

The Industry Matters

By Maya Reynolds

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Each time I sit down to write this column, I look for an event that establishes a theme for the preceding three months.

In reviewing the second quarter of 2006, I suspect the signature event was BookExpo America (BEA), held at the Washington Convention Center from May 19 to 21. This year's conference of booksellers will probably be best remembered for the fiery speech given by one of the literary lions in attendance--74-year-old John Updike.

Instead of providing the expected plug for his latest book, Updike launched into a diatribe on how technology is impacting publishing. His speech was a call-to-arms in what the *Washington Post* portrayed as the clash between "the technorati and the literati. The technorati are thrilled at the way computers and the Internet are revolutionizing the world of books. The literati fear that, amid the revolutionary fervor, crucial institutions and core values will be guillotined."

In his closing, Updike said, "So, booksellers . . . defend your lonely forts. Keep your edges dry. Your edges are our edges. For some of us, books are intrinsic to our human identity."

If Updike spoke for the literati, the spokesperson for the technorati was Carly Fiorina, former CEO of HP, who gave a BEA speech entitled, "The Future of Publishing in the Digital Age." She said that, ultimately, "technology is transforming every industry, and it can be resisted, but it can't be stopped."

There was such demand to hear these speeches that BEA has made them available for download. You can listen to Updike at <http://bookexpocast.com/2006/05/26/bea-2->

john-updike-speech/ and Fiorina at <http://bookexpocast.com/2006/06/13/bea-8-carly-fiorina-on-the-future-of-publishing-in-the-digital-age/>.

The rest of this column will be devoted to the breaking news on either side of that technological divide.

In my January column, I suggested keeping an eye out for a company called iRex, which was scheduled to release a new e-Reader called iLiad in April. As I write this on July 4th, the iLiad will finally be available for shipment in the U.S. on

July 10--at a price of \$811. No matter how wonderful the reading device is, at that price, I doubt many will sell.

Breaking news: As this newsletter is going into production (July 24), Engadget reports, "Trustworthy insiders [say] that Apple's not satisfied merely vending Audible's books-on-digital-audio solution. With the iRex iLiad and Sony PRS-500 Portable Reader both right around the corner, is it possible the next iPod might catch the eBook bug? . . . According to a source at a major publishing house, they were just ordered to archive all their manuscripts -- every single one -- and send them over to Apple's Cupertino HQ. A separate trusted source let us know that the next iPod will have a substantial amount of screen real estate . . . as well as a book reading mode that pumps up the contrast and drops into monochrome for easy reading."

After reading Engadget, I visited the iRex website. Lo and behold, the \$811 price is no longer posted and, instead, there's a form for interested buyers to send the company an email. Looks like iRex might be re-thinking their pricing strategy.

On May 19th, Amazon and BookSurge (the company Amazon purchased in April, 2005) issued a press release announcing "a new Print-on-Demand (POD) program designed to help book publishers sell lower volume book titles through a more economic supply chain."

Translation: Amazon is now offering publishers an inexpensive way to print as few as one copy of an out-of-print title from their list.

Last spring, BookSurge sent a letter to their clients touting its acquisition by Amazon.com. The letter said, "BookSurge's inventory-free fulfillment network offers a great advantage for online retailing. We can stock an infinite number of titles without worrying about shelf spaces, restocking, or reprinting. We simply print the book once it's ordered."

It will be interesting to see how many publishers take advantage of the Amazon/BookSurge initiative. BookSurge is not without problems. There have been complaints (and at least one lawsuit) about the quality of their product.

Readers' choices continue to expand. Once upon a time, a reader's only options were to buy a print book new or used. With the advent of the Internet, s/he could purchase a book for download on a computer. With this new POD initiative, if publishers sign on, readers will be able to purchase a single hard copy of a book that is no longer available in print.

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In my April column, I wrote about Sophie, the project of the Annenberg Center for Communication at the University of Southern California. Sophie is a social engineering project and an attempt to create documents that could live and breathe on the Internet and where readers could interact with each other and with the author.

The June 5th edition of the *New York Times* had an article that reminded me of Sophie. The *Times* described a book called *Only Revolutions* by Mark Z. Danielewski. During his editing process, Danielewski created a private forum on his website so that fans of his work could read and add suggestions online. When the book is published in September, those hundreds of margin notes will be included in the finished product.

Such interaction between a writer and readers would not have been possible a decade ago. Now the social networking possibilities related to reading a book seem limited only by the boundaries of imagination.

The *Times* says: "Hovering above the discussion of all these technologies is the fear that the publishing industry could be subject to the same upheaval that has plagued the music industry, where digitalization has started to displace the traditional artistic and economic model of the record album with 99-cent song downloads and personalized playlists.

"Total album sales are down 19 percent since 2001, while CD sales have dropped 16 percent during the same period, according to Nielsen SoundScan. Sales of single digital music tracks have jumped more than 1,700 percent in just two years."

Like John Updike, many writers and publishers live in fear that technology will rob them of revenue. Others, like thriller writer Lisa Scottoline and fantasy writer Laurell K. Hamilton are making the latest developments work for them. Both women provide the first chapters of their book on their websites to tantalize readers into purchasing the books.

Now, let's look at some tidbits from the world of print publishing. A July 4th article on www.CBC.ca by Andre Mayer talked about a new marketing initiative for books. HarperCollins is publicizing the debut novel by British author Gautam Malkani with a video trailer made for the Internet. Mayer reports, "The *Londonstani* trailer uses Flash animation and provocative images: Bimmers, cellphones, nightclubs, alternately graffitied and blood-spattered walls — all punctuated with juddering, Asian-flavoured drum 'n' bass. Never before have I felt such a visceral urge to read a book."



Judith Keenan, who in 1994 originated the use of video trailers to promote books as though they were movies, says, "the rationale behind book trailers is to take the onus off retailers to promote books and market to consumers directly. The convenience and immediacy of the Internet make it a no-brainer."

HarperCollins has produced nearly a dozen trailers so far this year. "The motivation is 'to drive early word of mouth,' says Steve Osgoode, director of online marketing and new media for HarperCollins Canada."

While we're talking about publishing strategies, there was an interesting article in the *Wall Street Journal* on June 3rd. Jeffrey A. Trachtenberg reported on publishers who are "commissioning two or more books at a time from an author and then releasing them within months of each other to get readers hooked. And they're publishing them as 'rack sized' paperbacks." These rack sized paperbacks are the smaller

versions popular in airports and on newsstands where commuters shop.

The WSJ article talks about a popular thriller writer, James Swain, whose five previous novels had been issued in hardback. Mr. Swain agreed to a deal that would discourage many writers. His next two novels will be issued as \$6.99 paperbacks, and they'll be released five weeks apart. This strategy is aimed at "addictive" genres like mysteries (or romances) where readers purchase books frequently. It's a great tactic for quickly building readership—especially for an author whom the publisher believes has enormous potential.

Ballantine released original trilogies in successive months by romantic suspense writer Mariah Stewart and fantasy writer Naomi Novik. The response from bookstores was especially gratifying. Ballantine was pleased to find that, with three books being issued in three months, bookstores offered prominent placement for all three months. A bookstore owner commented, "It's about price and convenience."

That quote could well be the mantra for media purveyors in the future. With so many choices competing for consumers' entertainment dollars, publishers are going to have to think in new and creative ways to capture the public interest. And authors are going to need to be willing to experiment along with their publishers. It's time to think outside the box.

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Maya writes about publishing, new trends and the writer's life in her blog. You can read it and previous "Industry Matters" articles at www.mayareynoldswriter.blogspot.com