You Can’t Judge a Book by Its Cover

The evolution of books is having an impact all across the book publishing industry.

By Jill Baker

In 1997, Optical Toys published a flipbook of Thomas Edison’s “Kinetoscopic Record of a Sneeze.” As you flip the pages of this 2x3-inch top-bound book using your thumb, the black-and-white photos, originally taken by Edison’s assistant, W.K.L. Dickson, “animate” the sneeze in progress.

Originally produced by Edison as a motion picture in 1894 and reconstituted from a Library of Congress print of the original copyrighted material, this little gem explains that at the time of release, people paid 25-cents to view Edison’s short films in five different machines at the first Kinetoscope parlor on Broadway.

More than 100 years later, we are still exploring creative ways to tell and share stories on multiple screens.

The so-called e-book revolution is really part of an evolution that has taken us from ancient petroglyphs to illuminated manuscripts and from the typeset Gutenberg Bible of the 15th century to the beautiful gold fore-edge printed volumes of the Victorian Age. What a range of “books” we’ve enjoyed! Compare, for instance, James Audubon’s 39-inch color-plated Birds of North America (early 1800s) with the chunky, cardboard cut-out and pop-up books for children in the 1900s.

Books historically have been defined by how they’re made: written, illustrated and printed with ink on blank sheets of paper, parchment or other materials and usually fastened together to hinge at one side. Yet the finished products span an impressive range.

Books encompass low-cost, dog-eared, beach-toted paperbacks and slick, colorful tabletop compilations; crisp, factual textbooks and campy graphic novels. Between the covers of the book, the writer’s drive to document information, tell stories and share knowledge meets the reader’s quest to obtain and consume that knowledge and entertainment and devote significant time in comprehending it.

WHAT IS A ‘BOOK?’

Although books have been with us for centuries, we’re now on the cusp of an era that redefines the very meaning of “book”—not only in the form it takes but the way in which it is created, delivered and consumed. And since many of today’s data-saturated readers are not inclined to read long-form printed material, formats, delivery systems and pricing models for digital, electronic books (e-books) are adapting to meet their needs.

Who says a book has to be rectangular or must be read by a single person, or that content has to reside on a page or computer screen? Consider the brilliant multi-platform outdoor campaign launched by Jay-Z, Random House and Droga 5, an agency that has since been recognized for creative excellence. Their campaign promoted Jay-Z’s Decoded book by publishing excerpts in unlikely venues, using Bing maps to locate them and social media to integrate participation. Book chapters were plastered on the sides of buildings, on the bottoms of pools and on burger wrappers, turning mundane surfaces into literary canvases. Part scavenger hunt, part publicity stunt, here the book became a larger-than-life “spectacle” that crossed geographic barriers.

A recent article in Publisher’s Weekly suggested that in five years, e-book sales will account for half of trade book sales. While not all publishers agree on the pace of transformation, most acknowledge that e-books are gaining momentum.

BOOKS ARE WHATEVER WE WANT THEM TO BE

As a digital and mobile publishing provider, Texterity has witnessed and participated in the migration of publishers and readers...
from traditional, print-only formats to bold digital, mobile and rich media-enhanced solutions. The channels used to create and separate information delivery have blurred. Today, a digital edition can sit on a website or become a mobile app; it can play a video or contain interactive features; it can link to e-commerce or include it all while remaining connected to a social media network. “We are seeing a tectonic shift,” said Martin Hensel, founder of Texterity.

Unlike traditional book publishing, where change is painstakingly slow, these latest changes seem to be happening in nanoseconds. Just months ago, e-book publishers were targeting broad-based consumers. Now they are looking at niche markets: academic, business, enthusiast. And why not? An e-book, read on a mobile device or e-reader is extremely portable, very durable, less likely to be lost, priced right and available with the tap of a finger.

Although Texterity now specializes in periodical publications, its roots are in e-book publishing, and many of the trends Texterity has observed in magazine publishing are being replicated in the book publishing sector.

“The application of apps to books will further establish a direct-to-consumer business model,” said Hensel. “Transaction is important today, as is immediate delivery. The reading public is increasingly distracted, so they are opting for shorter, faster bites of information. This opens the door for stand-alone serials that can be purchased when a reader wants.”

Book publishing is also changing behind the scenes. Literary agents and publicists are almost becoming a dying breed and even established authors now find themselves shouldering the responsibility for marketing themselves. In some cases, authors are self-publishing, printing on demand or choosing e-book distribution and skipping traditional publishing houses altogether.

Technology is also altering how publishers and authors gauge success. “We see behavioral marketing coming into play as we become more sophisticated in tracking reading patterns,” Hensel said. “Unlike monitoring an over-the-counter sale of a traditional print edition, current digital and mobile technology allows us to understand what our readers like and where they linger. With cross-channel publishing, we also can be smart in using one channel to leverage the other. We encourage our publishers to use print to promote digital, to use digital to promote print, and to use both plus the Web to promote mobile.”

This new e-book publishing environment is increasingly controlled by digital distribution channels rather than publishing companies or their distribution partners. Apple’s announcement of the iBook will give Amazon a run for its money,” Hensel said. “iBooks will replace the college bookstore by offering a great reading experience, easy publishing tools, iTunes’ buying ability and better economics to publishers and authors.”

**WRITE ON**

Digital technology presents opportunities to writers, as well as readers. For the aspiring self-publisher, online platforms like Blurb and MyPublisher offer templated solutions ideal for photo books, albums and family histories. While MyPublisher focuses on expanded print formats (books, calendars and cards), Blurb is now embracing iOS e-publishing platforms that integrate with its free book-making tools. Its website claims, “Now you can take any book you’ve already made with Blurb Bookify™ or Blurb BookSmart® … (and) buy or sell it as an e-book for just US $1.99.”
Authors are also facing responsibilities once assumed by their publishers. With traditional publishing houses curtailing marketing services, today's authors are tasked with setting up their own promotions and book signings. Combined with new production technology and the powers of social media, that makes the need for a third-party publisher almost obsolete. Consequently, the lure of e-book self-publishing is gaining traction.

At a recent workshop on book marketing, one published attendee claimed that she had previously been earning 66¢ for each hardbound copy sold. Now, through Amazon, she was making $7.93 per e-book. The instructor pointed out that today's authors will make less money on a beautiful $24.99 printed book than on a $5.99 e-book due to the difference in overhead and the need for middlemen. Ironically, he said, the same industry peers who three years ago were thumbing their noses at self-published e-book authors are today clamoring to get e-book deals.

In all likelihood, some genres will do better in e-book format than others, depending on the subject matter and sophistication of the electronic device. A text novel, for example, might survive without much digital embellishment in e-book form, especially on an e-reading device where text extraction makes for an easy, streamlined read. On the other hand, a highly visual historical, scientific or photographic book would be less compelling on an e-reader like the Kindle, where dramatic layout is lost. But tablets like the iPad, which are simple enough for a toddler to use, increase the effectiveness of instructional or graphic e-books by allowing readers to manipulate content in the learning process. 3-D renderings, animations, layers of supplementary information and audio enhancements point to the advantage of e-books as tablet apps.

THE CHALLENGES OF CHANGE
As books evolve, some of the skills that support traditional book culture will regrettably be lost or devalued. Classic printing methods, book jacket design, binding and strategic merchandising become less critical for books on screens, and paper quality, typography and bookcases seem anachronistic.

“As a designer, the prospect of e-publishing is both exciting and daunting,” said Julia McCandless, art director at Davis Publications, which publishes books for art education. “We already produce print editions which are then digitized, but we do not take full advantage of all the e-publishing features. From what I have learned about e-publishing, I would have to acquire a new set of skills and have the time to design for multiple platforms. Of course, there are automated way of displaying text and images, but that strips away the creativity. Still, imagining what I could do with those new skills is enticing.”

Publishers are also grappling with the guidelines for e-book usage and lending, which brings libraries into the mix. You can see the e-writing on the library wall at the American Library Association website.

Today's library is becoming a state-of-the-art informational center that is redefining the role of those who facilitate the storage and access of information. But while technology provides opportunities, it also creates turmoil in existing business models. Fearing that lending will cut into their sale, five of the six major publishing houses have decided to restrict or disallow libraries from lending e-book versions of their titles. Will publishers continue to restrict access to digital books in libraries or will they eventually embrace libraries as an outlet for raising awareness and distributing their titles?

Clearly the rumble of change is rolling across all facets of the book publishing industry, engulfing authors and publishers, distributors and readers. There may soon be a time when we no longer say “You can’t judge a book by its cover,” because we may well be enjoying customized e-books topped with the covers of our choice. Then again, without the need for physical newsstands and a way to attract impressionable eyes, will book covers even be necessary? This might be a good time for book designers to learn about splash screens.