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O'Reilly TOC 2009: Books, Reading, and Publishing

Text and photos

by DONALD T. HAWKINS



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O'Reilly TOC 2009: Books, Reading, and Publishing

Text and photos by DONALD T. HAWKINS

O'Reilly Media held its third Tools of Change (TOC) for Publishing conference in February in New York. And just as with the first two TOCs, it emphasized new directions in publishing, particularly book publishing. About 1,000 people attended the event, an uptick of 200 from 2008.



Bob Stein, opening keynoter



Cory Doctorow

The New Definition of 'Book'

Opening keynoter Bob Stein, director of the Institute for the Future of the Book, began by asking the key question, "What is a book?" The old dictionary's definition is not the only appropriate definition today. The internet has separated content from the object, so "books" have become places and social experiences; authors have become leaders of communities of inquiry (for nonfiction) or creators of worlds that readers populate (fiction).

Books are now a medium where the reader controls the sequence and pace of accessing the content. Stein provided his definition of a book: "a user-driven media where readers and sometimes authors congregate." He also predicted that our great-grandchildren will routinely view reading as a social experience—something they do with others. In this networked environment, even the publishers' roles are changing from simple content distribution to building communities for authors and readers. They are no longer in a book business but a "reader" business where comments are now pre-eminent.

The Role of DRM in Books

Cory Doctorow, a well-known novelist and contributor to many newspapers and blogs, noted that publishers have not behaved like the music industry in bringing massive litigation against their users. He recommends that publishers should demand the right not to add DRM to their electronic products, saying, "Any time someone puts a lock on something you own against your wishes, they are not doing it for your benefit." His ideal license agreement would contain the following four words: "Don't break copyright law."

Several other speakers including Mark Coker and Tim O'Reilly, in particular, op-



posed DRM and pointed to Amazon as their chief villain. Drawing a parallel with Apple's closed PC operating systems, they criticized Amazon for requiring that DRM be applied to books and predicted that once a publisher allows its ebooks to be made available on Amazon's Kindle reader, it will lose control not only of its content but of its business as well. Coker, founder of the Smashwords self-publishing platform, said that although Amazon has done much good for book publishing, it is not a good company on the DRM issue and is impeding a wider adoption of ebooks.

Challenges for Authors

Authors have to learn new ways of writing in an ebook world. Until now, they could safely assume that books would be read from the printed page, so content could be static and page-based. But this approach works poorly in an electronic world. New features for ebooks such as animations and audio have become available, and authors must learn what works on the various platforms. For example, dedicated ebook reading devices are not yet capable of rendering color, but mobile phones are. So content and formatting must depend on the capabilities of the reading device. It is easier to think about this during the au-

(continued on page 30)

O'Reilly: Getting Your Share

Tim O'Reilly took the opportunity to offer a refreshing spin to the recessionary economy during his keynote presentation, *Reasons to Be Excited*.

He pointed out that times were not good when Johannes Gutenberg was alive either. Victor Hugo decided not to follow any proposals to modernize the cathedral setting in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*; new cathedrals of learning, such as the library at Trinity College, were actually built around that time. Similarly, as the internet becomes more complex, we cannot envision where it will take us, but the web has already generated more electronic pages than print book pages in recorded history.

O'Reilly concentrated on a few of the following topics:

- We are living in an amazing time. The future is just beginning to be invented by people like us. Publishers must gather those interested in development technology to their teams. We are in a revolution where fortunes can be made.
- Use social media effectively. Don't just make announcements; bestow status on your authors, communicate what matters to you, and convey your passion and personality.
- People are paying for access to information and not just for advertising. According to a Veronis Suhler report, internet access fees amounted to \$2.8 billion, while video download revenue pulled in \$353 million in 2007. People will pay for online content; he suggested getting your share of the action.
- People are reading, and publishers can confer status on people. According to Twitterholic (www.twitterholic.com), best-selling author Stephen Fry (who has a new book coming out in May titled, *Stephen Fry in America: Fifty States and the Man Who Set Out to See Them All*) is one of the top five most popular people on Twitter, based on number of followers.
- Curation still matters. The long tail receives significant attention, but remember that there is also a head. We need to figure out how to confer status on authors. Publish good content, and people will follow you. Make your content available wherever your readers want it and in the format they want. Share what you learn so we can all improve together.
- People need what we do. We are members of a great profession. Billions of people are coming online. Make something good happen.

—D.T.H.

thoring process rather than trying to adapt the content later. References to page numbers are meaningless in an ebook, so authors must cite chapters and verses (as in the Bible) or paragraph numbers. Publishers have the opportunity to improve their services to authors by creating guidelines, templates, and so on.

The Return of Ebooks

Ebooks, which have made a comeback, are now responsible for a significant advance in overall book sales. In fact, the Association of American Publishers (AAP) reported that in December 2008, ebook sales jumped 119.9% for the

month (\$6.5 million) and 68.4% for the year. Early ebooks were primitive, but now, growth has continued with better screen technology, new readers, and a large increase in content. According to Coker, the reading experience will improve in 2009 with new screen sizes, touch and pen interfaces, and flexible displays. By 2010, the first full-color ebook readers may be ready. One example of a new product under development at the Plastic Logic booth was a reader prototype with an 8.5" x 11" display that was only 7mm thick.

Early ebooks, once a simple repurposing of printed books, are getting better in presenting a book on the web or on a reading device. The user experience on Amazon and Sony readers is well ahead of what it was on the earlier devices, which is one reason for the recent rapid growth of ebooks. Amazon's Kindle has sold about 500,000 units, while the Sony Reader has sold 300,000. With this market acceptance, estimates predict that 2%–3% of U.S. households will own an ebook reader within the next 2 years.

Although the ebook market is growing, it still represents only about 1% of the book publishing market. But consumers are becoming more aware of ebooks, and according to Neelan Choksi, COO of Lexcycle (producers of the Stanza ebook reading software), 2008 marked an inflection point: Oprah Winfrey recently displayed a Kindle reader on her TV show, new hardware is available, and displays are improving. Choksi presented the results of a survey of Stanza users, where consumers said that their primary usage of ebooks occurs in bed (31%) or while commuting (29%).

Mobile Ebooks

Mobile phones are a revolution relying on network-scale applications, so ebooks are a natural application for them. With its large high-resolution display and touch-screen interface, the iPhone is paving the way for the availability of mobile ebooks to a diverse market. This is already happening in Japan's ¥35 billion (\$370 million U.S.) ebook market. Brent Lewis, vice president of digital and internet at Harlequin Enterprises, noted that 85% of ebook content in Japan goes directly to mobile phones without going over the internet. Many of today's iPhone applications, such as

travel guides, restaurant listings, and others, can be regarded as ebooks in disguise. The relationship between publishers and consumers will change because consumers will have the ability to download ebooks directly from publishers.

The Future for Publishers

Sara Lloyd, digital director for Pan Macmillan, Ltd., said that we are living in a networked era, so the future is already here. Other speakers said that we are at the end of the Gutenberg era, and they can hardly imagine the eventual consequences of digitization and the internet. For example, Nick Bilton, lead researcher at the New York Times R&D Lab, receives more than 160 links a day in his RSS reader and clicks on about half of them. In his keynote address, he said that as storytellers, we are trying to find shelter from the blizzard of information. One of the projects he is working on is “smart news boxes,” where everyone could receive a different version of the newspaper.

CEO Panel

Five CEOs (Eileen Gittens from Blurb, Clint Greenleaf from Greenleaf Book Corp., Michael Hyatt from Thomas Nelson, Bob Young from Lulu, and Tim O'Reilly) described some of their recent innovations and speculated on where the industry is moving.



CEO Panel, from left: Eileen Gittens, Clint Greenleaf, Michael Hyatt, Bob Young, Tim O'Reilly

For example, while the industry has grown, the current recession has renewed the focus on productivity. Part of this growth is credited to a number of now-unemployed people who have the time to write a book. O'Reilly noted that publishers are performing a service to the world and are spreading knowledge, which he considers to be more important than the bottom line.

And the innovations will continue. O'Reilly has also seen his company's category of downloadable ebooks grow. Gittens mentioned creation of a community to help authors, Hyatt started the Book Review Blogger (<http://brb.thomasnelson.com>), and Young started weread.com (a social

networking community of book lovers). As Young pointed out, ratings and reviews are discovery features especially suited for the long tail because they help people find their next book to read. O'Reilly agreed and said that books have become souvenirs; people buy them because of their shared activity and their status in the community.

Although the panel agreed that self-publishers and traditional publishers will likely work together, they had different opinions on what will drive this trend. Greenleaf said that credibility is important, and people will read a book regardless of who published it. Gittens, who believes that self-publishing has not conferred enough status on authors in the



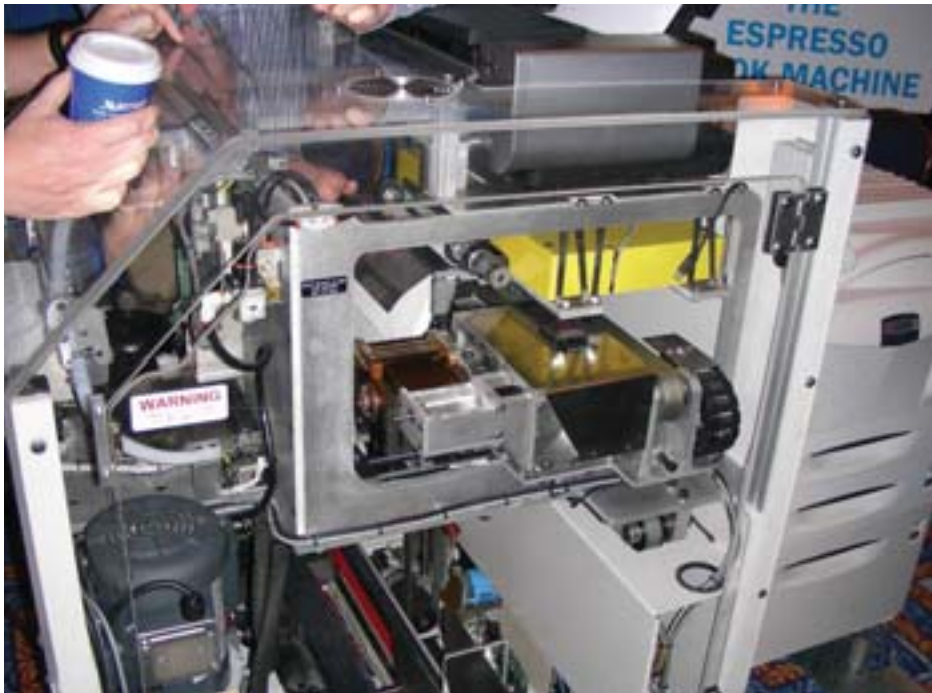
Plastic Logic's prototype reader



The prototype reader displayed at Plastic Logic's booth



Nick Bilton



Espresso Book Machine

past, sees a curatorial opportunity for all types of publishers. O'Reilly said many groups are doing good work, and publishers must figure out how to integrate those publishers into their offerings without damaging their already successful brands.

Hyatt said that people will always have an affinity for print books, but he believes that the next reading device, which may be available within 5 years, will

bring ebooks into market dominance. O'Reilly believes that books will survive along with free content because the quality of free editions is often inferior to those for sale. He also thinks that Google has not figured out how to monetize books; ads in books will not work.

All the CEOs strongly agreed that an author platform is critical for publishers to help authors publish their works. Git-

tens said that "platform" is the word of the year for her company. Hyatt agreed, saying that publishers must stop talking about a platform and start providing it.

The Espresso Book Machine

TOC 2009 was the first public unveiling of the latest version of the Espresso Book Machine (EBM), produced by On Demand Books (www.ondemandbooks.com). The EBM has been called "an ATM for books"; version 2.0 is smaller, faster, and less expensive than its predecessor. Attendees at TOC were able to watch a working prototype in the O'Reilly booth as it turned out copies of *The Best of TOC* (also available as a free download at <http://toc.oreilly.com/2009/02/best-of-toc-collection-now-ava.html>) and other books.

For more information on TOC 2009, visit <http://toc.oreilly.com>.

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