'In less than ten years, no book will be made from paper.'

...or perhaps: 'Academic print publishing is about to die.'

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These are just a few quotes from a series of meetings held in Melbourne recently, focussing on the future of the book industry. For the past three months, a team of twenty experts have been researching and writing on a broad range of technology issues affecting the book industry. The industry is in a real bind right now (pardon the pun). The e-revolution — or more aptly in this case, the i-revolution — is in full swing, and the 'i' in this case is most certainly the first-person singular.

As long as fifteen years ago, digital processes began to infiltrate all aspects of printing and publishing, and today most aspects of production incorporate elements of digital technology. Today, the digital process is on the cusp of wiping out a chain of intermediaries that were — up until now — an essential part of the publishing process. First it was the typesetters that were removed from the process, then more recently the imagesetters are feeling the pinch, and now the entire publishing industry is wondering who is next. The advent of 'personal publishing' (or 'vanity publishing', if one was to be more cynical) has redefined the landscape somewhat, as has the introduction of more sophisticated computers and other technology that allow even the casual user to become a pseudo-publisher. Each step of what was once a rather complicated process (creator of content to consumer or end-user) is now inexorably moving towards a much simpler process, to that of creator to consumer, or C-2-C.

Each simplification brings with it the demise of yet another 'snout in the trough'. One would hope that with one less intermediary, the overall cost of production would be reduced. However, there are fundamental changes taking place that will have far-reaching ramifications. For example, the advent of 'e-books' is shifting the production, supply and consumption chains into uncharted waters — and to different industry sectors. What was once the principle domain of the publishing industry is now being infiltrated by the information technology industry: the inventors, the industrial designers, the software and hardware engineers, the developers, and the entire marketing — and legal — machinery that is 'part and parcel' of the IT sector.

E-book technology, currently trialled in a number of libraries both here in Australia and elsewhere, is defined as the usage of hand-held hardware for reading digital text, and can be found in a confusing array of proprietary formats, shapes and sizes — and with a range of methods of managing the affiliated digital rights attached to the texts. The hardware ranges from devices such as personal digital assistants (Palm Pilots etc) to ordinary computers that use custom software (or the web), to book-like readers such as the now-defunct Rocket eBook.

There is no standard format of text or hardware, making transfer from one machine to another virtually impossible — just like the problems faced with VHS and Betamax, and the future of book-like readers is evolving so rapidly that it is difficult to make predictions about what hardware and e-text a given library should adopt.

Developers of the hardware are suggesting that the e-book readers of today will seem far too primitive and clumsy compared with what will be available in the next five years. Here is what is coming soon: electronic ink on wafer-thin film (looks like paper, feels like paper...) with in-built thin-film power packs bound into a book-like shape — though one has to ask why the developers are trying so hard to emulate the traditional format so closely. In-the-wings technology promises all of the advantages of paper, but with the added potential of being able to be updated, enlarged, spoken, annotated (for the crossword puzzles), and/or erased. Oh yes — and copyright-protected.

Did I mention digital rights management? Here's an acronym that you'll see more often in the future: DRM, or Digital Rights Management. E-book technology has accelerated the requirement for sophisticated methods of managing content. In fact, it has become a veritable minefield, especially for libraries which might be contemplating a move to increased use of e-book technology.

For once, libraries are in a strong position to dictate the terms and conditions of rights management through the deployment of e-books, and now is the time for the sector to focus closely and very seriously on the ramifications of an environment in which they become possibly the major outlet for the distribution of titles — old and new. We have arrived at the point at which content management will become the cash-cow for the content managers — and one should not assume that any of the key players in the present-day book publishing industry will be the primary force controlling this new market. Libraries are quite likely to be at the bleeding edge, once again...

We are most certainly living in interesting times. ∎