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The Future Of The Knowledge Society

Richard Walsh

We can predict nothing about the future of the knowledge society unless we are prepared to study its history closely. This morning, of course, my focus is specifically on the fortunes of print in Australia, on the three traditional print media—newspapers, magazines and books. And to tell you something about them I can do nothing better than tell their story as though they were characters in a traditional nursery story. So ...

Once upon a time there were three bears who called themselves The Print Family. There was Father Bear, who was large and macho. And Mother Bear, who was very feminine and well turned out. And Baby Bear, who spent most of her waking hours scrounging for food and was known to the rest of the family by the name of Cinderella.

Do you recognise these characters? Indeed, you do.

Father Bear, of course, is the newspaper industry. In Australia he is an introduced species and traces his origins back to the 17th century corantos of Venice and Antwerp and to the enduring traditions of the London Times. In character he is very macho indeed—in newspapers even the women are macho! The traditional newspaper companies that have come down to us from what in Australia passes for antiquity have always been male-dominated—after all it was not until the Short Reign of Michelle the First at the helm of the Canberra Times in this fair city, commencing in 1994, that we experienced our very first Queen of Newspapers. It was an experiment that was not pronounced a success.

The newspaper companies have always been part-time manufacturers—they get their hands dirty by printing their own products—and their symbiotic relationship with the political and financial power structures has made them mildly megalomaniac and not a little arrogant. The really good news is that time has tapped Father Bear on the shoulder and he is now an endangered species.

Mother Bear, of course, is the magazine industry and she's actually a bit of a koala—not really a bear at all and very indigenous.

Mass market magazines, as we recognise this medium today, are the brash newcomers in the print troika. The first such publications in America began only in the late 19th century because their relative cheapness depended on the growth of advertising, which in turn required the development of mass consumption and mass production. The first Australian popular magazine was probably *The Dawn*, produced by Henry Lawson's mum, Louisa, in October 1889, a mere six years after the launch of *The Ladies Home Journal*, which is regarded as America's first magazine. *The Dawn*, incidentally, was produced on a hand press by an all-female crew, much to the consternation of the Typographical Association, which promptly boycotted it.

Of course, there were many literary periodicals before Louisa Lawson's little effort—most notably the Sydney and Melbourne Punches and their ilk—but these were not called magazines in their time and were not magazines as we know them today. *The Bulletin*, which had begun in 1880, called itself a Sydney paper.

The word magazine derives from the French word for a department store, *magasin*; the new medium too had its various departments and was targeted at women. *The Dawn* was a totally new concept—it was a mixture of fiction, poetry, practical advice to the housewife and, in its own memorable words, it was a 'phonograph to wind out audibly the whispers, pleadings and demands of the sisterhood'. And it was cheap. With *The Bulletin* you got eight pages for

sixpence. But *The Dawn* was a mere threepence for 16 pages, and then later 32 pages as its advertising content burgeoned.

Much later, *The Australian Women's Weekly* at the height of its remarkable powers was read by more than 40 per cent of all adult women in this country and was the largest selling magazine in the world on a per capita basis. *The Women's Weekly's* character was uniquely Australian but, unlike newspapers and books, it was affiliated more with the entertainment industry than with the knowledge society, which is why I described magazines as koalas.

In the 20th century the large newspaper companies became the most successful publishers of popular magazines but that did not mean they were particularly good at it—their dominance resulted more from their ownership of the printing presses and of the means of mass distribution than from any talent they displayed as magazine publishers. Magazines were derided by the press boys as what we would call today 'secret women's busines'. Because magazines did not have the ferocious deadlines of papers, they were judged as a cinch to produce. They were viewed as though they were prettied-up newspapers produced on a sluggish timetable for women.

The particular skills good magazine publishing demanded were simply not recognised and certainly not respected. *Mother Bear* was held virtually in contempt and, from a business point of view, treated with benign neglect. Failed newspaper executives, or those past their prime, were usually those despatched to take charge of their magazine division. Indeed, magazines were so despised that ultimately the *Herald & Weekly Times Group* and *News Ltd* and *John Fairfax* divested themselves of most of their magazine interests.

The one large group which always took magazines seriously was *Australian Consolidated Press*. Because *The Australian Women's Weekly* had been *Frank Packer's* baby and had proven a goldmine, magazine publishing was always at the forefront of the *Packer* psyche. In a telling moment, in 1987 *Kerry Packer* managed to convince the young *Warwick Fairfax* and his advisers to sell to *ACP Fairfax's* magazines—including *Woman's Day*, *Dolly*, *People* etc.—for about \$100m. Given their mediocre commercial performance at that time, this seemed fair enough but within a very few years we quadrupled the profitability of those titles, illustrating what could be achieved by dedicated magazine publishers.

In the late 20th century men finally made contact with the feminine side of their souls and began to recognise, somewhat grudgingly, that being visually attractive isn't all that sissy—even newspapers have lately been forced to pick up their game and become more colourful and handsome to look at. The big magazine story of the last decade has been the enormous growth in male readership, not only of the new wave of lads' titles like *Inside Sport* and *Ralph*, but of magazines in general. Good old *Mother Bear* still has lots of life left in her, as we shall see.

And then there is the wee bear called *Cinderella*. In other words, books. Now the truth is that while *Baby Bear* may look like a child, she is in fact a very old bear indeed, now in her second childhood—sans hair, sans teeth, sans respect, sans everything. The real scandal in the *Bear* household is that this isn't the child of *Mother Bear* and *Father Bear* at all—it's their wizened old grandmother, shriveled up in old age and forced to cadge for food in her dotage. As old as *Gutenberg* and *Caxton* themselves, this is a bear with a proud tradition. Until recently it was through books that all of us gained our literacy and it was through them that the wisdom of the ages was passed on to succeeding generations.

How on earth did the book industry come to this pretty pass? We live, brothers and sisters, in materialistic times—in the immortal words of *Oscar Wilde*, we know the price of everything and the value of nothing.

In saying that *Father Bear* is strong, that *Mother Bear* is weaker but still standing and that *Baby Bear* is enfeebled, please note that I am talking not about the media themselves but about the media companies involved as their publishers. In truth, most people still retain great respect for the book and have little respect for newspapers but the traditional

arrogance of newspaper companies has been based entirely on the great profits they once made in a golden era fast fading. When ACP was floated as a public company in 1992, no one had any idea exactly how much money successful magazine publishers made but when they saw ACP's figures they were duly impressed.

There are no book companies listed on the Australian Stock Exchange but everyone fears, not without reason, that their profit and loss accounts would make pretty embarrassing reading. In the financial year 1997–1998, according to figures compiled by the federal Department of Communications, the revenue that flowed to publishers from the sale of books in Australia was \$1.035 billion. But the cost of producing these books was \$1.133 billion, which would have produced a total loss of almost \$100 million for the industry as a whole. If it were not in fact for government subsidies, PLR, CAL payments and other miscellaneous income, the whole of the book industry would look remarkably similar to Kempsey after the recent catastrophic downpour.

But, as Bob Dylan reassured us in his heyday, the times they are a-changin'. Indeed they are, and their impact upon the Bear Family may well be not merely to change the household pecking order but to re-arrange the family dynamics entirely.

I do not want to dwell for too long on the impact of online technology on newspapers because much of it is obvious and already anticipated by the industry itself. Modern newspapers are a collection of magazines gummed together with an outer coating of reportage and paid for by mainly classified advertising. The Saturday Sydney Morning Herald, for example, is a series of magazines with names like Domain, Icon, News Review, The Good Weekend etc., with a light batter of news on the outside and what remains of the famed golden rivers of advertising to provide sustenance. In exchange for colour technology, which makes their magazine content look suitably pretty, they have been forced to surrender to truly appalling deadlines—it seems that anything, however important, that happens after 11 o'clock at night is quite beyond them.

Immediacy was once the great engine that drove newspaper circulations; but today, for late-breaking news, you turn to the broadcast and online media. Somehow the press boys still manage to con their advertisers into believing their magazine content enjoys the same readership as their news pages but sooner or later their remaining display advertisers will wake up. In the highly profitable categories of classified advertising—cars and houses and jobs—the capacity of computer technology to allow readers to locate what they want quickly and efficiently will raise the arsenic in the rivers of gold to commercially toxic levels.

There can be little doubt that modern online technology threatens the traditional dominance of Father Bear; but it may yet put new finery across the narrow shoulders of Cinderella and send her off to the ball in fine style. The New Technology may in time prove to be the Great Leveller. As the most prosperous print medium, newspapers after all have the most to lose from rapid change; books have nothing to lose and all to gain as we shall see.

Up to a few years ago you could have been forgiven for dismissing the idea that people would give up reading books and magazines printed on paper. After all, experiments by John Gould and his colleagues at IBM in the 1980s had shown that reading from paper was up to 30 per cent faster than reading from computer screens, due largely to the lower resolution of text on a screen. You and I know how awkward and slow and, yes, plain inaccurate it is to read from a standard PC or laptop.

But there have been some important advances recently and there are more in the pipeline. Microsoft's ClearType and Adobe's CoolType, released onto the market about a year ago, have tripled the resolution of type on screen. The nifty little E-book reading device known as the Rocket E-book is portrait-shaped with a higher resolution than most PC screens. More importantly, it dispenses with the irritation of scrolling type and can be read from almost as many angles as paper, so it can be used with equal ease while walking, lying on a sofa, sitting at a desk or on the proverbial loo. Readers turn whole pages at a time with thumb-buttons beside the screen.

Of all the developments rolling down the pipeline of progress I believe the most important is Philips Electronics's E Ink –Electronic Ink technology. Because E Ink contains the same colouring agents as normal ink and paper, it is three to six times brighter than reflective LCDs, the type of display currently used on laptops. It exceeds newspapers in contrast ratio and reads easily in both dim light and full sunlight. Like paper, the E Ink display has a clear image that can be seen at any angle without a change in contrast.

But, beyond readability, E Ink offers portability. It is anticipated that displays utilising this technology will require one-thousandth the power required by a standard notebook computer screen; requiring smaller batteries, it will be less expensive and lighter to carry. Because electronic ink displays read like ink on paper, they should cause less eyestrain than displays that emit or transmit light. Which would be pretty scary stuff if I were addressing a convention of printers or paper-makers this morning but, hey, we're publishing and editing and indexing folk, right?

So where is all this heading?

The most significant feature of the old order was that, so long as publishing required significant investment in printing and paper and the means of distribution then those who provided the necessary capital—the proprietors—were the dominant force. Over time, of course, the balance has begun to tilt away from the old-style Beaverbrook/Hearst/Frank Packer newspaper tyrant; in radio and TV and film for a long time now the performers have been better remunerated than management. Because of online technology, which simultaneously makes publishing less expensive and also destroys the old distribution oligarchies, the time has arrived for the journalists and writers to flex their muscles at last.

Paul Barry is a typical New Age journalist—he is a freelancer who pursues stories that interest him and he is able to sell his output to newspapers or to TV or to a book publisher. In time, there will be lots of Paul Barrys and they will work for a new kind of media company, one with the expertise to publish in whatever print medium is best suited to their output or indeed in whatever medium is required. Such companies will have the capacity to identify budding Paul Barrys and to nurture their talents. By then newspapers themselves will have shrivelled to four or eight pages a day—a series of syndicated columns and exposés available not only printed on paper but also in E-Book form.

In time newspapers will give up even trying to report fast-moving news stories. Online reportage is more likely to become a partnership of the internet with radio than with newspapers because only radio requires 24-hour news gathering and newspapers no longer maintain large teams of reporters, themselves relying more and more on news agencies.

The vice-president in charge of electronic books at Microsoft, Dick Brass, at last year's eBook World Conference in New York reiterated that company's famous prediction that the last print edition of the New York Times will appear in the year 2018. If Microsoft truly believes that there will be nothing called the New York Times in print at that time then I believe the good folk from Seattle are suffering an advanced stage of cyber-hubris. If, however, they are predicting that newspapers in 2018 will look nothing like today's papers they are almost certainly correct.

During the next twenty years, newspaper companies will disappear as great manufacturing enterprises. What will arise in their place, in my view, will be entities more akin to today's syndication agencies. John Fairfax, for example, might be the exclusive managing agent, in all media, for maybe over 200 working journalists—high-profile bylines like Alan Ramsey and Michelle Grattan and Ross Gittins and Deidre Macken and Peter FitzSimons and Roy Masters and for a whole lot of lesser names, whose reputations are under construction. The best-known of these journalists may maintain websites to which people subscribe; here you may be able to read their columns daily on-line or participate in their chat-rooms. The publishing company will manage their output in whatever medium is appropriate to their talents; it will market them and provide the infrastructure they will require—subeditors, researchers, fact checkers, legal vetting etc.

When David Salter and I were forced to close down Australia's first daily on-line newsletter, The Zeitgeist Gazette, of fond memory, in March last year we boldly predicted that it, or something like it, would one day rise again. When we launched the Gazette, in 1999, we flew in the face of conventional wisdom by declaring that there was no way known we could be free of charge and hope to live entirely off advertising income; so we then opted for a subscription-paid model. Time has vindicated us to this extent—no one today any longer believes that quality journalism can be sustained on the net purely from advertising revenue. Salon no longer believes that; The Wall Street Journal no longer believes it. I firmly believe that online newsletters, nourished by a loyal subscription base, will be revived as an important outlet for vigorous journalism in the future.

But for many years yet to come, one of the most effective ways of marketing journalistic heavyweights and generating revenue for them may well be to publish something that looks like an undernourished Bulletin, a selection of their online material in printed form—a kind of Readers Digest for easy reading on the increasingly congested public and private transport systems. These booklets, published maybe daily or less frequently, will have familiar names like the Melbourne Age or indeed the New York Times and will be the last vestiges of the great newspaper tradition. Such is the future of news analysis.

Lifestyle publishers, similarly, will no longer be newspaper companies or magazine companies or book companies. They will be all of the above, and more. In some ways the most significant harbinger of the future in this field of endeavour is Matt Handbury's Murdoch Magazines company, which today itself produces the television show Better Homes & Gardens, as well as the magazine of that name. His company produces the magazines Family Circle and Marie Claire, but also books under those imprints.

As newspapers run out of advertising income, they will no longer be able to afford to provide magazines like Domain or Drive free of charge to their lucky readers, but they may be tempted to develop these titles a little more aggressively and push them out into the marketplace as paid publications. Conversely, some of today's magazine companies will produce some of their output on newsprint so as to give them lower and more attractive cover prices. The new owners of Pacific Magazines, for example, may well be tempted to produce New Idea as an inexpensive colour newspaper—looking more like the Wentworth Courier or Melbourne Weekly than a traditional magazine. The problem for Woman's Day and New Idea in the last few years has been that their cover prices have shot up so dramatically that they have become considered purchases when they should, by rights, be impulse buys. As coloured newspapers they might yet regain their former glories.

Clearly what I am suggesting is that, in the near-future, we will not be defining print companies by the physical appearance of their output but by the subject matter they specialise in. They will become truly multimedia specialists in reportage or news commentary or lifestyle or whatever. And their domain will not merely be print but also broadcasting and online, including datacasting whenever the incoming Beazley Government manages to find a way of allowing this interesting new medium take its rightful place in the pantheon.

Books, of course, will continue to be written by the journalists and writers associated with the kinds of media companies I have already described. And there will be other enterprises which specialise in literature and education, the two great heartlands of the traditional book business. But there's no doubt that the world of book publishing is changing very rapidly, even as we talk about it.

Last year Jason Epstein wrote an influential essay in the New York Review of Books called 'The Rattle of Pebbles', which he subsequently expanded into a book called Book Business: Publishing Past Present and Future. I am sure many of you are aware of these contributions to publishing futurology; if you aren't, I recommend them to you even if I don't agree with all their conclusions. Epstein, of course, is and was a distinguished editor and publisher, having joined Random House in 1958. When I myself began in book publishing I used to visit New York twice a year, in regular forays to secure Australian rights on promising American titles;

when I met Epstein at that time New York publishing was highly prestigious and he was one of its notables.

For an old man Jason Epstein is surprisingly upbeat about the future and about the impact of the net on books. Perhaps his boldest prediction is that ultimately the big-name authors will no longer be published by mainstream publishing houses at all.

With considerable passion, Epstein writes: 'Such name-brand best-selling authors as Tom Clancy, Michael Crichton, Stephen King, Dean Koontz, and John Grisham, whose faithful readers are addicted to their formulaic melodramas, no more need publishers to edit and publicize their books than Nabisco needs Julia Child to improve and publicize Oreos. Name-brand authors need publishers only to print and advertise their books and distribute them to the chains and other mass outlets, routine tasks that all publishers manage equally well.'

Epstein believes that the only factor sustaining the current system is the humungous royalty advances being shelled out by big publishers to these name-brand authors. He writes: 'To retain these powerful authors publishers already forego much of their normal profit, or incur severe losses, by paying royalty guarantees far greater than can be recouped from sales. As a result publishers' profits from books by these best-selling authors, if there are any after the unearned portion of the guarantee has been deducted from revenues, often amount to little more than a modest fee for services. Given the negligible value that publishers add to these assured best sellers in today's brand-driven marketplace, these fees are a fair reward.'

Epstein reminds us that several name-brand film stars, including Leonardo DiCaprio, Kevin Costner, and Robin Williams, have recently left their agents and hired business managers to create their own production companies rather than sign with studios or independent producers on traditional terms. These celluloid superstars, in a mood not dissimilar to that of brand-name authors, feel they don't need anyone to produce them or to direct them or to show them how to act. Epstein predicts a day when the publishing conglomerates tire of overpaying their star performers and these writers opt out of the system, hiring independent contractors as production consultants, publicity agencies, and distribution services.

For the record, I agree with Epstein's prediction. So we are entering a world in which newspapers will have to survive without classified advertising and book publishers will have to survive without Bryce Courtenay or Harry Potter. What a challenge. In truth we are going to see emerge not only a new kind of publisher for journalism but a new kind of publisher for imaginative writing.

Cyberspace is already awash with new books emanating from major publishing houses. But there is also a huge and bewildering range of non-mainstream publishing of new E-book titles going on, ranging from vanity- to self-publishing, i.e. ranging from the author paying someone else to digitise their manuscript and host it on the web to the author foregoing normal royalties and advances, either accepting no royalty whatsoever or being paid a modern-day version of a share of profits, actually just like authors did in the 19th century. One common thread in all this frenetic activity is an overwhelming desire to dispense altogether with publishing editors. Either through authorial hubris or a desire to save money, the text as written by the author is the text that appears on screen. There is, for example, the new joint venture between the Australian Society of Authors and a company called IPR Systems Pty Ltd. This site offers Australian authors the opportunity to throw off their shackles and liberate themselves from those pesky publishers for once and for all. RMIT is involved with Commonground.com.au, which seems to be a semi-commercial venture along the same lines.

Discussing this phenomenon, Jason Epstein writes: 'The World Wide Web offers access to any would-be writer who may or may not have something to say and know how to say it. Several literary websites that have so far emerged are in effect vanity presses, willing to publish anything, regardless of quality, provided the author pays. It is highly improbable that from this clutter works of value will emerge.'

But my own view is rather different to Epstein's. His belief that nothing of lasting worth will emerge from the cacophony of the web makes it sound as though publishers are, and always have been, infallible and totally prescient. Nothing could be further from the truth. There are many notorious examples of great works that have struggled to find a publisher. To mention only one of them: as some of you will remember, the comedic novel, *A Confederacy of Dunces*, was written by John Kennedy Toole in the early sixties, when he was only 16. He tried unsuccessfully to get his novel published but ultimately, depressed by his failure to do so, he committed suicide in 1969. It was in fact only through the tenacity of his mother—who, like the very best kind of legendary good mum, never wavered in her faith in her son's work—that this book ultimately found its deserved audience. *A Confederacy of Dunces* won the 1981 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, twelve years after the author's tragic death.

Much rubbish and some really good books will be self-published on the net. But the net in time will come to be little more than a reader's nightmare, even if it is a writer's heaven. Browsing the web will be like visiting the largest and most chaotic bookshop you can imagine—one where the books are piled high but not organised according to any known principle. Something like Bob Gould's Third World Bookshop in Sydney during its heyday. Soon there will arise the need for someone to take readers by the hand and guide them through this forbiddingly lavish literary smorgasbord.

Publishers in the past have been the traditional gatekeepers between all that is written and all that is available to a wider public. That intermediary role may well continue in a new way. In time, in my view, a new kind of book publisher will arise—one who will, free of charge, act as a kind of search engine to this vast inchoate universe of immaculately conceived literary works floating around in cyberspace. Certain publishers will become touchstones for their ability to recommend works, to fossick through this awesome literary garbage mountain and to point their reader-clients in interesting directions. To recompense them for their work in 'discovering' and promoting authors' works that have already been posted on the web, these new-age publishers will obtain an option to publish such works subsequently in print. Such publishers may themselves post on the web excerpts from some of the manuscripts they receive, to test on-line reaction, as a kind of latter-day poison-tasting.

As an example of how the online world may in the future create real opportunities for the world of print, the commentator Steve Ditlea, in an article last July in *Technology Review*, provides an interesting case study. He writes: 'The power of e-books as a promotional medium has probably best been demonstrated by Melisse Shapiro, who writes under the nom de plume M.J. Rose. Her first novel, *Lip Service*, an erotically charged thriller, was rejected by a dozen book publishers for being too steamy for the chain bookstores. She opted to publish from her own Web site, offering digital downloads for \$10 or photocopies of the manuscript for \$20. Even when the password for her e-book was stolen and posted online, resulting in 1,000 pirated downloads, she managed to receive 150 paid orders for e-books and 500 orders for photocopies. She invested in printing 3,000 copies to help create buzz; at one point, it was the 123rd best-selling title on Amazon.com. Following her online blitz, Doubleday Direct picked up *Lip Service* for its mail-order book clubs and soon after, Pocket Books signed up print rights in hardcover and paperback.' The experience of Melisse Shapiro may yet provide a useful paradigm for the future.

Halfway between E-books and printed books, which are now sometimes referred to as P-books, there is the D-book, the Digital Book. Dbooks.com, for example, is a company located at North Sydney which uses Fuji Xerox digital printers to produce very low print-runs from existing pdf files. D-books are printed both sides of the paper and then perfect-bound as a paperback with a full-colour cover. Printing off just one single copy of a 200-page book may cost you as little as \$15; if the print-run is a modest 200, the price comes down to \$7-odd per copy. At the moment this technique is being used for micro-reprints or to provide publishers with a small number of advance copies of a new book before it comes off the big printing presses. However, the future application of this technology is obvious.

In America machines capable of printing and binding digitized texts are already being deployed by Ingram, the leading American book wholesaler, and are now being placed in the Barnes and Noble distribution centres and in publishers' warehouses. Jason Epstein in his essay foresees a future in which less expensive versions of these machines 'can be housed in public libraries, schools and universities, and perhaps even in post offices and other convenient places . . . where readers can download digitized texts in electronic form or as printed copies, bypassing retail bookstores . . . Though books manufactured in very small quantities or one at a time by these machines will cost more to produce than factory-made books, their ultimate cost to readers will be less, since publishers' distribution costs and retail markups will not figure in their price . . . the convenience of these machines in thousands of locations with access to potentially limitless virtual inventories, catalogued, annotated, and searchable electronically, will profoundly affect current book marketing practice, to say nothing of the effect on readers and writers.'

I do not quite understand why Epstein foresees these developments as 'bypassing retail bookstores'; I suspect, rather, that such new technology will simply transform the traditional bookstore. The capital cost of machines that can spit out instant D-books is certainly declining dramatically. A conference in Melbourne last month on Book Production in Transition was informed that the cost of a high-powered laser colour printer with built-in collating and binding functions capable of producing an entire paperback book in one smooth process has recently dropped from \$750,000 to \$350,000 per machine.

Nonetheless, this is a substantial outlay and sufficiently high to prevent them sprouting like mushrooms on every street corner. What we are more likely to see is a new type of highly attractive retail outlet where you can linger and eat, where you can listen to records or browse through old-fashioned printed books or, if you wish, where you can order from the vast inventory of available digitised texts a D-book or two, which may be produced for you while you wait. This is the bookshop of the future, rather than the bookshop bypassed.

Publishers are well advanced in using the net to promote their books. One of the most dynamic ways of encouraging book sales is by posting excerpts online; Allen & Unwin, for example, is a local publisher doing this very successfully. Steve Ditlea, in his article last year, to which I've already referred, draws attention to the efforts of veteran science-fiction publisher Jim Baen who in September 1999 initiated what he calls eWebScriptions; for \$10 a month, visitors to Baen's website may download quarter-of-a-book-sized instalments of four titles about to appear in print. Even after receiving the full text in HTML, 'more of our subscribers buy the finished book than don't buy it', claims Baen. By March last year one of his earliest eWebScriptions titles, *Ashes of Victory* by David Weber, had turned up on hardcover best-seller lists in America, partly propelled by Baen's online activities.

Once upon a time, as you may remember, all books were published first in hardback and the most popular of them were offered as paperbacks. Today most books appear at first in paperback and only those offering special commercial prospects appear in hardback. But we are probably moving towards a tomorrow when books will mainly appear initially on-line and then the best of them will later appear in print, and maybe—and this would be the ultimate accolade—sometimes even in hardback.

Some books may be trialled on-line; others may be excerpted. There may also, for example, be subscription sites where for a few dollars a week you can get a fresh new poem each morning to inspire you through your day. Short poems are ideally suited to the computer screen. But probably for a long time yet—maybe even forever—the most prestigious way in which an author may dream of being published will be as a printed item. It may even be that the classics of our times will be printed lovingly, using hot-metal type on handmade paper with elaborate end-papers and so on. Once upon a time people only hired videotapes but in the future a library of great films on DVD and favourite books, handsomely printed, may well be the ultimate distinction of a cultured human being.

On the other hand, clearly some categories of books are unlikely ever to be seen in print again. Reference books, for example, are exquisitely well suited to the net. In the past readers were asked to outlay large sums of money for a set of printed encyclopedias, but the text was already out of date on Day One and 90 per cent of the contents would never be read. On-line publishing allows reference books remain up-to-date at all times and the cost to the reader can be better calibrated to usage. MacquarieNet is a local pioneering attempt to achieve this. For a monthly fee subscribers can tap into the whole of the Macquarie Library of books plus other syndicated reference material.

A report in the SMH's I.T. section last month on Random House's new digital imprint, AtRandom.comBooks, noted: 'Many observers think e-books work best as an information medium, not a storytelling one, and statistics indicate that during the next few years, education/reference books will do better in electronic form than fiction and other mainstream genres. In a study released last week by Jupiter Media Metrics, the research firm projected that 6% of college book sales would be in electronic form by 2005, compared with just 1.5% of consumer titles.'

Academics, in particular, see the net as a magnificent opportunity to overcome, in one mighty leap, all those tiresome obstacles that stand between them and publication. No more peer reviews, with their murky machiavellian politics; no more irritating economic realities. The availability to anyone interested of every monograph ever written, of every PhD thesis (however arcane), of every intellectual contribution ever concocted, is a triumph of New Media intellectual democracy. To attempt to edit any of this would be what realtors call over-capitalisation.

On-line publishing really comes into its own with specialised titles, whether scholarly or of other kinds. Steve Ditlea cites an example of an on-line title called A Potter's Geology, which is far too specialised a book for any publisher in a single country. The web allows those interested in such a title, however thinly dispersed over the planet, to access its text.

What Ditlea doesn't mention is an enticing future prospect. Such books have the potential to be published initially in a special kind of basic English that can be instantaneously machine-translated into any one of a number of global languages selected by the prospective reader. Thus a book like A Potter's Geology can be available online not merely to the couple of hundred people in each continent who are interested in its contents but in whichever principal language they prefer to read it. While machine translation is still in its infancy, it can in fact be very accurate if the author and editor work within the discipline of a limited and predictable vocabulary with a simplified, stripped-down syntax. Michael Singh, Professor of Language and Culture at RMIT, has contributed a fascinating chapter on these possibilities in a volume called C-2-C (standing for Creator to Consumer), the proceedings of the Melbourne conference on Australian Book Production in Transition organised by RMIT last month and published instantaneously by their Common Ground operation as a D-book.

Most E-books these days are conceived of as being very text-oriented. Anything too complicated on-line simply takes too long to download, leading to reader impatience. But we should never forget that there is another kind of non-print book entity. Here is the ever-eloquent New Media commentator, Ralph Lombreglia, wallowing in a little nostalgia in his contribution last December to the Atlantic Unbound:

'In the early nineties, my wife and I were hired by a small development company ...

The result was A Jack Kerouac ROMnibus, published by Penguin Electronic in 1995 ... if a more ambitious 'multimedia illuminatio' of a full-length literary text has ever been attempted, I'm not aware of it. Hundreds and hundreds of phrases in Kerouac's text were linked to pop-up annotations in various media: photographs of people, places, memorabilia from the author's estate, and pages from his note-books; audio readings of various texts; clips from films; original interviews videotaped for the project. All these years later, it still looks great. Unfortunately, you can't see it, because it's no longer available. When we started the project, no one had ever heard the word Netscape. When we finished it, the word Netscape was

everywhere, and before long the World Wide Web helped kill the CD-ROM publishing business and in the process set multimedia production back at least five years.' I should add here that I myself was involved peripherally in a similar venture to this all those years ago—an elaborate version of Joseph Banks Journal, published by the State Library of NSW. I think they still have copies available in their bookshop if you were interested in seeing it.

Ralph Lombreglia concludes rather sadly: 'Most readers never saw the electronic books of the 1990s. That's because serious, well-produced CD-ROMs were too far ahead of their time—too far ahead of the software, the hardware, the digital economy itself. The general public may well believe 'e-book' to be a brand-new, twenty-first-century idea ... [but] electronic-multimedia books could indeed become the future of reading, or part of it. Just like they used to be.'

Despite every attempt to provide high-speed access to the internet, the information highway may never be as fast as we wish it to be. Just as when we build motorways in the real world they simply seem to encourage more traffic and so their immediate beneficial effect is dissipated, so it may be that, for all the cables that are frenetically being laid, we may never be able to keep up with digital demand and deliver the download speeds the online spruikers are predicting as just around the corner. For this reason it is not impossible that the CD-ROM, which delivers a succession of still and moving images so rapidly and effortlessly, may yet make a comeback and prove as durable as the printed book.

And so at last we come to a question which may conceivably be of more than passing interest to those of you gathered here on this bright Canberra morning: In all this maelstrom of change, you may well ask, what exactly does the future hold for today's industrious and highly experienced editors and indexers?

Well, there is good news and there is good news.

Firstly, I think all of us have to accept that the new technology offers a sophisticated and timely solution to the two greatest impediments to modern book reading. The two greatest complaints laid against the book by dedicated readers is that books are now too expensive and too unavailable, meaning by the latter that it is simply too difficult to locate a bookstore that stocks any specific title we are after at that particular moment.

These problems are nobody's fault, as we know, but a direct outcome of over-publication. We are spoilt for choice, which is wonderful given that our interests and tastes are so wide-ranging, but this torrent of titles is its own undoing. Print-runs are shorter, therefore cover prices soar; there are so many new and recently old titles that no bookshop, however large, could ever be expected to stock them all or anticipate from which direction the next surge of demand will arise.

Amazon Books and its imitators have made an important early contribution to book availability but ultimately online technology, via either on-screen texts or advanced E-book reader machines or digital printing on demand, will deliver 100 per cent availability of most titles anywhere on the planet at any hour. Apart from being a giant step forward in convenience, consider for a moment the impact of this on world literacy and world enlightenment and rejoice.

The second point to make is that these changes will in time create cheaper books. Today in Australia one of the largest costs publishers have to meet is their writedown of stock; across the whole industry it undoubtedly costs more than \$100m. per year to write off stock that ultimately has to be sold at well below its manufactured cost. This, in accounting terms, represents the size of the risk publishers embrace each time they print copies of any book—across all the titles a large publisher produces in any year this cost alone may represent 10–15 per cent of the recommended retail price.

The new technology lowers the investment publishers have to make in printed stock per book and thus it lowers the interest they have to pay to their banks or shareholders; it lowers the risk they take and thus their writedown costs; it lowers their warehousing costs and their

distribution costs. Because it may lower the cost of a bookseller's inventory it may even lower the discount that is appropriate to the retailer.

In time readers can expect not only to see the price of books come down, in relation to other kinds of goods, but also to experience less agonising doubt in choosing which titles to buy. Today our friends recommend a book to us as a must-read; on the other hand, we may have read some reviews of this particular book which are equivocal—we hesitate in purchasing it because we fear disappointment. Reading an excerpt on the web can be much more reassuring than sneaking a quick squiz in a bookshop.

To be able to buy what we want, when we want, at a more manageable price and with greater certainty of reader satisfaction—this represents a giant step forward in anybody's language. Particularly in a world where newspaper reading is declining and where—in relation to one traditionally important sector of book readership—there is an ever-swelling population of retired people who are going to enjoy good health and good eyesight for many decades to come.

Now, as publishing professionals, you are entitled to feel a little aggrieved that there are going to be plenty of literary and unliterary works flying around cyberspace that have never experienced the gentle and caring touch of a publishing editor. But it doesn't pay for you to get too excited about that. In our personal lives we long ago have had to get used to the fact that our friends—even our writer friends—sometimes send us letters, and these days e-mail, that surprise us with their carelessness and almost illiteracy. All you can do is grit your teeth, shrug your shoulders and get on with your life.

I have mentioned previously a D-book called C-2-C, which was produced last month, reproducing the papers presented at a Melbourne conference on Australian Book Production in Transition. This was published by Common Ground, a publishing endeavour associated with RMIT and specifically its Faculty of Art Design and Communication. Not a bad provenance, you might be forgiven for thinking; and indeed its contents are very stimulating indeed. But as a piece of professional publishing it's a joke. It's in very great need of good subbing and competent proof-reading; its index, no doubt produced by a computer, is almost useless.

The view of the future promoted by the text of C-2-C is superficially seductive for authors—it suggests that, through a reduction in printing and publishing costs, authors may now hope for larger royalties than they have ever previously dreamed of. Of course, the folk from Common Ground are talking about royalty rates—these people seem to be mildly innumerate in not understanding that a professional writer is ultimately more concerned with total income than royalty rates. After all, it's a triumph if authors get a 25 per cent royalty but somewhat of a pyrrhic victory if they only manage to sell 500 copies.

The world we are entering is going to be even more intensely competitive for authors than the world that preceded it. In the past it's been only a minor achievement to write a book; the real achievement has been getting it published. Now we have a situation where getting published is only a minor achievement but to gain wider recognition and a significant readership will certainly take more skill than the mere capacity to digitise text. To be properly edited and professionally indexed and marketed—these are the kinds of cutting-edge advantages few professional writers will want to sacrifice.

In the last decade there has been a marked increase in the activities of literary agents in trade publishing—it is estimated that today 90 per cent of general books issued by major publishers come to them via agents. Clearly, from what I have said, I see the conventional roles of publishers and agents merging. Editors will work for these new entities as they have traditionally done—encouraging authors, assessing new clients, preparing material for publication. Some manuscripts may well at first be test-driven on the internet in an unedited form but, having evoked a positive response there, they may then need to be professionally edited and prepared for their next step up the literary chain, as a D-book or an offset-printed P-book.

Ideas expressed in written words will continue to be the most significant way of analysing and arguing about the great social and political issues of the day. However, the border between writers and editors and polishers and checkers and researchers will over time blur. Material that is published and produced by the famous 'Jo Smith', in whatever medium, may well be the output of six or eight writers or editors, in the same way as daily gossip columns are produced—in the language of Renaissance art, such material may come from the studio of Jo Smith.

Once upon a time ideas expressed in written words were almost exclusively the province of the print media—of Father Bear, Mother Bear and Baby Bear. Give or take a bit of graffiti and some other minor exceptions, there was simply no other way of written words reaching out to people. But we now need a new way of describing even this notion because no longer is it true to say that ideas expressed in written words must of necessity appear as print on paper. The old tripartite separation of the print media—based on three distinctive manufactured products—is clearly no longer sustainable. But whatever new publishing configuration arises, there will always be a continuing vocation for those who can assist writers reach their fullest potential and their widest possible readership.

The new technology brings with it the promise of more reading, not less. Yes, more unedited manuscripts on the web but also, when it matters, more material to be professionally edited and marketed and published than ever before.

As always throughout human history, we cannot fight technological progress, we must instead use our best efforts to harness it to our greatest advantage. But never forget this. For the media the big story of the 20th Century was the creation of film and broadcast media. But to enjoy radio, to enjoy movies, to enjoy TV you did not need to be able to read or write—literacy may at times help you enjoy those media but it is not strictly necessary. However, right at the very end of the 20th Century, along came the internet. It is virtually impossible to use the internet without being able to read or write. Indeed, the popularity of the PC has meant that more people—yes, even men—know their way around a keyboard. The internet is literacy striking back.

As literate folk you should celebrate this remarkable, dramatic and recent change. Somewhere in all this rapid, dazzling and sometimes confusing evolution of mass literacy there is certain to be an exciting role for those who love language and value knowledge, and want to share that love with other readers.