it's just not the same until it happens to you. It reminds me of when I was having dinner years ago with a friend who's a famous writer, and we got to talking about *Spy* magazine. (This was during the interregnum when *Spy* was off the shelves for a few years before coming back to life.) My first novel was about to come out, and I was lamenting the fact that *Spy* wasn't around to make fun of me. My friend looked up from his meal and warily said, "It's not as fun as you think." At the time, I just waved his comment aside with a grin. Well, when my second novel came out, in 1997, *Spy* had returned and, lo and behold, they made fun of me. And guess what? My friend was right.

Beyond this general feeling, I think that we as publishers tend to use our experience and knowledge in a way that automatically puts the author at a disadvantage. We're the ones who know

the trends, the sales curves, and—more importantly—the fiction buyer at Barnes & Noble. We think we know best, and we make decisions based on this fact. But we’re not the ones who wrote the book. And sometimes, during various parts of the publishing process, authors are made to feel more or less powerless.

For instance, I’ve had five books published and I’ve never had major input on a cover. In fact, for my first novel I had a terrific fight with my publisher and—even though I loathed the cover beyond belief—they went ahead and printed it. (True, I was a first time author, but I have since commiserated with other authors, ones who have sold many more books than I ever did, and they have confirmed similar experiences.) And so, back then, I was that crabby author on the other end of the phone; the one who caused an editor’s eyes to roll towards the ceiling. Later that day I’d be the subject of a snarky story told in the elevator on the way down to lunch (“Guess who *still* doesn’t like his cover”).

I was a problem, a nuisance, a bore; a know-it-all and someone who didn’t know anything (both at the same time!). And yet I was also a writer, an author whose book they had paid for and put on the cover of their catalog. I remember at the time being immensely confused, thinking, “How could they want my novel, but not my advice?” And now the shoe is on the other foot. I’ve been on the phone with authors who were complaining about their websites, and this time it’s my eyes that roll. I tell stories about them the way that my previous publishers used to talk about me.

It reminds me of a scene in *Annie Hall* (yes, another movie reference; for someone in publishing, I watch too many movies), where Woody Allen and Diane Keaton are both on screen in separate therapy sessions. The off-screen doctors ask them each a question (“Do you sleep together much?” “Do you have sex often?”), and even though the questions are essentially the same, their answers are wildly different. Keaton replies, “Constantly, three times a week,” while Allen answers, “Hardly ever, three times a week.” While this exchange is a wry commentary on how, within a romantic relation-

ship, two people can have the same experience but reflect on it differently, I can see a correlation to our industry. Because, during the typical publishing experience, we always think we're doing everything we can to help our writers. Meanwhile, they think we're not doing enough.

All of which goes to say that, while I doubt every person who works in publishing will find the time to write and publish a book, I think that if everyone tried more often to envision what it's like to be an author, we would be better off. After all, we spend so much time these days crunching data and trying to look at our products from the point of view of consumers, reviewers, and booksellers; we should try to also imagine what it feels like to be a writer.



Shock And Yawn

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Of all the ways to win a popularity contest, working in publishing and writing a book called *Print is Dead* has to be at the bottom of the list. While the subtitle—*Books in Our Digital Age*—hopefully puts the argument in a bit more perspective, the title by itself always seems to set people off. In fact, it has earned me many a chilly reception (think Benedict Arnold, not Paul Revere).

The cold shoulder is especially evident at work (I'm employed at a major book publishing house). One co-worker, after I got into the elevator with him and a female colleague, said to her as we started to rise to our offices, "Don't talk to him, he's writing a book called *Print is Dead*." The tone of his voice was that I'd betrayed them by writing a book that went against everything they stood for (or, at the very least, called them obsolete and put into motion an idea that would cost them their jobs). A second later, of course, he started to laugh, adding, "Just kidding." But his initial comment was telling. This was six months ago, before anyone had seen a galley of what I was writing. He was reacting purely to the title, to the idea.

Another colleague, the publisher at a company where I used to work, asked me the title when he heard I was writing a book. I told him. His response was short—it consisted of just two words—and

is more than likely unprintable in these pages. Again, a moment later, he laughed in a way that was meant to signify that he was just giving me a hard time. But his first response—to protect print’s honor—had been instinctual, like a mother bear defending one of her cubs.

I’ve received these kinds of reactions often in the past year when I’ve told people about *Print is Dead*. More often than not, publishing people have been offended that I could even suggest such a concept, let alone write a book about it. But despite this reception, I’ve never thought of backing down and changing the title, even after a friend’s wife took me aside at a dinner party and politely suggested, “Why don’t you just call it *Out of Print* instead?” True, it’s a confrontational title, which is one of the reasons I like it. But I chose it not just to shock, but also to get people thinking.

While I realize that this is a sensitive if not controversial subject, I also think it’s an important one; one that we in publishing need to be spearheading. Because whether we circle the wagons, raise the drawbridge, or stick our heads in the sand (or do all three if we’re in serious denial, not to mention metaphor overload), all around us the world is changing in monumental ways. Our industry, so far only touched at the fringes by the Internet and the enormous changes it has brought, is sooner or later going to have to embrace a digital culture and an electronic mindset. If we don’t, we’d better prepare ourselves for either piracy or silence.

Of course, this idea is neither new nor entirely mine; it has been more than a whisper for longer than a decade, as print-on-demand machines and eBooks, not to mention the rise of the Internet, have begun to signal that our industry—untouched by technology for generations—is about to change.

Some people don’t want to be bothered by bad news and would rather stay with the status quo until they one day wake up to find it all gone. My book is getting in the way of their rosy outlook; that’s why they get angry. Things are changing, and they don’t want to have to hear about it. To my

mind, that's like people getting mad at Paul Revere because he woke them up as he rode through the countryside yelling out that the British were coming. I mean, how rude. Didn't he know that people were sleeping?



Pianos on the Showroom Floor

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As a kid I remember a huge piano dealership in the corner of our local mall. Sometimes I would nervously venture up to one of the grand pianos—not knowing at all how to play it—and try to find two random notes that sounded good when played together.

These stores would let you play a piano for as long as you wanted, but of course you couldn't take one home unless you bought it. Access to the pianos was being given away in the hope that you'd buy one. Without that free access, it would be impossible to make the choice of one over the other (not to mention that, until you played one, you might not know that you even wanted a piano).

It's a similar story with books that are offered online for free. When a digital book is being offered for nothing, it's not being given away for "free." Instead, what's being granted is access to the text. People are given the chance to read the entire book in the hope that they will buy the real thing. True, they can read any passage that they want, but that's the whole point; offering only one chapter as an excerpt, and expecting people to get interested in a book, is like letting a potential piano buyer have access to only a portion of its keyboard. An online book to which a user has complete access is the 21st-century equivalent of a showroom piano.

There was some panic this week when it was reported that all of the novels nominated for the Man Booker Prize would be offered online for free. While it was later clarified that negotiations with the publishers were still ongoing, but that any online editions would be for sale, what would have been the harm if they had been free?

Hundreds of thousands of people would have been exposed to novels they probably otherwise would not have known about, and a few hundred at least would have bought the real thing. Those sales would not have occurred otherwise.

Offering electronic editions for free won't cannibalize the sale of print copies, but will instead give potential consumers an appetite for a book they might not have heard of before. Far from causing the book industry's downfall, free access to electronic versions of novels has the potential to be its savior. And to publishers, struggling for relevance in a digital age, that should be music to their ears.



Reading 2.0

Originally appeared in *The Publishing News*, October 2007

Reading, at first glance, seems to be a physical experience: you begin the process by picking up a book. You then hold the book in your hands, peel back the dust jacket—or else leave it on and use the flaps as a bookmark—open the cover, and then spread the pages to where you were last time, all the while keeping a thumb and forefinger poised above the paper, ready to turn the page and advance the story.

This sounds very much like a production-line process, one step inevitably following the next. In fact, I can easily envision a set of instructions similar to those that accompany items from Ikea, showing illustrations of people and books with each subsequent drawing portraying a different phase in the reading process (the first panel has a man approaching a novel sitting on a nightstand, and the last shows him in bed with book in hand and smile on his face). And yet, none of this is really *reading*.

Everything you can see happening in the reading process is not what's important. Because the flipping of pages, or even the back-and-forth typewriter carriage-like movement of the eyes, doesn't necessarily mean that words are being absorbed (much less understood). Anyone can pick up a book and repeatedly pantomime these movements.

In fact, scanning machines have been invented—in order to not have to destroy the books being scanned—that cradle a book and gently turn its pages while a camera takes pictures of the words and translates them into digital sentences. But no one would say that these computers are reading.

Instead, reading really consists of comprehension. It does not mean only the moving of body parts, or the taking of books in hand. More importantly, reading is about the intellectual processing and digesting of words that have been strung together in a series of sentences and paragraphs by a writer. Reading is therefore less about the physicality of books and pages, and is all about words and readers.

However, whenever the fate of publishing is discussed, the debate never fails to touch upon a number of predictably familiar points (not many of which have anything to do with reading). Instead, it's all about the books themselves. Books are variously described as everything from the perfect technology to aesthetically unimpeachable.

And so what happens when we ought to be talking about the future of reading is that we invariably end up talking about the history of books. And not in the sense of books written about history, but books themselves as history (with Gutenberg and his printing press at the far end of the spectrum, and Oprah standing on a mountain of bestsellers at the other).

Indeed, writers and publishers repeatedly talk about the sanctity of books, but never seem to mention their utility. Yes, it feels nice to touch the smooth pages and crack a hardback spine, but wouldn't you rather hear a good story than simply treat a book as a chew toy? And yes, we all learned to read with books in our hands, but what about the imagination in our minds? What about the words and the experience and the characters? Surely these things are more important than binding and glue. But getting booklovers to imagine a process of absorbing text any other way is like trying to convince people—before Columbus sailed the ocean blue—that the world is round instead of flat. And yet, instead of ships falling off a cliff at the end of the Earth, what we're experiencing today is the falling off of readers' habits and overall literacy rates. Because books, as much as we profess to love them, are falling out of favor.

A recent AP-Ipsos poll found that a quarter of Americans didn't read a book last year, while the National Endowment for the Arts's landmark 2004 study, *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America*, showed that reading habits were eroding across all socio-economic groups and levels. (The NEA will be releasing a follow-up report later this year, and every indication is that the results will be even worse.) And yet, despite these trends, people are reading. They're just not reading books.

Huge portions of the population are instead consuming large amounts of content in a variety of electronic formats: blogs, websites, e-mail, etc. In addition, they're absorbing all of this content on a variety of devices and screens: desktop and laptop computers, tablet PCs, mobile phones, PDAs, you name it. And in many cases, such as online newspapers and magazines, the rising tide of digital consumption is beginning to erase the need for the real thing.

Newspapers are literally shrinking (this past year both the *Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times* reduced their size), while a number of magazines have ceased publication of a printed product but have retained their online brands. More and more people are interacting with words and sentences. However, fewer of them are bothering to pick up a book to do so. So even though you may not run into someone during your morning commute reading Stendhal as often as you used to (if you ever did), that doesn't mean people aren't consuming thousands of words a day in the form of websites and blogs. And all of that surfing of the Web adds up to lots of reading; all of it consists of the taking-in and processing of words. Whether or not the words were first printed in a book or magazine or newspaper shouldn't matter (after all, the printed page is a display device, and thus is no different than an iPhone).

True, time spent on the Internet is sometimes done so sitting in front of a screen watching Youtube (which is not much different than sitting on a couch watching TV). But social networking and user-generated content websites such as Myspace and Facebook give users the ability to upload their own creations, and then mix and meet with likeminded souls (something that is sorely lacking in the one-way street world of print).

So while the presence and cultural relevance of print media (magazines, newspapers, and books) begins to shrink, it doesn't mean reading is going to similarly disappear. In the technological segues witnessed over the years from horses to trains to automobiles to jumbo jets, the underlying principal always stayed the same: transportation; the need to get from one place to another. The same will hold true for what might come to be called Reading 2.0. Because, while the process of reading printed material will be seen as increasingly anachronistic in our ever-changing digital age, people everywhere will continue to crave, consume, and process words.

Of course, to hear the defenders of print describe it, if books go away then surely reading will follow. But the growing habits of new generations show us that the truth is quite the opposite. What publishers therefore need to do—and need to do quickly—is to market their books online as well as create new products (and modify their existing ones) in order to allow them to be purchased and consumed digitally.

Because if reading, at first glance, seems to be a physical experience, then why not let it begin with a screen?



Interview with Joe Wikert

Originally appeared on the blog [Publishing2020](#), November 2007

JW: The subtitle of your book is "Books in Our Digital Age." Up to now, the eBook platform hasn't really taken off. What do you feel will be required before eBooks become a more significant segment of our business?

JG: While you're correct in stating that eBooks -- as we know them -- have not really taken off, in the meantime what has indeed taken off is electronic content. So while people may not be buying novels in PDF format, they're buying music online, streaming TV shows from the websites of networks, and integrating their daily lives with a number of different interactive websites (such as Myspace and Facebook). So consumers are certainly ready to consume content digitally (witness the rise in online news, and the demise of the newspaper), so now it's just up to publishers to come up with a great digital reading experience, and I don't think that's yet happened.

JW: What are your thoughts on digital rights management (DRM)?

JG: Well, being an author and working in publishing, I see both sides of this issue. And it's not something that's just being fought for by the publishers; many authors and agents are wary to have their works out there, complete and unprotected. And while I think it would encourage literacy instead of piracy, I think we're years away from seeing a lessening in DRM, and I don't know if we'll ever have a completely DRM-less society when it comes to media. Instead, I'd rather content providers got together on standards so that we didn't have so many competing formats. One answer to the problem of DRM, in terms of eBooks, would be to get rid of competing formats. If there were a universal but protected file format -- say, the digital equivalent of vinyl forty years ago -- then that would go a long way towards putting to rest a lot of these arguments.

JW: Most eBook efforts up to now have been simple ports of print books into PDF, for example. Will this model ever work or do publishers and authors need to find new ways of leveraging the technology and offering more value than what readers can get in a print-only product?

JG: You're absolutely right; what's held back eBook adoption isn't that they're not enough like regular books, but rather it's that they're *too* much like them. We need electronic books to do things that regular books can't do, and that includes things like search, hyperlinks, and multimedia. Because the idea of reading through a PDF file "page by page" will always pale next to the real thing. eBooks (or rather, digital content) needs to come up with its own user-experience, the same way that CDs didn't try to replicate the two-sided experience of vinyl.

JW: How much of a role will price sensitivity play in the future of eBooks? Is it likely that mainstream customers will pay the print book price for an eBook?

JG: This is one of the most interesting issues surrounding this entire debate, and I certainly don't have a concrete answer to the question. What I think needs to happen is across-the-board experimentation; we need to see what consumers are willing to pay, and of course with what frequency they're willing to pay that amount. And while there's a great temptation to price eBooks incredibly low right now, in order to get people to read them, this makes no sense since there aren't enough eBook readers in order to get the publishers to lower their prices. Once the "network effect" takes place, in terms of eBooks, then I could see having lower prices across the board. But until they grow in popularity, lower prices will face resistance with publishers as well as with authors and agents. (And yet, of course, this sets up a Catch-22, because perhaps lower prices would be the thing that leads to widespread adoption.)

JW: Which of the various monetization models do you feel will work best with e-content in the future (advertising, subscription, price per unit, etc.)?

JG: All of the above. I also love that you called it "electronic content," since that's what it really is. And that content will vary widely, from things that we would consider today to be either a magazine or a newspaper or a book, but in the future that will all come under the heading of "content"; it will consist of words on a screen. And some material will be better suited to advertising than others, while some material will work on a subscription basis. There won't be just one monetary model; there will be lots of them.

JW: What should authors be doing to prepare themselves for the "Print is Dead" scenario?

JG: It's very difficult, but they need to try and break the crush they have on print. I know it's great to see your name on a dust jacket, or your book in a store window, but that has nothing to do with reaching people or exchanging ideas or information (or even telling stories). And yet the notion of what it means to be "published" is so ingrained in the minds and marrow of writers; to them it means physical things like books and bookstores, not to mention tours and book parties. All of that is going to change -- indeed, it's already changing -- and writers need to prepare themselves for the idea that much of their various relationships (not just with their readers, but also with their publisher) are going to happen electronically. More importantly, they need to realize that this is a very good thing, and not a bad thing. Simply put, the Internet is the best thing that has ever happened to the midlist author, and the Internet will save more careers than it ruins.

JW: How about publishers? What should they (we!) be doing?

JG: First and foremost, publishers need to rid themselves of the notion that they're in the "book" business. (The only ones who are in the book business are printers.) Instead, publishers need to realize that they're in the idea business. And once they start to get this reality into their heads, they'll start to see that a digital world will offer them many more opportunities than limitations, and that an electronic world isn't the end of Gutenberg's invention, but is instead its latest improvement.

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