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Explosive Words At BookExpo America, Publishing's Digital Wave Crashes Against a Literary Pillar

By Bob Thompson: First published in the Washington Post May 22, 2006

Think of it as the publishing industry's version of "Survivor."

It was late Saturday afternoon at the Washington Convention Center. Half a dozen editors confronted an audience of several hundred booksellers as the moderator laid out the rules of engagement: "The six editors here will talk about a *few* -- a few -- of their favorite fall books," she said. They would have 12 minutes each. If anyone ran over, "we'll just vote them off the island."

The "Buzz Forum," as this exercise in competitive salesmanship is called, represents business as usual for BookExpo America -- the annual publishing convention that brought roughly 25,000 book people to Washington over the weekend. If you listened, though, you could hear another kind of buzz at BEA this year. It was an angrier one, generated by a clash of cultures in an industry frazzled by technological change. The clash is between what you might call 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. No wonder they applauded long and loud when a champion stepped forth.

When John Updike approached the lectern in the Convention Center ballroom Saturday morning, most of his bleary-eyed, coffee-swilling audience expected him to talk about his latest novel, "Terrorist." But Updike, the much-honored 74-year-old author of dozens of volumes of fiction, poetry, essays and criticism, said that would be "immodest." Instead, he praised the assembled booksellers as "the salt of the book world" and reminisced for a while about bookstores he had loved in his youth.

Then, without warning, he opened fire on the technorati.

"I read last Sunday, and maybe some of you did too, a quite long article by a man called Kevin Kelly," he began. He proposed to read a few paragraphs so that listeners who hadn't seen the article might "have a sense of your future." The reference was to a piece called "Scan This Book!" in the previous week's New York Times Magazine. (The title echoes activist Abbie Hoffman's 1970 provocation, "Steal This Book.") In it, Kelly described -- in the messianic/hyperbolic style favored by Wired, the magazine with which he has long been associated -- the inexorable march toward an "Eden" in which the totality of human knowledge will be downloadable onto a single iPod-size device.

" 'When Google announced in December 2004 that it would digitally scan the books of five major research libraries to make their contents searchable, the promise of a universal library was resurrected,' " Updike read. He then followed up with later selections that had, he said, "clarified" Kelly's vision: " 'At the same time, once digitized, books can be unraveled into single pages or be reduced further into snippets of a page. These snippets will be remixed into re-ordered books and virtual bookshelves . . . once created, these "bookshelves" will be published and swapped in the public commons. . . .

" 'The new model of course is based on the intangible assets of digital bits, where copies are no longer cheap but free.' " Reading further, Updike noted Kelly's assertion that "copy-protection schemes" are helpless to hold back the technological tide. "Schemes," he repeated sarcastically, drawing a laugh. As his audience well knew, the Association of American Publishers filed suit last year on behalf of five major publishers alleging that Google's library scanning project is a massive and flagrant violation of copyright law. Updike went on at some length, heaping scorn on Kelly's notion that

authors who no longer got paid for copies of their work could profit from it by selling "performances" or "access to the creator." ("Now as I read it, this is a pretty grisly scenario.")

Unlike the commingled, unedited, frequently inaccurate mass of "information" on the Web, he said, "books traditionally have edges." But "the book revolution, which from the Renaissance on taught men and women to cherish and cultivate their individuality, threatens to end in a sparkling pod of snippets. "So, booksellers," he concluded, "defend your lonely forts. Keep your edges dry. Your edges are our edges. For some of us, books are intrinsic to our human identity."

'Apples and Oranges'

Three flights down from the ballroom where Updike had rallied the literati, BEA was in full buzzing swing.

Booksellers wore advertising on their name tags ("James Patterson Rules Summer") as they strolled with dazed looks through cavernous aisles filled with publishers' booths. Publicists enticed them with freebies and author appearances. (Look, isn't that Bob Newhart?) Meanwhile, a mild-mannered man named Tom Turvey sat beneath a huge blue, red, yellow and green Google logo saying, in effect: No harm, no foul.

Google has been coming to BEA for three years now, but it seemed a bit more visible this year. Maybe it was the fleet of subcompacts with "Google Book Search Mobile" painted on them that cruised the streets around the convention center offering free rides to people with BEA badges. Maybe it was the cookies bearing the phrase "Just a taste -- Google Book Search" thrust at conventioners near the main entrance, or the lavish party the company threw Friday night at the old City Museum. Turvey's business card gives his title as "Head, Google Book Search, Partnerships, Content." He has a PR problem and he knows it. His company's controversial library scanning program is *not* the same as Google Book Search, he said, but media coverage of the former has been such that most people confuse the two.

He explained: Book Search is a program *supported* by publishers, including the ones suing over the library program. It's a *partnership* with publishers in which Google digitizes their books with their permission, then refers any Google users who encounter the books while searching to the publishers' Web sites and to online vendors like Amazon.com, where the books can be purchased.

Not that he was disavowing the notion of library scanning. Libraries, he said, have been with us a long time and "all the books in them are free to end users." Turvey liked Kelly's article. "I think he nailed it," he said. Told of Updike's criticism, he suggested that there's a bit of an "apples and oranges" thing going on. "For novelists and trade publishers that publish books to be read sequentially," he said, the utility of searching within a book's content is harder to understand. But this kind of book is a minority, and a lot of publishers know that they can *increase* their sales by allowing searches that lead potential customers to texts they otherwise might never have found.

Take HarperCollins, which has all its in-print titles in Google Book Search program. At a BEA panel for publishers yesterday, HarperCollins executive Brian Murray discussed the advantages of Book Search. And now there he was, starring in a looping video that played on two flat screens in the Google booth: "We've learned a tremendous amount working with Google and we've reached a tremendous amount of consumers," the onscreen Murray said.

The 'Oooh' Factor

Beyond the Google booth, it was back to business as usual.

At the same breakfast event where Updike lit into Kelly, Sen. Barack Obama (D-Ill.) gave an optimistic speech in support of his new book, "The Audacity of Hope," due out in October. At the Quirk Books booth, co-authors Sarah Mlynowski and Farrin Jacobs autographed "See Jane Write: A Girl's Guide to Writing Chick Lit." It could not be ascertained whether Harvard plagiarist Kaavya Viswanathan had acquired a copy.

In the serious-author category: Here was Sebastian Junger (of "The Perfect Storm" fame) promoting his latest, "A Death in Belmont." Here was Richard Ford, whose "The Lay of the Land" will complete his Frank Bascombe trilogy ("The Sportswriter," "Independence Day") this fall. Here were Margaret Atwood, John Grisham, Jane Hamilton and Mary Gaitskill.

"The Da Vinci Code" being just out in theaters -- you could see a giant "DVC" billboard from the entrance to the Convention Center -- it seemed fitting to encounter brochures for a forthcoming spinoff compilation called "Secrets of Mary Magdalene." Meanwhile, Steve Berry, author of the if-you-like-Dan-Brown bestseller "The Templar Legacy," explained his formula for writing fact-based fiction: "The 'oooh' factor plus the 'so what' factor equals high concept," Berry said.

At the W.W. Norton booth, a crowd gathered around a familiar, furry face. It was Steve Wozniak, co-founder of Apple, founding member of the technorati and author of a fall book titled "iWoz: Computer Geek to Cult Icon: Getting to the Core of Apple's Inventor." Had he by chance read the Kevin Kelly article on the future of the book? He'd "glanced at it, at least," Wozniak said. "It's like everybody's scrambling to figure out how it falls out," he added, "and I don't *know* how it falls out. "But I do know that heck, I wrote a book, and you know I did it for Norton -- and I wouldn't want to get copies somehow spread around the Internet."

'Who Needs Megahits?'

Score one for the literati. But the technorati had their innings as well.

At a presentation titled "The Future of Publishing in the Digital Age," former Hewlett Packard CEO Carly Fiorina drew parallels between the publishing industry, as currently constituted, and the music and photography industries before they were blindsided by the digital revolution. These were "cautionary tales," she emphasized, not predictions, but publishers should understand that "there are a whole set of choices in front of you" and "my guess is that not everyone will survive and not everyone will thrive."

Fiorina has written a book, "Tough Choices," coming out in October from Portfolio, a Penguin Group imprint. "With all deep apologies to Penguin and Portfolio, whom I love," she said, she found it "horrifying" that a manuscript she had submitted electronically came back to her, in the copy-editing stage, as "physical pieces of paper with red and blue ink marks on them." She mentioned this more than once in her speech. Had she intended it as a metaphor for a larger problem? "Certainly," she said afterward. "That's why I kept using it. It's sort of emblematic, I think."

At another BEA talk, Wired editor Chris Anderson presented a concept called "The Long Tail," about which he wrote a famous article in 2004 and which he has now turned into a book. It contains both hopeful and troubling news for publishers. The basic concept is fairly simple, though it helps to have an illustration in front of you to understand it. Picture a graph showing sales numbers for, say, books. At the left, way up high, are the numbers for blockbusters like "The Da Vinci Code." The curve then dips sharply down and bends to the right, flattening out and stretching at some length (hence the name "long tail") as the sales per book get smaller and smaller.

It used to be that it simply wasn't worth keeping anything in print below a certain sales-per-year figure. But with the Internet's ability to reach niche markets, combined with online booksellers' infinite shelf space, this has changed. The good news? More titles can be sold profitably over a longer time. The bad news -- for an industry highly focused on the care and feeding of bestsellers -- was summed up on a screen to Anderson's right as he began his talk.

"The Long Tail: Who Needs Megahits?" it read.

Steve Rubin, president of Doubleday -- who publishes Dan Brown and has reaped the benefit of Brown's astonishing sales -- scoffed at the notion that the long-tail phenomenon means blockbusters will become less important. Jane Friedman, president and CEO of HarperCollins, said she embraces digital change. HarperCollins is "friends with Google," she said, because "we like the searchability of

our books -- it's like taking the shrink wrap off books in bookstores to allow a consumer to see a page."

But Friedman doesn't want to give *up* those digital files to anyone. She was chair of the American Association of Publishers when it sued Google over the library scanning project. "I'm very bullish on everything digital," she said, but "w e are going to control the destiny of our digital files," no matter how much Google cites HarperCollins as an ally in its PR.

Off and Selling

"Okay -- go!" the Buzz Forum moderator said.

Doubleday's Bill Henry launched into a rapid-fire pitch for Hampton Sides's "Blood and Thunder," an epic tale of the Navajo, mountain man Kit Carson and the conquest of the American West. Five other editors followed suit. No one got kicked off the island. No one mentioned Google, Kevin Kelly or even John Updike. It was all about persuading the "salt of the book world" to believe in these particular edged volumes and make them their own.

In other words, it was business as usual. For now.....**THE END**

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