



Draft version

“How to predict” the future of print publishing

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“Those addicted to the look and feel of tree flakes encased in dead cow (and prepared to pay for it) would not have to kick the habit; elegant physical volumes could automatically be generated on demand ... Old volumes could live out their days in safe and dignified retirement in climate-controlled book museums.” (Mitchell 1995)

William J. Mitchell is but one of many experts on the Information Age who has predicted the early demise of print publishing. Indeed, e-publishing does seem to be a safe bet here at the beginning of the 21st century. Even at scholarly conferences on the “future of the book” the focus is overwhelmingly on the brave new world of electronic publications (see fx. the conference web sites <http://2003.book-conference.com/> and <http://book-conference.com/>). Of course, the technology for the production and distribution of electronic publications is already widely available and it does seem to offer some clear economic advantages. Also, we should note, computers are involved in every step of book production from the writing and editing of manuscripts, to layout, and to the running of the presses. Still, strangely, the end result of the process in most cases remains a book on paper – including Mitchell’s bestseller, although it was also published electronically.

In this chapter we are not going to predict whether or not print publishing, e-publishing or parallel publishing (electronic and print) will prevail. Rather we will explore the complexities involved in making well-grounded forecasts about a phenomenon which in the world view of the present authors, steeped in a Western academic tradition, is of fundamental importance not just to the publishing industry, but also to areas such as education, research, communication of knowledge and news, literary culture, and indeed the very fabric of the (arguably) evolving *information society*. The “how to” of the title of this chapter thus is to be understood not as a prescription, but as a question, to which there are no simple answers.

Our basic premise is that future developments are always the results of choice. A highly complex cultural and social phenomenon such as publishing, however, involves many actors with different and sometimes conflicting interests. So, a many-faceted analysis is necessary in order to arrive at scenarios for the development of possible futures. One such framework for analysis, which we will adopt in the following is *Causal Layered Analysis* (CLA) as developed for *futures study* by Sohail Inayatullah (2002, 2003) and operationalized by Richard A. Slaughter (2002).

Contexts

CLA assumes that problems are constructed in and should be studied across a multi-layer context consisting of the four levels: *Litany*, *Systemic and Social analysis*, *World view* and *Myth and metaphor*. Below we shall use these levels for structuring our argument.

Litany

The quote from Mitchell’s book at the beginning of this chapter is an example of “litany”, which, broadly defined, is the public discourse of the news media, popular literature and “Futurology Light”. Predictions about the death of the printed book have been made for decades, and to a large extent they have been fed by technological inventions – computer networks, network services, storage media, data formats, software and hardware. Technol- itany is apt to reflect both technological determinism and an unflinching techno-optimism; and if it does take into account social and economic forces, these tend to be reduced to

clever catchwords. Forecasting by litany tends to oversimplify matters. It excludes from print publishing all but the aspect of information while at the same time emphasizing some particular area where e-publishing is already successful and on that basis making generalized extrapolations into the future (Brown & Duguid 2000).

Systemic and Social analysis

Identifying actors, objects and their interrelations lets us move from more or less unsubstantiated visions of futures to an analysis of the technical, social and economic issues involved. Future studies reports frequently operate at this level (fx Larsen 1994) where systemic mechanisms, no matter how relevant, tend to overshadow underlying values and perceptions.

As a fundamental requirement for our analysis at this level we need to characterize the various types of products in print publishing. Given the space available we cannot possibly deal with print publishing in general, but on the other hand by focusing on just one area we would risk falling into the trap of litany. Therefore we will be dealing with main categories of scholarly and commercial publishing: books (fiction and non-fiction), journals, magazines, newsletters and newspapers, taking broadly into consideration also the various genres and audiences associated with them. The aim is to arrive at some important general characteristics and relevant differences.

While the discussion of print versus electronic publishing is central to our study, it is essential also to consider the various alternatives that in the course of the 20th century have provided a steadily increasing competition to printed publications. Generally declining book sale certainly antedates the PC- and internet revolutions, and film, radio, television, electronic games and audio books all are contributing factors to this negative trend in commercial publishing.

It is also important to make clear that we are faced not just with a binary choice of either print or electronic publishing, but with a whole range of options including print-on-demand, parallel publishing and supplementary publishing in one or the other medium. Furthermore, "electronic publishing" is an ambiguous concept. The device for reading an electronic publication can be a web-browser or some special software application running on general-purpose computer, or it can be a PDA, a game consol or a dedicated e-book reader. In terms of storage medium an electronic publication can be distributed on CD-ROM/DVD/memory chip or via the internet. On the internet, choice of file format determines both visual appearance, use and usefulness of the product, be it published as a web site using HTML/XML and Flash, a pdf-file or word-processing file, or in one of the several proprietary formats now used for net-based publication.

The universe of publishing is constituted by dynamic interrelations among several actors, the most important ones being authors, publishers (including the production and promotion functions), booksellers, customers and libraries. Each of these actors has some interests to safeguard: general ones like power, legal rights and economy, and more individual ones like credibility, desire for/will to change, empowerment, ergonomics, prestige, social norms and tradition.

Through our analysis at this level we will seek to develop a model illustrating the interplay of the various actors in an economic, social/cultural and technological setting. The model is limited and limiting in so far as it reflects our understanding of publishing in a highly

literate and technologically advanced capitalistic first world democracy. Without going in to great detail, we do intend, however, to put our model in perspective by relating it to prevailing conditions in the third world.

World View

At the world view level we are going to consider in more general terms the social and cultural roles of publishing, going into some detail with a few selected subcultures, notably the academic one, where there has been fierce discussion of the forms and norms of publishing.

Marshall McLuhan's claim (1962) that the advent of printing produced the Gutenberg Man and laid the foundation for modern society, technology deterministic and eurocentric as it may be, provides a starting point for discussing the common understanding of printing as a major catalyst for modernization. Moving on to the post-Gutenberg Galaxy (Harnad 1991) we will be considering theories of the networked society and the information society leading to a new information order.

We will also relate publishing to contemporary scholarly and philosophical positions, including the prevalent one focusing on abrupt change and the collapse of tradition, which has contributed to demonising the book, as has been suggested by Paul Duguid (1996) who sharply criticizes the invocation of critical theory, postmodernism and poststructuralist theory.

Myth and Metaphor

Publishing, as such, may not be the subject of much myth and metaphor. But printing, books and book collections certainly are. Here we shall consider briefly three examples: Reverence for the written word and its creator, writing in the context of freedom and power, and full access to unlimited knowledge.

The externalization of knowledge in the form of writing has been revered in all early literary cultures, as evidenced by the patronage of Hermes, Krishna, Nabu, Oghma, Quetzalcoatl, Thoth, Wen Chang and other deities. Mass distribution of printed volumes certainly did make writing more mundane. But still, the book as "tangible thought" has remained a tie between humans separated in time and space, authoritative and even exalted, a symbol of erudition, empathy and refinement. Special status has been accorded to the writer. Great storytellers often become spokesmen of their age, and they are remembered and cherished, long after their contemporary social leaders have been forgotten. The sleuthhound of the newsmedia is a modern myth, regarded with a mixture of admiration and contempt. The catchword "publish or perish" in a primitive way expresses how status is constituted in many academic environments.

The written word can also be a symbol of the freedom of mind, and this makes it particularly dangerous to authoritarian clerical and secular leadership, who since the time of Qin Shihuangdi has tried to ban and burn seditious writings – and their authors. Conversely, books can be used as instruments of power; moderating as when used to regulate human relations and repressive when used to enforce a particular ideology.

The written word immensely increases the individual's access to knowledge, and the desire for access has been insatiable ever since early times. The Alexandrian Library, the

unachievable ideal of all later libraries, generations of encyclopedists and the electronic age Xanadu, is a myth well worth considering in the context of global networks of databases. Unlimited access to information, however, goes hand in hand with unlimited production of information. The “information explosion” is a modern narrative – profusely substantiated with statistics – of a monster that can be curbed only by means of digital media.

Towards scenarios

This chapter will conclude by making some suggestions as to how an analysis as the present one may be turned into actual scenarios for the future of print publishing. In this discussion, which does not involve the actual creation of scenarios, we will make use of the CLA method of “moving up and down” the levels of analysis, illustrating how context helps shape the definition of problems, and how solutions depend on the framing of problems.

Excursus: Scholarly journals as an example

All the above may perhaps seem quite vague and theoretical. So let us end this short presentation with an example of the application of the CLA approach.

“It is now practically universally accepted that scholarly journals will have to be available in digital formats”, claims Andrew Odlyzko (1999), who in a series of highly persuasive papers in the 1990s has argued for electronic publication for reasons of economy. Odlyzko’s analysis at the social/systemic level could be supplemented with for example analyses of the social structure of academic organizations, the framework of daily life of the consumers, the social and cultural roles of the intermediaries between researcher and audience who now risk being disintermediated (publishers, editors, libraries, book-stores), the interests of the various actors in terms of control (e.g. gate-keeping, systematization, empowerment of the individual, institutional leadership, etc.) and credibility (social and academic standing, prestige). Other factors well worth considering could be ecology and accessibility to information outside the privileged first world nations. On the world view level the most immediate issue is what constitutes academic quality. The standard answer is peer acceptance, and a whole culture has been developed around it. But also legal rights and ultimately political persuasion are at stake. Reduced to litany we all “know” that neither individuals nor institutions can keep abreast with ever-increasing loads of publications, that libraries and their collections are never accessible when you most need them, and that information most certainly “wants to be free”. “Free” on a quite different level, that of myth and metaphor, signifies freedom rather than gratis, and on this level we must of course also take into consideration the information explosion which seems quite real when it comes to scholarly publishing.

Obviously, if you analyze at just one of the levels roughly outlined above, you are bound to miss something important. Litany grows out of myth and simplified social analysis. Social analysis without an understanding of world view and implied cultural assumptions may explain “how” but not “why”. It is equally clear, that the problems encountered at each of the levels of analysis give rise to very different solutions. A scenario based solely on social and systemic analysis may involve nothing but technological and economic parameters. A scenario based on world view would have to suggest ways of developing the social system and the traditions of academic culture. One based on litany might define the problem as

being access to information. To (ab)use once again a modern cliché: It is a matter of what optics you use, and the strength of CLA is exactly that it both forces the researcher to be conscious of the level of analysis and invites combinations of point of view.

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