

Ripping off the cover

Has digitization changed what's really in the book?



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What is a book? And, what's really in it? These two simple questions are getting both more complicated and more interesting as books are moving from their incarnation as “laminated wood pulp” — as some digerati nerds mock the ink-on-paper versions of traditional knowledge containers — to other, mostly digital media.

With a multitude of new manifestations of the book, initiatives on the book, book-related gadgets and uses, and with 2008 as a likely watershed year for the future of electronic books (e-books), it seems only appropriate to revisit these two primal questions in a more systematic and serious way.

Admittedly, this article is more a loose set of initial observations, thoughts and notes than a thoroughly researched essay — at best a think piece, trying to identify and pick up a number of the loose ends of the current and often emotional debate on e-books. I try to identify some aspects of what may change — or has changed already — as books go digital; what on the contrary will not be so different, after all, in the digital future; what is at stake; and, somewhat as a postscript, why e-books so far have not been at all successful in competing with the traditional book.

What really is a book?

First, a global definition. According to the recommendation concerning the “International Standardization of Statistics Relating to Book Production and Periodicals”, issued by UNESCO in 1964, “A *book* is a non-periodical printed publication of at least 49 pages, exclusive of the cover pages, published in the [particular] country and made available to the public.”

The most striking aspect of this definition is perhaps how deliberately limited are the parameters it involves. The definition says that a book is a publication, hence not some private collection of something; issued at some place, hence the reference to a locality and an origin, yet

not necessarily to an author, even if such is perhaps implied; that it is supposed to be more than just a brochure or a pamphlet, and hence claims a certain weight, or importance; and that it is obviously expected to have “cover pages”, so it is limited and contained formally by something like a starting point and an end.

Obviously the UNESCO definition did not bother to say much about the originator or the industry that produced the book, nor its realm, distribution or economy; nor does the definition discuss the book’s audience or the process of reading. The definition certainly does not acknowledge a historical dimension — or the possibility of change — for the book. And it is quite unconcerned about the cultural value of this item, medium, or format, which makes the book such a privileged cultural totem of Western civilization, at least.

And yet, all those omissions do *not* seem to matter all that much, because the UNESCO definition seems to be good enough for many purposes. This is less surprising if one digs into various — authoritative and popular — dictionaries from the past two centuries, during which time books developed throughout the world into an industry and a highly privileged and protected format for the dissemination of many kinds of content.

Here are just a few examples to illustrate how the strictly limited scope of the UNESCO definition inscribes itself in a long tradition of giving astoundingly similar descriptions of the book, at least across Europe. According to the *Oxford Universal Dictionary* (1933/1969), a book is “a (written) narrative, record, list, register — 1681. gen. A collection of sheets of paper or other substance, blank, written or printed, fastened together so as to form a material whole ... “ The authoritative French dictionary of the 19th century, *Littre’s Dictionnaire de la Langue Française* of 1869, has it as an “assemblage d’un assez grand nombre de feuilles portant des signes destinés à être lus”; while, almost exactly one century later, the hugely popular *Petit Robert* of 1968 calls it a “reunion de plusieurs cahiers de pages manuscrites ou imprimées”.

Without aiming at a complete picture, I want at least to mention a current Italian formula for the book: a “serie continua di fogli stampati della stessa misura, cuciti insieme e forniti di copertina o

religatura” (*Dizionario della lingua italiana*, 1971); and add the definition of the contemporary *Meyers Grosses Universallexikon in 15 Bänden* (1981): “Mehrere zu einem Ganzen zusammengeheftete bedruckte, beschriebene oder leere Blätter, die in einem B.einband eingebunden sind”.

It is striking how the same formal elements — a certain number of pages, the purpose of the content being public, and, almost always, the fact of the binding and therefore the limits of a book imposed by its beginning and end — are stated in each definition, while the book’s tradition, its cultural role in bringing about a certain quality or sophistication of content, the matter of copyright, the industry around the creation and production of books, and many more aspects, are all omitted.

* * *

A book is indeed a closed container in one respect, but very much an open format in another. In order to understand the implications deriving from this paradox, I want to describe the book here in its two distinct, yet complimentary dimensions.

The book as a closed container. Obviously, the value of a book, both as an item and as a concept, is very much based on the fact that it ties together a clearly delimited body of work, often enough created and signed by one or several identifiable authors, or validated by some other process of authentication (as is the case with many holy books such as the Bible), which is not supposed to be changed, torn into parts, or given add-ons at some later stage.

Much of the authority of the book comes from the fact of its being such an assured and, in the end, fixed set of content. Publishers argue that their role as gatekeepers for the book derives from their responsibility for and investment and skill in the process of quality assurance and framing the respective final version of each book that is published under their control.

When printed books are digitized in some largely automated process, this assured quality of the editorial process can be undercut by severe shortcomings of the technology involved, and thereby damage the reliability of a book. When some time ago Google started to scan entire libraries, the automated text recognition software was not prepared, for example, to properly

recognize text set in German Fraktur type, which was used until the mid 20th century. A collection of works by Nobel laureate author Thomas Mann was given the entirely nonsensical title “Gefammelfe Werke” instead of “Gesammelte Werke” (collected works) when the letters “k”, “s” and “t” were turned mistakenly into an “f”.

Of course, such technical shortcomings can be overcome and the mistakes corrected, but it shows how any new handling of books necessarily builds on and lives on top of a rich, complex tradition. In this, even legitimate publishers are confronted with very similar challenges, as time-consuming steps of adaptation to any new technology act as a considerable barrier against innovation.

Nevertheless, the authority of books often derives from the fact, or myth, that what is between their covers can claim a certain degree of reliability, not the least because it has been put into a book. This is a remarkably circular argument indeed. But it makes it clear how much the widely accepted value of books in society is the expression and the result of a broad social consensus.

The book as an open format. Looking at books more closely though — and not only at one book at a time or at a single item, but at the broad use of books by various groups of people, such as readers, librarians, booksellers or publishers — reveals an entirely different set of qualities. These perspectives lead to seeing (and describing) the book in a completely different light, not so much as a closed container, but as a format, or more precisely as a format for exchange, whose principal characteristics are based on its “openness” or, to put it more technically, on its interoperability.

To begin with, books are not limited to carrying text. They can be composed of pictures, of course, and of other types of content, such as musical notes. Some artists create books as objects, writing for instance radically private characters or pictograms that are not supposed to encode any clear meaning for the reader and cannot be decrypted at all.

A key quality of books is that they can be shared, given away, sold, hidden, publicized or preserved for strictly defined groups of readers.

Take two extreme examples. First, is the index of prohibited books by the Catholic church, which is itself a particularly prohibited — hidden

— book for the obvious reason that it is an index — a road map, as it were — to all those things and ideas which the Pope and his clergy oppose or despise.

Second, at the other end of the spectrum, are books which have become hugely popular texts, but which were disseminated at first only on the Web, where they were read and commented on by many, before actually being picked up by a publisher in order to be turned into and marketed as a traditionally printed book. In China, this has become a fairly normal career path for writers who at first need to find their audience online, often in the hundreds of thousands of readers, before their work gets published and sold as a printed book.

The book would never have had the career it has had as the premier format for the dissemination of knowledge, without being such a universal and open format, as exemplified by these two extremes.

When Christian monasteries such as Cluny in medieval France started to collect and copy books, they did so by creating a sense of autonomy — in spirit and in economical terms — and by accumulating knowledge in the form of books which often made them so powerful that both the worldly rulers and their own church considered them a threat to their authority. One tantalizing question, whose full answer is beyond the scope of this essay, is: how could those early occidental libraries with their collections of only some thousands of books very soon outshine, in terms of relevance and impact, the Islamic mega-libraries of their era, notably in Cordoba, where millions of volumes were amassed?

We learn from these occidental medieval libraries that just bringing together a critical number of books is not enough. The important point is to organize them. Books develop their value and, consequently, their power to matter only as they are linked. Having single items protected and limited by covers, standing alone on a shelf, means little. Only through the introduction of logistics to the bookshelf, with orderly hierarchies and categories, can readers understand and follow the secret web of references between books, bringing them from one book to others, in ever new ways. This only ignites, at one point, an explosion of — “what?”

A closely related web of links and their consequences also comes from the subsequent communication between readers, from their chatter. We know how from early on learned people travelled to pick up books and to discuss and review them with their peers, a system that created the patterns replicated and immensely multiplied today by the World Wide Web and the digital networks we live with and within. It is sometimes amazing to realize how little has been added to those early patterns, except for the scale they have gained today.

Selling books reveals another aspect of the book's openness. The fact that books are products that can be commercially distributed is probably not in opposition to their cultural value — as it is widely assumed, particularly here in the German realm. The modern printed book as it was conceived by Gutenberg and his contemporaries in Mainz and elsewhere produced not only a technological invention but also an innovative business model — by designing a package for knowledge and ideas and distributing those containers efficiently, and by creating fairly rapidly out of this innovation a novel economy of scale for something — knowledge, ideas — that had not been “traded” very much before.

The culture of books would never have had the impact that we admire so much today had it not been turned into tradable goods, as this launched the most powerful scheme to propel this initially weird container of painstakingly written stuff that only a few could make sense of into something touching the minds of the many — who, soon after the initial ignition of the modern book on the river Rhine, chose to learn how to read, or teach their children to do so, because this proved to be a powerful skill in a radically changing and demanding social environment.

Paradoxes of the success of the book

In short, what makes possible the astounding success of the book is a historically optimized combination of the qualities of openness and closeness, of a container and a format, and, as a result, the manifold usages that it allows.

This paradox is illustrated very well both from a reader's and an author's perspectives.

As a first step, a reader needs to find or identify a book, which requires that a book is already referenced or ideally is open towards all the other books in the universe. But the book that the reader selects needs to attract the user not only by having a few key words or similar superficial indicators. In a world where information is paramount, a reader will pick a book, and even more so a specific book, if it conveys a certain uniqueness — an authority — which makes it different from all the other information around.

At first glance, these may appear to be qualities merely relevant for branding. While commercial brands excel ideally by their uniqueness above all other qualities, the value of a book comes from its links to all the other books and by the two layers of its uniqueness, as a format, and as being this particular singular book (this garden book, and not all those others), for whatever reason.

For the author, it is perhaps a bit more challenging. An author creates a book in order to package whatever he or she decides to — a novel, an autobiography, a monograph, a cookbook, or, together with other authors, a work of reference — in a unique, distinguished form. He or she claims a “copyright” for this, in order to avoid any confusion with the works of others, and to be paid for the effort of doing so. So at first, we have a strictly fragmented territory made of single items.

But hardly any author can reasonably do so without, again, entering the linked space of references, or the universe of open books — which is why publishers could start their businesses and distinguish it from pure production or selling, as a new intermediary. As gatekeepers, they organize not so much the quality of the books, but the way those books are formatted for their eventually changing audiences — a large-format deluxe Bible for sermons, or a cheap one for reading at home; a hardcover and several months later the paperback; the audio with the hardback, or with the paperback, and so on.

This is why around the year 2000 it turned out to be such a challenge even for a world-famous author like Steven King, with a solid following of dedicated fans, to sell his new tale, “The Plant”, in a new way — directly and only electronically as a download from his publisher's website.

At the same time, we can recognize how immensely rich direct encounters between books — and therefore between authors — and readers can potentially be developed through digital networks, but also how many hurdles need to be overcome or circumvented in order to do so. We also start to understand why introducing e-books to readers is much less a technological challenge than one of logistics. It is about getting the balance right for the e-book between its quality as a closed container and as an open exchange format for words, ideas, knowledge and all the other matter that traditionally comes to the reader in the format of a book.

Book usages

When the online retailer Amazon.com in late 2007 introduced the Kindle, a gadget that was expected to be the door opener for a new generation of dedicated electronic reading devices, Amazon came up with a tightly sealed box. Many things that we normally like to do with a book are not allowed by the Kindle, the simplest being lending the book to a friend. To do this we would need to hand over our entire e-bookshelf, and as a consequence, would not be able to access any of the e-books on the shelves until our friend returned the locked box, which is the Kindle.

Amazon opted for a strategy that emphasizes exclusively the qualities of the book as a closed container — probably due to its company preference for proprietary approaches as much as to calm down worries of publishers over piracy. Early adopters who provided positive quotes to media counted among them many professional readers whose job it is to read books and share only their own reading experiences in tightly packaged ways which often come with a price tag attached to them. Readers operating in such closed circuits include book reviewers, editors and similar professionals of the book.

From a reader's point of view, this is awkward, because reading is so much more about sharing and communicating than anything else, including the cosy feeling of sitting on a sofa on a lazy afternoon reading that special book just for oneself.

We read books to learn (most often we need to do this for our interaction in a group of peers or friends, at school or in the workplace); to get a

deeper understanding of something that we consider as relevant (which, by definition, usually has been declared as relevant — or, in some cases irrelevant — by others who are important to us); to win status (as discussed by the late Pierre Bourdieu); or to entertain ourselves, privately at first, but then how often we refer to our reading in a conversation and want to share what we have read or “taken away”.

Digital networks are the most powerful toolsets ever created to enhance those interactions, and to allow and even encourage the individual to communicate with others what they consider important.

But the interaction does not stop with telling someone what we have read. For many people, taking notes while reading is an integral part of the experience, underlining what is important, commenting, even crossing out a line and correcting it, privately.

In some genres of fiction, readers even write on where the original author has stopped. In the immensely popular fantasy novels, fan fiction has become an integral part of the literature.

A more mundane example is that of a school class or a university course, based often on a compilation of text copied from books and then, over the course of the teaching, commented on by the students — who would gain a lot if everyone, including the teacher, could be aware of the notes others have made.

Some of the most popular categories of books — on cooking, gardening, travel, advice for health and a good life — have been challenged by websites and their possibilities of using the open qualities of networks to allow comments and updates by users. Yet books have been able to sustain a certain quality of superiority so far, not only because the reader does not need to be online to access the content, but also because of a book's authority, as discussed earlier.

The Kindle and most other digital reading platforms so far fall terribly short on that crucial aspect of using a book which is sharing.

Buying the book, or accessing it?

As the book is usually traded as a container, it normally has a price tag attached. In many

European countries, the retail price is even regulated by law of government, and discounts can be given only under precisely defined rules.

This is another aspect of setting the book apart from other publications, notably newspapers, magazines or learned journals which are obtainable on subscription or, in some cases, are free of charge to the reader. But these kind of distinctions tended to blur considerably with the advent of the Internet. The “culture of free” — with legal as well as illegal ways of getting access to content — has spread. More importantly, access has become paramount.

With the omnipresence of content, the reliability — or, more fundamentally put: the authority — of information has become the new frontier. This is, of course, where the book comes in. What sets the book apart is not the price tag or a book policy upheld by governments, but its authority, or the grown and well-established consensus that only a book is a book.

As a consequence, we need to re-frame the question and ask: What are we paying for in a book, the item — the container — or its usage — the ways opened by the book as an exchange format?

The harsh and complex controversy between Google and publishers’ and booksellers’ associations in the US and Europe well illustrates the importance attributed to these two alternative perspectives. While Google, with its book search technology, argues that it helps to make a wide range of books “accessible” to large audiences, and notably books that are out of print or available only under certain circumstances, European associations cried out against agreements such as the one between the search engine and US authors and publishers: “Google will now occupy a unique gateway position that, if abused, could easily create a *de facto* monopoly”, argues the British Booksellers Association in an issued statement.

But perhaps even more important is Google’s changing the traditional gatekeeping role of booksellers from selling books as individual items, one by one, to that of organizing access to large libraries of books which can be handled more efficiently by an agent like the search engine than by a bookseller. This, almost automatically, would call for business models focusing on charging for

access, as in a subscription, rather than selling books one by one, with a clear price tag attached to each item.

This would trigger a shift of paradigms, from the book to the library, from the container to the format, from individual items to linked bodies of content, and from individual readers to communities of users in networks, with consequences which would hard to predict.

What’s in a book, version 2.0?

It is obvious why most actors within the traditional value chain of the book trade must feel at best concerned with regard to all the foreseeable turmoil ahead. It is more than unclear how the grown and very complex ecology of knowledge which is inherently based on the book as its preferred container and format, can be sustained under such circumstances of change. Still, it is not realistic to expect that the book industry can erect walls high and strong enough, to hold back the tide.

Time and again, commentators from beyond the book trade argue that with ever larger libraries being digitized and made accessible to wide audiences on a screen, an old dream of the universal library at last is becoming a powerful reality. And in fact, the book industry proper could not come up with alternatives of its own making. So instead of demonizing Google — or Amazon — or foretell the end of books, culture or even reading, it is better to take a bolder look at what may be ahead.

Perhaps a way out, if not a solution, of this odd deadlock is to go back to our initial question asking what the book is in the first place, and why books are so important. Instead of pointing to purely formal criteria such as the 49 pages plus a cover, it may be helpful to address the authority of books, as compared to other content made public.

From an author’s perspective as well as that of a reader, one could say: Whoever decides to present a body of complex knowledge, regardless on what subject, be it fiction or non-fiction, text or other, will consider as the best course to turn it into a book. And whoever, as a reader, needs a body of complex knowledge, regardless on what subject, be it fiction or non-fiction, text or other, will be most likely to turn to a book.

Books are, in this regard, simply *the most universal format available for the exchange of ideas and complex knowledge*.

The value and hence the authority we find in books, derive from their paramount role in the exchange of ideas and in the communication of knowledge, which stem from the inherent qualities of the book as a container and a format. Books are a social convention that turned out to be successful, sustainable and efficient. If books, in the next step, are to be embedded in a linked digital environment, and if they are digitized themselves, we have a lot to gain by even enhancing those qualities — instead of trying to curtail them with absurd restrictions.

In the end, there is no reason why books should now have reached the end of their evolution only because new digital ways widen the scope of the library and lower the barriers of access to the knowledge in books. Such re-framing is more likely to strengthen what makes the core of

books-and this includes the rights of authorship and newly introduces the stakes held by the reader. It is most likely to open the gates for new usages in that it reinforces the lesson from Cluny, that the most powerful thing about the book is not only that it is read, but that the reading is shared within the community of readers. □

This article is based on a presentation on “The History of the Future of the Book” given at the conference of SHARP (Society for the History of Authorship, Reading & Publishing) held at Oxford Brookes University on 20th June 2008. The presentation was made along with two other papers, presented by Miha Kovac of the University of Ljubljana and Angus Philips of Oxford Brookes University.

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