

BOOKSELLING

Technology, technology, technology

*If your time to you
Is worth savin'
Then you better start swimmin'
Or you'll sink like a stone
For the times they are a-changin'.
—Bob Dylan*

Technology, technology, technology has not exactly been the battle cry of the bookselling trade over the years, but technology has now become an inescapable influence. The seismic changes brought about by the arrival of online bookselling in the mid-to late 1990s might have just been an appetizer. In the past year alone we have seen numerous technologies introduced, each with potential far-reaching effects for the bookseller. Three that stand out are the LongPen, breakthroughs in digitization and print-on-demand technologies, and the book social networking craze.

The LongPen is a technology that allows authors to sign books from the comfort of their own homes. It is billed as “the world’s first long distance, real-time, real pen and ink autographing device,” which produces “legally valid” signatures. It includes an audio and video component that recreates the particulars of a reading without the presence of the author. The two most interesting uses so far were what was probably Norman Mailer’s last “book signing,” when he went LongPen for the Edinburgh International Book Festival, and convicted felon and book collector Conrad Black’s recent LongPen session. As far as I can tell no copies of books signed via LongPen have hit the market yet, but this is sure to create a stir as the market determines the value of these “signed” books.

Print on demand has been around a few years, but this past year the Espresso Book Machine hit the scene. Like a vending machine, the EBM has the ability to produce two 500-page books every seven minutes. The books are glued in full laminated covers and can be printed in any language. Though at present this technology is prohibitively expensive for most booksellers, the seeds are here for a future version that will be affordable. Conceivably every out-of-print and hard-to-find book will be available to be printed on demand.

This will not end the demand for the original book version, but it will greatly diminish the pool of potential customers for that book in its original form.

Then there is the issue of digitization. Google will eventually run out of libraries to court, and with its insatiable need for content will be forced to look elsewhere for material. Outside of libraries, booksellers are one of the few repositories of untapped information. An enormous amount of unique content is stored within the bookselling trade. From books long out of print to ephemeral items that represent core samples of our material culture, here is a treasure trove of content awaiting the light of digitization. The door might not be open for long, but if entered correctly it might become a new source of revenue for the bookseller.

Then we have the new world of social networking for book lovers. The three major players in this field are LibraryThing, Shelfari and Goodreads. Each brings readers and book people the opportunity to visualize their library and meet others with like interests. Though the act of reading is a solitary activity and doesn’t necessarily lend itself to the socializing and networking elements of this technology, there still remains tremendous potential here. For example, the library of Thomas Jefferson was recently added to LibraryThing, and one can imagine all the great collections both public and private that could benefit from being exposed to this new format.

In a trade that remained fairly stable for hundreds of years, we are now faced with change as the constant. How booksellers adapt to this new reality and these new technologies will ultimately determine their success.

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NEXT ISSUE

Profiles of winners from the 2007 Alcuin Society book design awards; diary of a week-long printing course at Barbarian Press; and the last in our first series of original prints.