The battle to define the future of the book in the digital world

Clifford Lynch

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Abstract

Commercial publishing interests are presenting the future of the book in the digital world through the promotion of e-book reading appliances and software. Implicit in this is a very complex and problematic agenda that re-establishes the book as a digital cultural artifact within a context of intellectual property rights management enforced by hardware and software systems. With the convergence of different types of content into a common digital bit-stream, developments in industries such as music are establishing precedents that may define our view of digital books. At the same time we find scholars exploring the ways in which the digital medium can enhance the traditional communication functions of the printed work, moving far beyond literal translations of the pages of printed books into the digital world. This paper examines competing visions for the future of the book in the digital environment, with particular attention to questions about the social implications of controls over intellectual property, such as continuity of cultural memory.
Perhaps the tools of the digital world can help us out of this lull. Computers’ healthiest influence in history thus far has been the deepening and broadening of professional conversation. The digital archives, which bear the clearest connection to scholarly writing, create apparent problems as well as opportunities. Everyone knows the past was wonderfully complex, but seeing the complexity of even a small slice of the past held in suspension before us in a digital archive can be discomfiting. Digital history could be both a catalyst and a tool in the creation of a more literary kind of history. Encouraging and enabling new kinds of books of this kind would be in itself a worthy product of digital archives, but those archives hold out even more bracing prospects. Books have provenance. Your favorite books define you, and digital versions don’t seem to impart connections that are quite as deep. Queenan again: Books as physical objects matter to me, because they evoke the past. This piece of the experience doesn’t translate to the electronic format. Someday in the distant future, maybe David Eggers’ Kindle will be sold by Bauman Rare Books on Madison Avenue, but it’s unlikely that digital books will ever be personal artifacts the way that their physical counterparts can be. "I think print and paper has a lasting value that people appreciate. Pixels are too temporary," said Praveen Madan, an entrepreneur on the Kepler’s 2020 team, via email. Yet while there is little doubt that technology will continue to be a driver of change across the developing world in the future, the precise trajectory along which technological innovation will travel is highly uncertain. For example, will critical technological advances come from the developed world, or will innovators and their innovations be more geographically dispersed? The two chosen uncertainties, introduced below, together define a set of four scenarios for the future of technology and international development that are divergent, challenging, internally consistent, and plausible. Each of the two uncertainties is expressed as an axis that represents a continuum of possibilities ranging between two endpoints.