

E-Books vs. Dead-Tree Books: An Alternate Dialogue

BY BUD WEBSTER AND JERRY POURNELLE

Bud: There are those who eagerly promote the demise of paper books and the ascendancy of electronic text, and those who vehemently decry the idea and cling doggedly to their bound codices, no matter how cool electronic books might, in fact, turn out to be. Okay, that being said, where's the middle ground, and how does this debate illustrate the current state of flux in the publishing industry? For the past ten years and more the industry has shown few signs of stabilizing. Technology changes aren't likely to make it more stable.

Does the electronic format have to drive out paper, or is there room for both to co-exist peacefully? And what does it mean, not only to writers, but those of us for whom Real Books are a be-all and end-all?

I'll begin by coming to what is, for me, one of the most important advantage the printed book has over its electronic version: I find books beautiful. I find them sensually rewarding, corporeally gratifying, and visually satisfying. The feel of a fine binding against the palm, warming to the touch of the hand as you explore its texture, whether cloth or calfskin; the impact of an intriguing jacket, protected (in my house, anyway) by Mylar, the light from an over-the-shoulder lamp reflecting off it against the wall and driving the cats mad; the aroma of old paper, sometimes comforting, sometimes alarming (depending on the degree of acidification); the rustle of the pages against your thumb as you riffle them to find the paragraph at which you left off last; the way they line up on the shelves alphabetically, chaos necessarily resulting from order as tall books and thick books alternate in wonderful randomness with short ones and fat ones.

The flashes of wild color, typography and images that whip across your senses as your eye skips from shelf to shelf, recalling the first time you read that one, the friend, now gone, who gave you this one, the roller coaster ride of nostalgia stopped dead in its tracks by the realization that the other one over there you haven't read yet—all these things are as important to me as the actual content of the book.

The foregoing is a little over the top, I'll grant you, but I am first and foremost an unrepentant bibliophile. Don't get me wrong, the content is the primary attraction of practically any book, physical or virtual, but I grew up loving the artifact as well as the information it contains. In Junior High School (what they call Middle School now, reluctant as they are to use potentially negative qualifiers), I remember trading a stack of comics for an old edition of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Not the first, of course, but definitely 19th Century, with his signature stamped in gold on the cover. The binding was shot, the spine broken, and the front board dangling from the hinge by only a few threads, but it was old. I loved that book until it finally fell apart after a move.

I'll begin by coming to what is, for me, one of the most important advantage the printed book has over its electronic version: I find books beautiful.

— B.W.

(The comics I traded away were infinitely more valuable than the book was, even if it had been in fine condition, but I didn't care—I wanted the book.)

There are other, minor things as well, of course. You can't use an e-reader as a coaster, or to prop up the short leg of a wobbly table, and although I suspect that the injury done to your physical body were you to drop one in the bath would be minimal, I wonder how well the reader itself would hold up. If I drop a paperback, I'm out \$7-8 max, assuming I didn't get it in trade or half-price at a used bookshop. How much do I stand to lose if I'm clumsy with an e-book? I'm told that the readers can hold hundreds of e-books. I can understand losing one's li-

brary in a flood or hurricane, but by dropping it in the tub?

For the moment, I'm going to pass over what is probably the most esoteric aspect of bibliophilia, the lore of the First Edition with its correlative arcana of edition points, variant issues and errata, since it's a position difficult to explain or justify to those for whom it has no attraction. But think about this: if your book is published electronically, what happens at a bookstore signing? Sure, they'll truck in your older novels and collections (assuming they're still in print), and the fans will bring in tattered paperbacks and the occasional well-preserved hardcover, but what about your newest one? Is there a way to personalize an electronic copy of a book that really only exists in phosphors? Will the electronic signature plate used by delivery services and cash registers become commonplace at in-store promotions? And if so, what kind of memento of the experience will that be for someone who may have driven from an hour or more away and stood in line patiently for longer than that? Or will they bring in CD-ROMs they've burned themselves to be signed?

That's enough in the way of questions for now, Jerry. None of them are rhetorical, by the way; I really am curious.

Jerry: We have no quarrel regarding the worth of hardbound books, but I don't know too many people who think hardbound books will or should be replaced by electronic books. Hardbound books still support a large economy. Publishers, distributors, and authors all make money. Oddly enough, enormous best sellers such as the Harry Potter books make a much smaller profit per unit than the majority of books, because of the huge discounts that best sellers get now; but even so, books are profitable, and book tours to promote books are still arranged.

There's also some profit in quality paperbacks. Less than with hardbound, but that is still a viable business.

It's different with paperback mass market books. Authors still do reasonably

well from paperbacks, but neither publishers nor book sellers do. Moreover, there are few promotional tours arranged for paperbacks. When an author signs a paperback book, it is likely to be either at a convention, or as another book to be signed when promoting a new hardbound. Thus the intriguing question of what an author would sign when promoting an electronic book isn't likely to arise for a while.

The case for electronic books replacing paperbacks and other mass markets rests largely on two pillars: economics and convenience. On the convenience side: when going on vacation it's difficult to carry twenty books to read, whether hardbound or paperback. On the other hand, carrying twenty or even two hundred different ebooks is trivial. The economic case is similar: at the moment, publishers like to charge exorbitant prices for electronic books, but that practice is changing, due to competition from more savvy publishers, but also from pirate editions. Readers who would hesitate to steal a copy of a book and deprive the author of his due have fewer scruples about "ripping off a bloodsucking publisher" who wants twenty bucks for an ebook.

Electronic books now compete with paperbacks on price; and it's easy enough to make package deals. Buy one of the older Harry Potter books and get its predecessor as part of the package. Get three Kinsey Millhouse novels for the price of one. Buy this space opera, and receive a free copy of the first book in a new series. It costs nothing to add works to the package, and we can expect to see such deals pretty soon.

Of course, it all hinges on what you're reading it on. CDROM books didn't catch on even after CDROM drives fell in price from many hundreds of dollars to practically nothing because not many people want to read a book on a laptop or desktop screen. I have read perhaps a dozen books that way, all older works I didn't have—one was Samuel Butler's *Way of All Flesh*, and another was his disquisition on identifying Homer. This was before Amazon; if I'd had a simple way of quickly acquiring either or both of those, I'd probably have bought them as books—they couldn't cost much, being public domain. As it was they were free, but inconvenient to read.

But those days are gone. People do read books on laptops, and on Palm Pilots and iPAQ pocket computers, and some

like to do that; but it's not very convenient. People read books on TabletPC systems, and that is convenient; I not only read works on my TabletPC, but often edit my own works on the Tablet. Reading on a TabletPC is comparable to reading a hardbound book; they weigh about the same, and it's about as easy to turn pages or browse with the one as the other.

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But the TabletPC won't make major inroads into paperback book industry. It's too expensive, and there's no reason for everyone to carry one. It's also not the end of the technology trend. I have seen pocket computers: full Windows XP and Vista computers, able to do everything a laptop or desktop can do, about the size of an open paperback book. They can be read in the dark, or in bright daylight; and it's easy to carry several hundred novels plus a bunch of reference works on the machine, and switch from one to the other as conveniently as you might fish into your brief case to change reading matter.

That still won't do it because not everyone wants to carry a pocket computer: but nearly everyone carries a pocket telephone. Present telephones aren't very good for reading books, but the next generation will be. The iPhone is getting lots of publicity. It's not very good as a telephone, but it has shown the way.

We will soon have telephones that are also pocket computers. I have seen the prototypes. It's a telephone (with Bluetooth or wired headset); text message (BlackBerry substitute); camera; GPS device; travel direction device; Yellow Pages; notebook; voice notebook; Personal Data Assistant; calendar; and probably some other functions I haven't thought of. Most people carry cell phones now; more and more carry several of these. I don't think it will be long before nearly everyone has the device I describe. I suspect that fashions

will change, so that instead of hanging devices on your belt or stuffing them into pockets, both men and women will carry some kind of personal handbag to carry one's personal computer.

Your telephone will also hold 1,000 books you don't have to carry separately, and they will be as easily read on your telephone as they would be on paper.

When that happens, the paperback book will be as good as dead.

As to the other points: people don't usually carry their pocket telephones into the bathtub. Whether the convenience of reading in the bathtub will outweigh the inconvenience of carrying physical books that are already present in your telephone may be debated, but I suspect there is only one outcome to that. Electronic books have the possibility of backup copies; that's rather harder to do with paperbacks.

Bud: To hear a lot of people talk, the mass market paperback is already dead, what with distributor-dictated inventories and a returns policy that should have been abandoned decades ago, but let's let that lie for the moment. You can, of course, back up a copy of a paper book: buy another one. However, that's more glib than on-point, so let it pass.

Let me ask you this, though, since you bring up books-on-phones. How easy is it to read on a phone screen? How easy for someone who has to wear glasses? Who suffers from presbyopia? How visible is that screen in sunlight? How much text can a phone screen hold as opposed to the standard 4.5x7" mass-market paperback, or the increasingly common 5.25x8" trade paper? Does the convenience of having your library with you at all times outweigh the squints, and the inevitable headaches? I suspect that to many, at least those young or fortunate enough to not suffer from optical challenges, it will be, but I have to wear reading glasses as it is, and I'm fairly sure that reading on a small screen isn't going to make the experience enjoyable.

The tiffle-taffle about print books being replaced by electronic is primarily in the country of Blogistan. I see people posting gleefully that within five years (or two, or ten, depending on how their dice-throw came up, one supposes), books will have gone the way of the vinyl LP and everything will have magically become available only in easy-to-download MP3/PDF form.

That there is an enormous industry devoted to printing and binding paper books with at least a century's momentum behind it seems to have slipped beneath their radar; these are the same sorts who, twenty years ago, were cheerfully predicting the advent of the "paperless office." Perhaps not the same people, but certainly the same Voice. I haven't noticed fewer paper shredders being marketed, or seen fewer copiers and laser printers in the offices I visit.

I have to bring something else up as well, and that's competing electronic formats. If I accumulate a library of 1,000 books to be read on the Mattel "My Li'l E-Reader" at a cost of a few dollars apiece, what happens when that breaks down and I have to switch to something else, like the Nerdstrom M-850, which has a proprietary software that won't run the Mattel books? I'm making those up because I don't follow the e-reader technology the way you do, but as the joke from "Men In Black" goes: "Looks like I'll have to buy the White Album all over again." How many times do I have to buy the same book just because the gizmos don't speak the same language?

I find it interesting that you cite piracy as a competitive factor in changing the price and availability of e-books, not to mention the perception of the publishers as "bloodsuckers," since essentially the same sort of thing happened in the post-war years with sound recordings. When that industry switched to the long-playing record, the Big Boys concentrated almost solely on contemporary material, ignoring the market for their earlier recordings. A number of pirate labels sprang up to reissue classic jazz on 10" LPs, one of them rather proudly dubbing itself "Jolly Roger." The majors did, eventually, bring their back catalogs into press, but not until after the pirates screwed themselves by bootlegging recordings that were then currently available.

Whether or not that will happen with books, I just don't know. Certainly the Internet is crammed with pirate sites, both domestic and foreign, offering scans (often imperfectly OCR'ed) of a writer's entire oeuvre, and eBay abounds with sellers flogging CD-ROMs filed with hundreds of stories and novels. Many of those are, in fact, in the public domain, but most of it is protected.

Which rather handily brings us back

to our principal subject: the relative merits of print over phosphor. When one of these modern-day Bluebeards wants to upload last year's Hugo-winning novel, he has two options (well, three, but the third one—not to do it at all—isn't one he's likely to consider): he can either get a copy of the book and laboriously scan each page, perform the ritual OCR, and then convert it to his preferred format, or he can download a legitimate copy, hack the protection (if there is any), fiddle with the margins a bit and change the font, then offer that one to his eager customers/patrons. So, with a website waiting to be filled with literary "warez," which is he most likely to do? I know what I would do, but I'm lazy as hell.

I'm making those up because I don't follow the e-reader technology the way you do, but as the joke from "Men In Black" goes: "Looks like I'll have to buy the White Album all over again."

— B.W.

Set piracy aside for now, though. You mention the possibility of bundling older titles on CD-ROM with current print books as come-ons. I have to ask, if only for the sake of form, if it doesn't make more sense for the publisher to not do this, but rather (as has been done in the past) simply to re-package the older titles, perhaps at a discount, and offer them? Series books were done like this for decades, with the newest Tom Swift or Nancy Drew being accompanied on the bookstore shelves by the previous volumes in new printings. Why would they offer them for free when they can still make money on them?

Well, for one thing, we have to decipher what the sales numbers tell us. We all know that there are more books being sold every year, but the question is how those sales are distributed: is it more copies of fewer titles, fewer copies of more titles, or (as is devoutly to be wish'd) more copies of even more titles? If the last, we're good to go and all this is moot; more

people are buying more books, so all we have to do is keep writing them.

But the first two choices—either of which is far more likely than the last one—give your prediction a lot more weight. The publishers have to create a broader market somehow, and traditionally one of the most effective means of stimulating sales is to give stuff away. Loss-leaders, they used to be called, because although the producer might lose a little money on the freebie, he stands to make much more from the consumer because a) he's getting something for nothing, and is therefore more likely to spend the bucks he just "saved," and b) it promotes good will, which will keep the consumer returning to the producer, even when there's nothing free to be had.

Thus we come to a business model you certainly can discuss far more intelligently than I, so I'll toss the ball back to you by invoking the name of what is perhaps, for better or worse, a unique example in the publishing industry: Baen Books.

Jerry: You still do not understand. What people now carry as cell phones are not satisfactory for reading books; but the iPhone comes close, and what will come after the iPhone will be about the size of a paperback book. I have seen such devices, and they are as easy to read as any paperback. If you squint reading a paperback you probably will squint reading on the new screens - but maybe not, because the electronic medium will let you adjust the print size. Ginny Heinlein couldn't read books at all towards the end of her life, but she was able to read email letters on screen.

You do ask a number of unrelated questions, leaving me to organize the responses. I'll try.

I don't claim to be a marketing expert, and your guesses about marketing packages are likely to be as good as mine. I'm not a publisher. At the moment publishers are experimenting, and they make errors. There are multiple formats—just as there were multiple VCR formats. Note that the VCR itself has vanished, and there's competition between Blu-Ray and HD DVD; but the movie rental business hasn't vanished. There will be a single ebook format as soon as someone wins the competition for what device people will carry. It may be iPhone compatible, or something else. We'll just have to wait and see.

Baen makes small profits on paperback books, but fairly good profits on hardbound. I have a number of books with Baen, and I have been convinced that the existence of free electronic copies of books doesn't hurt the sales of paper copies—or hasn't so far. We can all hope that will continue, but it's not entirely clear. When Jim Baen was alive he built an on-line community of Baen Books readers, starting with the BYTE INFORMATION EXCHANGE (BIX) and continuing through Genie and then to the web. His successors have continued this practice. As a result, Baen buyers tend to scorn pirate editions.

Regarding piracy: this is a key question, but it affects the entire entertainment industry, not just book publishing. The mechanics of piracy get easier every month. There were pirated copies of the latest Harry Potter novel available before the official release date. Automatic scanning devices are quite accurate now and can only get better. They're relatively costly, but pirates seem to have access to them.

Pirates operate from various motives. Some use the lure of free books (or videos, or songs) to draw people to their web sites and collect money from advertisements; in other words, they use stolen material to draw a crowd, then sell their wares. Others have no profit motive at all. Some are genuine fans who want other people to read works they enjoyed. Some do it to impress their friends: I had Harry Potter on line before you could buy it in a book store! Another enthusiast has translated the last Harry Potter into French, and has it on line months before the official French translation will be published!

It hardly matters why they do it: we know there are people who will offer pirated works for free, and it's unlikely there will be fewer of them as it gets easier to scan in paperback works. Refusing to allow works to be offered in electronic form will not stop electronic piracy.

Baen books has shown that it's still possible to sell books in both electronic and printed form. I recently got significant advances for electronic rights to many of my older works. Clearly Baen thinks they can continue to make profits in this medium.

Other publishers haven't had such good experience, but many of them have

not tried very hard. Some tried to sell eBooks for almost as much as they would charge for hardbounds, then wondered why they had few sales. The result was predictable. That hardly means that publishers won't wise up, and many of them have already done so. Everyone is watching Baen.

The mass market book industry is in transition. One result of this is the author's death spiral. It works this way: a publisher ships 50,000 copies of a paperback book. It doesn't make any best seller list, and the sell through is 50% (which seems to be average). When the next book comes in, the publisher must decide whether this author is worth supporting at the previous level. All too often, the answer is no; so the press run for the next book is, say, 30,000 copies. That also gets a 50% sell through (again about average). The next press run is 20,000, and then it's decided that author isn't profitable. The author can decide to write under a pen name and try to start over, or get a day job.

Everyone is watching Baen.

— J.P.

Whether electronic book publishing will change this is an open question. It may help. It certainly offers authors an alternative way of publishing.

I don't think any of us has a working crystal ball. I do think there are vast changes coming. TV didn't entirely replace radio, but it did finish off the market for radio soap opera scripts. TV also ended the adventure magazine market. Stuart Cloete (Rags of Glory) told me he got \$4200 in 1948 for a short story in the Saturday Evening Post; he lived off that for the year it took to write his first novel. Breaking into the Post was the goal of most fiction writers, until the Post—founded by Benjamin Franklin!—essentially vanished. I have no doubt that we'll have equally significant changes in publishing as technology advances.

One thing I am sure of. Story tellers will always find a way to make a living. We always have.

Bud: From your mouth to the ears of the gods, boychik. As a writer who practices

only the short form, I've watched in dismay as market after market has fallen by the way, to be replaced - if that's the right word - by a plethora of on-line 'zines that seem to be run by fifteen year-olds in Mom and Dad's basement. Not all of them, certainly (I'm poetry editor and columnist for one of the better ones), but an infinite amount of web space, cheap bandwidth and easy software can make even the most amateur efforts look like the Big Boys - until you start checking the content. Haven't these people heard of spell-checkers? At the very least?

Jim Baen managed to work his magic with the cooperation of most, if not all, of his authors, and by relying on his zealous and passionate on-line fan base, but mostly because he himself was convinced that it would succeed. Now that he's gone, it remains to be seen if the momentum he built will continue, or if literary entropy will take over. I respect his success, even if I don't care for some of what he published. I could, however, have said exactly the same thing about DAW books in the late 1970s, so *plus ça change*, if you will.

I agree about the silliness of charging high prices for e-books, and not just because people won't pay \$29.95 for something they know damn well cost the publisher a penny apiece in bulk (for the physical disk, not the content). It has a bad tendency to cause resentment in your customer base, and when that happens, they're far more likely to buy used paperbacks or e-texts from some pirate site than from traditional retailers—and that goes for the publisher's entire catalog.

I wish I could deny the existence of the death-spiral, but I've seen it all too many times, even with people I know to be fine and reliable writers. And it does force a spiraling writer to consider alternate formats for his next book, assuming his "real" publisher won't take it. Case in point: Lawrence Watt-Evans and his Ethshar series. Tor, his current publisher, wasn't interested in the next book because sales figures for that series were lower than other titles he was doing for them. So, in the tradition of story-tellers down through the ages, he took the then-new Ethshar novel to the web, posting each chapter only after he'd received a set amount of money in the form of donations. Those who had ponied up a certain amount were promised a pa-

per copy of the book, I'll gleefully point out, and the only two readers who turned it down were one who preferred the e-version and another who didn't want to pay the postage to Australia.

Now, he didn't make nearly what he would have even from an advance from his publisher, but he proved that there were plenty of Ethshar/Watt-Evans fans out there who would, in fact, pay for the book in electronic form. The book is currently available as a trade paperback from Wildside, as well as a limited edition hardcover, and will be issued by Cosmos in mass-market format soon as well.

The on-line magazine I'm involved with, HELIXSF.COM, does much the same, except that we don't cliff-hang the reader in order to get their pocket change. It's all there to be read and enjoyed, but we make it clear that unless donations come in, two things will happen: first, the writers won't get paid, and second, we won't be able to continue publishing. Thus far we've been at least as successful as any semi-prozine out there, and none of the story tellers have been paid less than three figures.

What I draw from all this is that books, both e- and tree, can co-exist, and that, whether or not I like it, e-books will become more and more common as the hardware/software evolves. I hope that publishers don't lose their enthusiasm for the physical book, because I cherish them beyond their content, but I'm only too well aware that I'm hardly their target demographic.

I'll pose one more question, then leave it to you to sum up. I know you see the e-reader, in whatever form it may take, becoming more and more available and usable in the next decade. What do you see for the bound codex in, say, 50 years? 100? Will they still grace the shelves of those of us dyed-in-the-wool bibliophiles, or will even that word change its definition?

Jerry: First, short fiction markets: I used to edit anthologies. John Carr and I turned out two or three a year, often buying first stories from new writers. There was enough money in the anthologies that John Carr could, and did, work with writers, doing the kind of editorial consultations that now come only with big novels and large advances.

That market is gone. There are anthologies, but they don't make enough to allow someone like Carr to make a living grooming writers. I can't afford to do anthologies for what they bring now. And yet: we are even now making deals for electronic rights to some of my older anthologies (*War World* almost certainly and possibly *There Will Be War*). They won't be reprinted on paper, but they'll still be available, and they'll still make money for the contributors.

It may be that ebooks will revitalize that market.

What do you see for the bound codex in, say, 50 years? 100?

— B.W.

We can't predict the future, but we can invent it. Books are convenient and have been around a long time; there's no reason to suppose they will vanish in the next fifty years. However, there's good reason to believe the book business will change a lot.

There are many kinds of books. Some have only information and have to be revised often. That's an obvious candidate for an electronic book. Some are an aesthetic experience in themselves: Easton Press makes a lot of money with those, and so long as people will pay for leather and paper and color illustrations, they'll continue to do so.

The real question is mass market books. That especially includes magazines. Magazines have photographs and illustrations and color. They are expensive to print and are usually thrown away after being read. At one time BYTE magazine was enormous, so thick that it could only be printed by the company that printed the Sears catalogue. It was tremendously profitable, and could afford to pay what in retrospect were wonderfully high editorial rates and generous expense accounts. Now it's gone. So are a lot of other magazines.

The instant that most people carry something like an improved iPhone, nearly all the rest of the magazines are doomed. A few specialty magazines may remain, but the notion of printing something both elaborate and ephemeral on dead trees is already bizarre.

But if printed magazines vanish, there will be competition among electronic magazines; that will almost certainly help the short story market. Of course the short story may have changed a lot. Writers may have to find ways to illustrate their stories, add maps, perhaps add photographs to set the scenes. There may be photos and even short action clips of actors portraying characters. We can look forward to a number of experiments as electronic magazines try to attract readers.

That's nearly inevitable once most people are carrying gadgets capable of displaying text, color pictures, action shots, video, and sound.

And that's our opportunity. Some of us will take advantage of it.

Mr. Heinlein told me two things about making a living as a writer. The first was, "It's a good racket. We work inside, sitting down, and there's no heavy lifting." The second was, "Never forget we're professional gamblers. Get your house and car paid for free and clear the first time you make a big sale."

I doubt that the new technology will change that much. ■

