

UP 2.0

Much attention has been focused recently on the transition from the printed to the digital book, and some of these reactions – and invariably the ones featured in the media -- have been extreme, ranging, at one end, from teeth-gnashing proclamations of the end of culture, if not civilization, as we know it and, at the other end, to euphoria verging on Rapture (*with a capital “R”*). To the true believers, the digital book, and the seamless connectivity it seems to make possible or inevitable between everything ever written and everybody still reading, appears either as the final dagger in the heart of the literary culture or as the realization of the globalizing, utopian visions of writers such as Teilhard de Chardin, Ted Nelson, and Marshall McLuhan. Both extremes, but of course with opposite affect and attitude, seem to take for granted the imminent precipitous decline, if not outright demise, of the printed book, notwithstanding that such books have held sway for 4 ½ centuries, during which they have been integral to and instrumental within immense religious, political, social, intellectual, scientific and cultural reformations, revolutions, and upheavals.

Publishers are portrayed as particular heroes or villains in these contemporary polar narratives, given pride (or shame) of place because they appear to be at the controls of this world-historic tipping point: though many social, cultural and technological developments provide the context and impetus for this momentous publishing shift, publishers are the grunts on the front lines, the folks who actually push the buttons and determine whether, when and how to transfer the production and dissemination of books from print to digital. University presses are particularly visible and particularly vexed at this juncture, not least because conflicting mandates imposed on those presses keeps one foot planted on each side of the digital divide and the press as a whole painfully, even impossibly stretched as the chasm widens.

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Phil Pochoda
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Part, but only part, of the additional pressure on university presses stems from their extreme financial fragility, and the continuing necessity to raise a significant percentage of the cost of operation through sales revenue. The substantial and well-publicized declines in revenues from sales of print books -- due primarily to library budgets being hijacked by exorbitantly priced journals and to sales to students for course use being overwhelmed by organized streams of used books -- adds to university pressure on presses to exploit the economies allegedly residing in the digital realm. Almost all university presses receive a significant subvention from their parent university and those universities themselves have a significant stake in the digital transition since important university venues, such as libraries, IT divisions, communication studies departments, schools of information and/or library science, have both expertise in and convictions about the digital development of scholarly communication. While commercial presses can make decisions about investment in digital processes according to strictly business principles, university presses must accommodate, and often themselves share, strong university principles about the value of digitized scholarly communication that do not derive from considerations of cost or revenue -- in particular, the fundamental conviction that faculty research results should always be made available as widely and freely as possible.

Moreover, university presses are in the unusual position that their authors and their readers are interchangeable and share a professional community, a community that has strong opinions about the print/digital transition, and, in the aggregate, exerts considerable influence on university policy. Though the press may have strong financial, logistical, and institutional incentives to go digital, if a significant segment of their academic authors/readers insist on printed books while shunning the digital product, the transition is bound to be troubled.

Adding to the quandary in which university presses find themselves while navigating the storms of the digital transition (elevated to a near-perfect storm by the simultaneous recession) is that few of them have pools of available capital to fund required new

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investments in digital publishing platforms and cyberinfrastructure or to replace falling print revenues even temporarily while awaiting the predicted, but uncertain revenues deriving from sales of digital versions of texts. Faced with the collapse of their traditional business model, the decline of university subventions, the increasing unwillingness and inability of universities to tolerate press debt, the problem for many university presses is not just how to manage the digital transition, but how to survive it.

Physical books may seem to be the immediate casualty of the movement towards e-books, but they appear, both empirically and in theory, to have considerable staying power, doubtlessly owing to the impressive range of functions they serve, the symbolism that they embody, and the fierce loyalty they have engendered, not least among university press constituencies in the humanities. Physical books transmit manifold latent as well as manifest signals about social position, cultural values, intellectual achievement and aspiration, professional identity and status, aesthetic convictions, and personal accomplishment. Particularly for academics in the humanities and the social sciences who constitute the largest segment of the authors and readers of university press monographs, books have been an axiomatic part of the physical environment (weighty in both the physical as well as metaphorical sense) as well as a component of personal identity: I am what – and how – I read. The first printed books were explicitly theological vehicles, but the printed book itself, apart from its content, became, and, in many circles still remains, the totem of a cultural creed, an icon and talisman as well as an elegant and economical content provider. When the University of Michigan Press recently announced an administrative transition (to the library of the University) as well as a much increased emphasis on digital books, though the reactions to the latter were generally favorable, there was a vocal segment of negative academic responses that essentially accused the press of heresy, of sacrilegious behavior.

The multiple roots of the printed book, the diverse networks that it sustains and is sustained by, help account for its longevity and, in particular, the loyalty and the passion

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that it continues to generate. Whereas for other observers and commentators such as persisting affiliations may well be a mere curiosity, or a subject for analysis or research, for university presses now at the apex of the digital tipping point, they can determine success or cataclysmic failure in the short-run -- and the short-run might well be the end of the line for many struggling presses.

Academics, particularly humanists, are at existential and ontological levels, people of the book, specifically, the printed book. Historians, literary scholars and critics, the serried ranks of academic humanists, are born and bred of the physical book, often do their research largely through and about books, and generally present the results of their research in carefully formulated and formatted books. They teach about and from books; they encase themselves within walled environments of books both in their professional settings as well as in their domicile; books tend to be strewn haphazardly but consistently on any available horizontal surface throughout their domain, resembling the way that dogs mark their terrain with urine.

The circulation of physical books helps define the professional and personal, formal and informal, networks of many academics; books are routinely presented to friends and family, deans and colleagues, for reasons that are both social and professional; they are among the primary signifiers of identity both of the benefactor and the recipient. The well-produced book has acted as a source of pride and the physical marker of the successful completion of a humanities research project years, even decades, in process; they are the primary basis for professional promotion, reward and status. Books have proven remarkably effective as a venue for presenting extended analysis and argument in the humanities, and for encouraging communication with professional peers and other readers. The reasons for this are numerous, but perhaps most succinctly: the printed book is **bounded** (literally bound, and occupying a distinct space); generally **identifiably authored** (though the author may be multiple or anonymous); and **stable** (though it can be damaged or deteriorate physically, a book can persist in physical form, with unchanged content, over the space of not just decades but many centuries).

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Since the value of the printed book to many academic authors and readers is powerful and overdetermined, the replacement of a book by its digital counterpart bears implications and consequences that are not all straightforward, and have an impact upon many overlapping but distinct levels of function and significance, some of them deeply buried and difficult to excavate. There is no way that its digital replacement can fit seamlessly into all of the networks and spaces evacuated by the print book. The medium may be the message, but the more precise rendition of McLuhan's mantra is that the medium of the printed book conveys many explicit and implicit messages, some of which can easily be provided by digital books, and some in far superior fashion, but others will get short-changed and some lost in the shuffle.

On the time scale of the 450 year history of the printed book, the digital book is not just a work in progress, it is still in its embryonic stage. On screen at present it most commonly emulates the visual qualities of the printed book (type faces, page layout, page sequencing), a continuity that is influenced in academic venues by the ongoing commitment to valuing books as aesthetic objects as well as cognitive vessels, featuring a limited range of evolved forms and formats, ornamentation and design that are considered integral to dignified scholarly communication. Tim O'Reilly and others have given considerable thought to how the migration of books to the web – with its unprecedented opportunities for instantaneous linkages, visual pyrotechnics, and limitless interactivity – will and should transform writing as well as visual formats and functionality. But the situation at present is analogous to the one McLuhan ascribes to the period just after Gutenberg's invention of the movable type printing press when, as if to certify their legitimacy and pedigree, the incunabula strove mainly to provide an accurate facsimile of the hand-written scribal manuscripts, primarily of sacred texts, that they replaced. Only gradually, over the course of centuries (as Elizabeth Eisenstein, Robert Darnton, Anthony Grafton, Roger Chartier and others have taught us) did the printed book and the printed page discover their emergent qualities and fully exploit the

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transformed and enhanced opportunities for design, content and distribution unavailable to hand-written manuscripts. And the same kind of punctuated evolution, will likely characterize the development of the ebooks of the future.

The fundamental characteristics of digital files is that as information bearing entities they are **unstable** (the reasons that libraries still buy \$100 million of microfiche materials per year is that they don't trust any current digital platform to remain readable in the course of decades, much less centuries): digital files are also **unbounded** (inherently they have no limits to length, and adding material, much less altering material, is generally trivial); and, in principle or in fact, **unauthored** or unstably authored – that is, easily subject to alteration, intervention or incorporation by other, even unknown authors. While printed books are securely anchored in a tradition and linked with a specific author (or authors), on-line manuscripts may be inserted into a mutating “database” of similar “files”, in which the individual project can, in principle, merge seamlessly and searchably with other texts without the author's involvement much less consent (in the digital universe, to the horror of many traditional humanities authors, “mashing” is often considered appropriate and advantageous.)

But there is world-changing value in the miraculous **searchability, accessibility and connectivity** that the digital world offers to scholars and scholarship world-wide. The Google-initiated prospect of a universal library, available to everyone anywhere; the ability to locate, search, and connect virtually every book ever printed; to do this from anywhere in the world and at almost no cost, which was the stuff of fantasy only a few decades ago, is fast approaching the stuff of reality. Realizing the full potential of these digital opportunities, many only barely sensed at present, will require a press - let's call it **University Press 2.0** – that is transformed both internally and in its external relations and collaborations with other university units, with other university presses, and with an expanding range of academic authors, readers, and disciplines.

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UP2.0 will be immediately confronted by the co-existence of the two not quite compatible sensibilities sketched above: one that attaches to the printed book (and the many mature intellectual, scholarly, professional and personal circuits in which books circulate); and the other that is cathected to the digital book, itself the emerging epicenter of a vast but immature set of technological, scholarly, professional, and personal digital networks (attachments that make up in passion and scope for what they lack in history and development). In the short run, at least, I believe that presses will have to harness and ride the print/digital pair in tandem, favoring the digital colt as the mount for the future, but keeping the aging but steady print workhorse nourished on demand.

UP2.0 will feature the availability and applicability of digitally enabled interactive networks and networking at every phase of the publication process. Digital books will incorporate a wide range of digital features and resources, including, at a basic **UP 1.0** non-interactive level, supplementation of text by imaginative digital audio and visual materials; linkages to relevant disciplinary books and other didactic materials issued by **UP2.0** itself; and instant access to all of the sources, citations, notes, and bibliography mentioned in the text.

But the hallmark of **UP 2.0** will be the creation of far-flung, interactive, digital, disciplinary-based, communities, mediated by the digital book. The press will establish robust social networking capacities within each of its disciplinary or publishing areas, hosting on-going interactions between commentators, readers, authors, and editors at all stages of the writing process. Since the marginal cost of production and dissemination of each digital book beyond the first is essentially zero (though, contrary to much current rhetoric, the cost of that first digital copy, and the coding, the servers and the archiving required to maintain it, are not inexpensive), the press can be imaginative and aggressive in dramatically extending national and global access to its digitized publishing lists far beyond the narrowing perimeters of the imploding print monograph communities.

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The digital books themselves will inherently function as nodes in overlapping interactive networks of authors, readers, and commentators worldwide, as well as in networks of other books, all talking with each other both within the digital confines or the digital margins of a single book, as well as on the more general disciplinary sites established by the press. Since such interactions can be queried, monitored and mined digitally as well, we already possess intimations of the eventual transformation of our still embryonic **UP2.0** into **UP3.0**, the latter characterized by an algorithmically driven semantic ability to mine the intersecting clouds of books, readers and authors for unanticipated information about scholarly practices, reading habits, and the extent and the nature of collaborative scholarship.

Mike Shatzkin, one the most astute commentators on publishing in general, and digital publishing, in particular, writes often about the necessity for what he calls “verticality” in all publishing sectors in the digital era. He means by that injunction that publishers, booksellers, even book trade shows, need to give up the “horizontal” illusion of being all things to all people, and instead focus on selected core content, and develop those core areas with all the energy, imagination and resources they can muster. Though Shatzkin doesn’t address university presses explicitly, it is clear that in the academic segments of their list (consisting of a concentration on a handful of academic/scholarly areas in the case of the smaller presses, or disciplinary lists in fifteen or more academic areas in the case of the largest presses), university presses have long employed a vertical strategy, a strategy that needs to be pursued even more relentlessly and intensively in the digital age. For digital dissemination to be successful in any publishing area, and to take maximum advantage of digital technological resources -- which would include linkages among all the books a press publishes in each scholarly area; searchability on all the key terms and concepts of the discipline; and extending such disciplinary searches to analogous lists from other university press publishers (and, perhaps, marketing and disseminating such lists jointly) -- requires not just a substantial, growing, critical mass of books but digitized content that is also current and highly valued by the disciplinary authors and consumers. Shatzkin points out that it is the verticality that makes possible the

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disciplinary communities that I have been discussing: the more prestigious and the more abundant the projects in a particular “vertical” publishing segment and the greater its range -- in the case of scholarly publishing, from scholarly monographs, through books suitable for use in courses from beginning undergraduate to graduate use, and on to books in the area that are suitable for inter-disciplinary readers as well as for general interest readers – the more successful the press will be in attracting and sustaining a large and interactive community in the area. Scale has always mattered in publishing, and in the digital era, scale, built up from rich content, matters even more than before.

In the print regime it is well understood that -- by choice and by default -- university presses recruit, assess, massage, market and publish the overwhelming number of scholarly books emerging from university based research in the humanities and much of the social sciences; these books in turn play a significant role in determining professional status and academic rewards, promotion, and tenure for their faculty authors. In addition, since university presses strive to publish the most original, most significant scholarly books from scholars world-wide, the strength and the national and global reputation of these disciplinary lists redounds directly to the reputation, visibility and identity of the press’s parent university. Many public university presses also publish books that speak to and about the geographical region in which they are embedded, thereby extending the university’s service and exposure to the same public constituencies which they educate more formally.

And finally, it has fallen to university presses to partially redress the disheartening current void of intelligent, informed public discussion of the most critical social, cultural and political issues. With the control of other media, including almost all the large trade book publishers, passing to international media conglomerates that ruthlessly put requirements for profit far above the social value of content, coupled with the rise of web-based social networking sites draining advertising revenue from newspapers and magazines, university presses have become, almost by default, the primary source of robust information and sustained analysis on domestic issues such as poverty, education,

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public health, gun control, immigration, incarceration, civil liberties and political democracy, as well as on the international issues, including ideological and religious struggles, human rights, torture, and economic development, that are so roiling the planet.

The problem now for **UP 2.0** is to find the digital analogues and multi-dimensional digital enrichments for some or all of these functions. The future of the presses depends on successfully negotiating the digital transition with the support of university allies and cyberinfrastructure-supported connectivity. But there is a downside: if university presses fail in their metamorphosis to **UP 2.0**, they will almost certainly go the way of the actual dinosaurs (in the days before dinosaurs were deemed too big too fail), and likely will be replaced in the rapid evolution of scholarly publishing by more nimble, more adaptable, more imaginative - though not-yet visible - digital shrews.