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The Medium is Still the Message

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Who'd have thought that the physical book might turn out to be way more flexible and subversive than a born-digital copy? – www.epistemographer.com Blog (Josh Greenberg)

About nine months ago, I got a serious reality check. I was at a local art-fundraiser and ended up chatting with a young guy. He was a software engineer, so our conversation accelerated pretty quickly. For the past few years when I mention to strangers at such functions that I work with books, I am often asked about e-book readers. The question usually resembles: “So, what do you think of e-books ... (pause) ... this Kindle thing?”

I don't remember this conversation and deliberation about iPods. Maybe I missed it, but I don't remember debates about whether or not putting all your CD's on something you could carry in your pocket was a good idea or not. But e-books are great cocktail party conversation for me and in these typical exchanges I tend to take a standard three pronged approach.

First I dazzle them with a heavy rhetorical question and, next, follow up with some hard hitting business data:

- e-books are good for some content (large print, professional, academic – where you need specific access to specialized information) but at what point does it no longer need to be called a “book” as long as it is the right digital information?
- We sell e-books at BiblioLife so we have no reason to root against them. They currently comprise far less than 1% of our sales.

Then, third, I wrap that in a challenge-of-sorts to do some “deep thinking” about the role of books in culture. Of course, they are looking at me the whole time thinking that I have to view the world through “print book” glasses in order to keep our largely print-on-demand business

healthy (and they are right!). But I do currently believe most of this as personal philosophy also. Here is a paraphrased version:

Books may have a ritualistic role that is larger than a desire for controlled market efficiencies or effecting / predicting the future of academic knowledge dissemination. Information is and will continue to go digital (and will drive toward free access) but the classic form of the book may or may not need to be a part of that process For some, the way paper books package and exchange information may continue to contribute to a sense of grounding for a “non-digital” person. Ask someone in 50 years how important that will be....

And so on. Typically, the person gets an informative answer to their question, I get to preach a little, and it is a great accidental conversation on both sides (or seems to be). But this software engineer, this kid, shot me down cold. It seemed like slow motion as he fired off: “Nostalgia Dies Faster than People Think” (added capitalization for effect).

This conversation rattled my cage in two ways:

- 1) Not long ago, I was the brash kid making pronouncements like this. Now I was a middle-aged guy bidding on silent auction items.
- 2) He equated paper books to nostalgia, an idea that had not occurred to me, but he was dead right.

In hindsight, my only regret is that I did not question whether he had a personal relationship with books. I guess I just assumed he did, but I am not sure. It would have been good to have him talk about some important moments in his life where physical books were involved in some serendipitous way. I could certainly have shared some of mine. So that is a missing data-point in the story, and one that has taken on more mean-

ing in reflection. I am sure he will have a similar moment when he is nearing 40. I try to imagine something important he is doing today that will seem so trivial and silly in 15 years. For all my dramatic interpretation, it was a really enjoyable talk.

It's the marketing, stupid

The real genius of the Kindle is that it was the first high-technology device designed for Baby Boomers. Amazon started their assault on the e-book world with 60 + MM installed and passionate customers - most of whom read books. A nice head start for sure. The market for the Kindle is 40+ affluent readers - a demographic they were poised to dominate. In executing so well, they have made the Kindle the de facto frame into which all e-book conversations now fit.

When I ask people on airplanes (which is pretty often) whether they like their Kindle, the responses are almost uniform and along some pretty consistent thematic lines:

- 1) 20-somethings who say, "My parents gave me this thing for Christmas but I don't really get it."
- 2) 40-something bibliophiles who read so much a Kindle is the only thing that can keep up with them.
- 3) 50-something, + affluent folk (I have a lot of miles and get upgraded domestic sometimes...) who would stab you in the hand with a fork if you tried to take their Kindle from them. It is an almost super-human passion, and emotes equally from both men and women.

The bonding affection must come from the genius of the device and how it works. Despite criticisms of the "clunkiness" of the Kindle when it was first released, the thing Amazon always prioritizes is how to separate you from your money. The Kindle nailed this right out of the gates. Be under no illusion how difficult it was to make it that easy. I worked at Amazon for two years and I know how hard they work.

Ten years of customer devotion and behavioral training also helped. We all give Amazon mon-

ey as second nature behavior on the Internet. To boil it down, you ordered a Kindle and:

- 1) Took it out of the box
- 2) Bought books
- 3) Flipped pages / increased font size

All of these could be accomplished by anyone in minutes without asking their kids or the IT guy at the office a single damn question. Genius.

All the talk about someone catching Amazon in what I would call the "true e-book market" is nothing but chatter. Amazon has the market and they will keep the market. By this definition, a "true e-book" is book content sold to individual readers who want to read it on a screen rather than in print - but where the experience is not diminished either way. Mostly words on "digital pages" doing their damndest to look like a book. There will always be a nice niche market for this. And for the foreseeable future it is my opinion that Amazon will dominate it.

"It doesn't matter how good or bad the product is, the fact is that people don't read anymore. Forty percent of the people in the U.S. read one book or less last year. The whole conception is flawed at the top because people don't read anymore." - Steve Jobs in 2008

I find it important to make this distinction regarding "true e-books" because there is a growing number of "traditional publishers" that are beginning to resemble indie production companies. Whether these publishers can be successful in this transition remains to be seen, but we can probably all agree that a "Vook" (Internet Based Video + eBooks = VOOK - get it?) is something other than "traditional" publishing. The question still to be answered is whether the skills and management structures at traditional publishers are capable of competing with indie digital and development shops that are numerous and operate on very low overhead structures.

Another category of "book publisher" includes those that create artifacts of value and under-

stand the value of brand. Pay a visit to the Taschen or Phaidon booths at the Frankfurt Book Fair and you quickly realize the concept of e-books in their world is irrelevant (www.taschen.com / www.phaidon.com). The books are art themselves. Others as well see the art of bookmaking as one that will survive the industry of books. And it flourishes today.

If we apply some historical perspective, I suppose all books are headed this direction in one sense or another. Books are nostalgic. More and more they will become artifacts. In 2007, the internationally renowned rock band Radiohead self-published their new album. They let fans pay what they wanted (or nothing at all) for the entire album, which could be downloaded easily from their website. Fans also had an option to pre-order a special box-set CD / book. This option had the fans paying the band directly (meaning they had to sell far less albums to make the same amount of money). The offer included artwork, a vinyl album and other extras; the price tag: about \$70. Selling a \$70 artifact and giving the "same" content away for free worked because Radiohead understood that it was the meaning of the art and the relationship with their fans that mattered most and not the perceived efficiencies of the distribution channel. Other bands, authors, etc., have done similar direct releases and have had much artistic and financial success.

So, where is the book failing and where are its opportunities? Forgetting the niche market of voracious readers, will people really "read books" (as we have traditionally defined them) when live events, movies, music, games (and an increasingly uber-creative mash-ups of all these) are one hand swipe away on their iPad? Some will if they are given a compelling reason to do so, but they are likely the same folks for whom reading will remain important. And they will spend money on nostalgia and the sense of security that comes with a real book. Will all people who think like that eventually die? Probably, but I am not sure when.

Call it Luddite, call it nostalgic; just be sure to call it subversive. The act of unplugging to again realize the magic way books enter and leave our physical lives is important. My time in self-

publishing (and some of the authors and publishers I have met) also suggested to me that the process of creating a book (a real book) based on your experiences is one of the most cathartic things a person can do. It should continue to be an important outlet for artists and our ever-increasing digital psyches.

The market for physical books will decline over the coming decades. That is okay. We can let books do what they do well and go into history with some grace. But let's not behave as if they are a historical shackle from which we are being emancipated.