

The Future for Books in the Electronic Era

A report on a seminar jointly sponsored by the Jerusalem International Book Fair and the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies

In the future a book may be bought as a bubble-wrapped package containing a dust jacket together with a computer chip from which the reader prints out the text at home.

Publishers may not stock inventory but print books when customers order them.

Information will be acquired rapidly from computerized databanks, but literature and poetry will remain in printed form.

The usage of language may be changing under the impact staccato TV-talk. Although most cultural and political life has always taken place outside the home, the new electronic technology may be creating an isolating "living room culture."

These are some of the possible effects of the new electronic technology on the future of books and book publishing that were discussed by a panel of diverse experts in a two-day seminar at the Jerusalem International Book Fair in late April 1983. The major themes that dominated the seminar were:

1. Whether the new communications technology is a threat to—or an opportunity for—book publishing.
2. Distinctions in the use of the new technology for information, entertainment and art.
3. The nature and extent of the technological revolution.
4. How the role and rights of creators and writers are affected by the new technology.
5. How the new technology gives consumers new choices.
6. How conversions are made between books and the new technology and how books are adapted to the new media.

Threat or Opportunity

Eliot Minsker reviewed the various modes of electronic publishing, including computer databases, videocassettes, videodiscs, cable television, direct-broadcast satellites, game cassettes, floppy discs (for computers), flat portable TV screens and remote printing. He identified the lines of opportunity and con-

flict between these modes and the publishing role. Minsker asserted that the new technology is not a threat to the publisher or the author, but is, perhaps, to the traditional printer. He pointed out that the publisher still controls the information and that electronics can communicate it to a larger audience—get more information to more people. The real threat to publishers today is the increasing cost to produce and ship books. Electronics can improve the distribution system. He projected an electronic-era scenario in which the publisher will be relieved from guessing at his print run. He can print to order. Minsker even speculated on publishing a bubble package containing just a dust cover and a computer chip. Referring to marketing requirements, he said, “We are always going to need a dust cover.”

Marc Jaffe asked about the effect of such an offering on the impulse buyer. He said a significant percentage of book sales comes from impulse purchases. Elihu Katz reinforced Jaffe’s point in the discussion period. He said that while publishers can assume readers are highly motivated, they cannot afford to eliminate browsers who are “looking for the unknown.”

Irving Lazar took issue with Minsker. He said, “The publishing world is ‘the fabulous invalid.’ . . . The publishers have never been in better shape—immensely profitable.” He said that publishers have problems because their books are either not in the stores or are on display for too brief a time. Jaffe agreed that “publishing is healthy.”

“The book shall survive,” asserted Martin Levin. He pointed out that in 1982 book revenues were up and that heavy readers devote as much time as ever to books. If the new media have virtues of being updatable and accessible, so do books, he argued. Books have already survived television, but a distinction should be made between *literature* in book form and *information* in book form.

Robert Maxwell said that publishers, authors, and printers must look on electronics as an opportunity. However, Martin Keltz, a publisher who is already working in the electronic future, warned that leisure time is finite and that studies show the use of video is already expected to rise from 7.8 hours a day per household to 12 hours a day. He said the printed word is no longer the only tool for getting information; the younger generation is rapidly developing an affinity and ability to work with electronic media.

Both critic John Leonard and author Herbert Mitgang urged attention to the audience. Leonard said the problem of the new media is to find their audiences, and Mitgang emphasized the need to reach minorities of people with special interests.

Minsker interjected that, in the long run, economics and price structures will dictate whether novels, for example, remain in book form as we know it. Adam Hodgkin predicted that the key will be not what technology is available but rather how quickly people want it and get used to it. Similarly, Ernst Cramer said that the tool is irrelevant—“the brain makes the difference.” He saw no worry

for the writer in the new technology. He added that books will always be in demand for an elite of serious readers. "Television," he said, "is not the enemy of the book—but a competitor." Herbert Schlosser agreed that the new electronic media will not replace the book but will supplement it. He said that radio did not eliminate the movie theater and television did not eliminate either the movies or the theater. He predicted that viewers will be exposed to more subjects; and when they want to explore them in depth, they will turn to books. John Leonard said later in the seminar, "We are talking about wonderful toys. Technology has made life more pleasing and longer." Ernst Cramer added, "There is a desire that good books survive. They will survive. We must not be afraid of the new media. They can enrich our culture if there are a lot of people who care."

Moderator Michael Rice summed up by saying that the new computer-based technologies are more like the telephone than like television—terrifying at first use, perhaps, but soon familiar and taken for granted. They will help many people communicate with each other—as opposed to broadcasting, which communicates just from the one to the many. The computer may turn out to be the most hospitable medium for such point-to-point, person-to-person communication.

Information, Entertainment, and Art

Speculating on electronic publishing's prospects, Martin Levin distinguished between the dissemination of information and literature. Robert Maxwell supported this distinction by saying that the electronic systems for handling money have developed fastest because of the need for swift and comprehensive information in the banking and investment fields. He added wryly that medical information could also be communicated instantly if people were thought to be as valuable as money. He said that electronic publishing will advance most rapidly in areas of crucial "high penalty" information. Sir Huw Wheldon agreed that information will be marketed electronically while literature, poetry, and philosophy do not have to be updated and therefore would more likely remain in book form. Martin Levin predicted that information, unlike literature, will be transferred "without paper." He discussed shopping, banking, and game-playing by electronics, also citing the LEXIS system, which makes comprehensive legal information available to lawyers. He introduced Jerome Rubin who described the LEXIS system he helped create. He said it has worked well and even increased the sale of law books.

Media change their functions over time, Professor Katz explained. He said radio in the beginning was used for point-to-point communication and only later became a broadcast medium. Photography liberated art to be non-representational. The book was originally a collective experience but is now used individually. Ernst Cramer made a similar point when he said that refer-

ence books and thrillers will be shifted to electronic databanks but literature and science will still be marketed as books. John Leonard agreed: "Most novel writing is trash"—and can now be seen on television, but electronics provide us with machines that can deliver more information faster and to more places. Adam Hodgkin pointed out that both writer and reader make an investment in literature, and he doubted that video has the same cultural value. Leonard added that McLuhan was wrong in thinking that the new media are participatory. Huw Wheldon emphasized a further distinction—between art and entertainment—and asserted that American television is based on the tradition of the movies, "not the art of truth but the art of pleasure." He added that the dramatic tradition stems from the art of the sublime and good plays belong to the world of art, not entertainment. "The enemy is mediocrity and accepting mediocrity." The new technology may crowd out the written word, Adam Hodgkin warned. It may prevent the creation of literature.

The Technological Revolution

Herbert Schlosser suggested the extent of the electronic communication revolution by pointing out that almost three million home computers have already been sold and many countries are putting satellites into place. RCA alone has five working satellites. Schlosser added that growth rates in Europe are at least as great as in the United States. Major publishers are entering the business; 65 percent of Time Inc.'s earnings now comes from its video group. Eliot Minsker noted that there are 1500 databases in the world today and most started from the book form. The market dictates that pace of change, Adam Hodgkin said. Oxford University Press is already looking into paperless publishing. It is printing fewer copies of its books and could even move into printing on demand.

Huw Wheldon and Martin Levin both expressed the feeling that the use of the new technology thus far has been mostly parasitical. Television uses reruns because new material is expensive and demanding. In Levin's view, we are spreadeagled between the old and new technologies and may actually be in a pre-revolutionary stage. We have lived with television for 30 years and most of it has been linear and story-telling, Schlosser commented. But now we are beginning to see children learning to use the personal computer in school and at home—a quite different experience. Keltz added that even video games provide a learning experience; youngsters go on to develop an interest in programming their own games and using home computers. Cramer said that television is changing the language. The newspaper *Bild Zeitung* copies its style from television usage. As people grow accustomed to this, he warned, they may lose the ability to read seriously.

The fastest growing video form at present, Schollosser said, is non-linear and non-story-telling; it is music video with wild, non-story images. He feels that this non-linear exposure is already changing the medium and may change the

viewer. Herbert Mitgang said he was horrified by the thought of children mesmerized by this music video. Professor Katz suggested that whether we use the printed page or moving images defines the nature of the content and affects how the mind works. He observed that different media favor different content. John Leonard pointed out that in books words are meant to be read and on film they are spoken; the decisive difference is the typewriter versus the camera. "I think there is no cause to mourn the destruction of literature," he added. "The book will endure." And Martin Keltz agreed that film and television offer exciting frontiers on which great works will be created. But the small screen does not yet have the capacity to satisfy the needs of the imagination, Marc Jaffe warned. Databases can contain information but they cannot tell us what we don't know and what we need to know. Michael Rice said that the word processor can help liberate even the poet by making text adjustments effortless. But Sir Huw Wheldon said he did not see much future for poetry in the electronic media; poetry, he anticipates, will be left to books and the printed page.

The key, according to Schlosser, is what we choose to put into the new machines. "The new generation will be able to operate computers and still read books." Adam Hodgkin added, "Literature preceded the printing press. We are not wedded to printing and paper." Martin Levin compared this era to the period of the Armory Show of 1913 when people were not ready to accept the new art forms. He said we shall have to wait a generation to see how the new technology will develop. He predicted that publishing will change to smaller press runs and will be able to find and segment audiences.

Writers' Roles and Rights

A number of participants discussed the role and responsibility of the author in relation to the new technology. Ernst Cramer asked whether in the future the work of good writers will be economical to publish. Irving Lazar asserted that all writers are serious, but they are at the mercy of how the publisher sells their books. Huw Wheldon asked whether in electronic publishing the author is more or less in control. Adam Hodgkin expressed the view that authors are more in control, but Martin Keltz felt that electronic technology allows the editor and publisher more participation— instantaneously.

The skills of writers and graphic designers will change for the new media, Keltz predicted, but existing talent need not be lost. In book publishing, Marc Jaffe said, despite marketing and production input, decisions are made by creative individuals and small editorial entities. He agreed with Ernst Cramer that we do not yet know the impact of the new technology on language, but he believes it is already clear that training in television writing has improved storytelling skills. Huw Wheldon added that writers will provide the leadership: The content always leads—not the production.

Herbert Mitgang made the point that authors must have the protection of copyright and royalties in order to keep top talent writing for the new media. He said he has two fears: that electronic forms will detract talented writers from doing the best work they could do and that writers will not be given the protection they deserve. Irving Lazar said that in his experience novelists write movies to make money: If they don't need the money, they won't do it.

Herbert Schlosser expects that in the United States the Supreme Court will ultimately decide whether it is illegal for consumers to tape television programs off the air; he anticipates tax-and-royalty arrangements for this use in return for making it legal. Lazar agreed that authors will share in the profits. John Leonard said, "As far as real books are concerned, there has been no good television." Mitgang re-emphasized that even if just two paragraphs of non-fiction are put into a database system, the copyright must be protected.

New Choices for Consumers

Herbert Schlosser disagreed with John Leonard's comment that television is a passive medium. It is now a receiving screen for a wide array of inputs. The consumer has choices and decides how to program the TV set. Advances have been explosive in this area over the past five years, he said. In the United States in 1982, advertisers and consumers supported video to the amount of \$20 billion; a large proportion of that outlay was made up of consumer payments for programs. The United States already has 5,000 separate cable systems and 29 million homes connected to cable. Consumer choice will keep growing, Schlosser predicted, as videodiscs and cassettes are produced and sold together with books.

To illustrate how the new technology expands the range of choice, Schlosser cited the expansion of the audience for opera and ballet through the sales of videotapes and discs. Many people who cannot get to opera for either geographic or economic reasons can enjoy it through the new technology. At the same time, music video is now associated with the best-selling popular music. Reinhardt Muller-Freienfels asserted, however, that television cannot replace the experience of personal presence at opera. He said that while Bayreuth's and Salzberg's festivals are sold out, the same programs on television attract only three percent of the TV audience. Martin Keltz said the movies are being captured by the 14- to 25-year-olds who want to get out of the house. Still, video expands the audience who eventually sees movies.

The experience of watching television is different from that of reading, seeing a film, or attending an opera performance, Professor Katz suggested. He feels that the experience of television as we know it may change because of the new technology; people may even dress up to watch great events on television. Ernst Cramer asked whether television programs prepare a larger percentage of the people to switch to serious programs and to books. Can more people be

interested in high-quality television and books? If so, he said, we would truly have a revolution.

The videocassette recorder is successful because it is a time-shifting device, allowing people to watch programs they want and would otherwise miss, according to Martin Keltz. Production studios, he said, were at first terrified by home video and then came to see it as a supplementary market. At the same time, it liberated the viewer from the tyranny of the networks and the advertisers. The consumer can watch what he wants to and when.

Keltz added that children have an appetite for moving-image media; and since children's programs have been replaced by soap operas on afternoon television and relegated to Saturday mornings, Scholastic saw an opportunity to find unserved audiences via the new media. It created interactive videodiscs with a variety of games that let children vary what they see. Cable systems, wanting to be deemed essential to the whole family, also offer children's programming.

From the seminar audience, book publisher Esther Margolis was troubled that bookstore chains are going heavily into video games at a time when space for books is already crowded.

Professor Katz said that, as perceived in most nations, at least 50 percent of what comes out of the television set is what someone abroad has put into it. Commenting on this observation, John Leonard said that every culture should represent its own people—they look to its substance and style for their identity. But it is often cheaper to buy culture from somewhere else—and that, Leonard said, is dangerous. In the discussion period, one commentator suggested that the new technology is pushing us toward a universal world culture. Katz noted that television causes people to stay home, while culture and politics go on outside the home. The new technology that is spreading across the world is creating “a living room culture.”

Conversions and Adaptations

The largest financial opportunity created by the new technology is in mass entertainment, said Schlosser. The television mini-series tells the story of a novel in from two to 20 hours. This is an expensive form of production and recovers its investment through the use of broadcasting, cable, and home video. As millions of people acquire home video, novels and other books will appear first in that medium and then play on pay cable and finally on free television. Books and film rights are already frequently sold together.

In the making of large series, Huw Wheldon said a program should be prepared like a book with an author—and without committees. He said that when he approached Kenneth Clark for the series that became *Civilisation*, he approached him as an author. But Sir Huw warned that one cannot produce the equivalent of a book in video—the best one can do is make a translation. He said that the film or video product “is organic in its own right.” Books and

video both need good creative work and are very hard to make. He added, "So far, no masterpieces have been created in the new electronic media."

In the final seminar session, devoted to Film and Television Adaptation—Dramatizing a Book, moderator Michael Rice noted that today we have film and TV-drama book adaptations, including non-fiction docu-dramas and both fiction and non-fiction mini-series. He asked whether, in the light of this diversity, we can look forward to dramatizations of other books beyond the "blockbusters?" Do dramatizations increase book sales? Are there rules of fidelity to the source work? What have we learned from involving the author in adaptations? How is the integrity of the author's work protected?

Irving Lazar, whose work has involved him in such questions over 60 years, led the final discussion. "Every night is still New Year's Eve," he said buoyantly. He cited *Winds of War*, *Shogun*, *Thornbirds*, and *Roots* as great adaptation successes. *Roots*, he pointed out, actually started as a television production, and the book became a bestseller after the film was well received. *Winds of War* made its book sequel, *War and Remembrance*, a bestseller again. Lazar said it is not essential to start with a bestseller to make a television hit.

No movies have shaken people to their core and changed their perceptions, John Leoard said. Reinhardt Muller-Freienfels said his organization has been adapting books for television and the movies for many years. They have learned that the books best adaptable for television are novels with stories and suspense and not too many characters; it also helps if not too much of the story takes place in the minds of the characters. Most important, he said, is that the book, even an old book, "hits the nerve of the present time." Muller-Freienfels found that the worst adaptation merely illustrated the book. Often the integrity of the book can better be protected by a good adaptation than by exact duplication. One can be too respectful of a novel. He cited Alfred Hitchcock for converting mediocre novels into memorable films. He said German publishers seek adaptations because adaptations sell books. He believes that television brings people back to books.

The seminar at the Jerusalem International Book Fair concluded that book publishers, writers and readers are in the middle of a technological revolution that is rapidly changing cultural habits. The revolution contains both opportunities and threats, but it is a permanent part of our world and everyone is adapting to its existence. The challenge is to assemble and disseminate information effectively—and to create entertainment and works of art that will be communicated in new forms, including those still beyond today's horizon.

The seminar was suggested by Mayor Teddy Kollek of Jerusalem and Joseph E. Slater, President of the Aspen Institute, and organized by Michael Rice, Senior Fellow of the Aspen Institute, and Zev Birger, Managing Director of the Jerusalem International Book Fair, with support from the Times Mirror Company and others.

Participants

Ernst Cramer, Editorial Writer & Chief Executive, Axel Springer Publishing, Berlin
Adam Hodgkin, Senior Publishing Editor, Philosophy and Law, Oxford University Press, Oxford

Marc Jaffe, Editorial Director, Villard Books, Random House, New York

Elihu Katz, Professor of Sociology and Communications, Hebrew University, Jerusalem; and University of Southern California, Los Angeles

Martin Keltz, President, Scholastic Productions, New York

Irving Lazar, literary agent, Beverly Hills

John Leonard, television and book critic; cable television host, ABC Arts, New York

Martin Levin, President, Book Publishing, Times Mirror, New York

Robert Maxwell, Chairman, Pergamon Press, Oxford

Eliot Minsker, President, Knowledge Industry Publications, White Plains, New York

Herbert Mitgang, novelist and playwright; former President, Authors Guild of America, New York

Reinhardt Muller-Freienfels, Head, Television Drama Department, Sddeutscher Rundfunk, Stuttgart

Herbert Schlosser, Executive Vice President, RCA Corporation, New York

Sir Huw Wheldon, Chairman, London School of Economics; former Managing Director, BBC Television, London

Michael Rice (moderator), Senior Fellow, Aspen Institute; President, Michael Rice Media, Inc., New York