

The Future of Publishing

2010 Flair Symposium—Shaping the History of Photography

Three quick things about me: First, I publish only writing about visual art and photography—not images. Second, I married into the photo world, so please forgive me my trespasses. And third, yes, I'm young, but so you'll stop wondering, probably older than I look.

So, I'm here to talk about the future of publishing, of which, there are many wonderful visions. So many in fact that it's a bit of a cottage industry in itself. But rather than offer you another one, I'd like simply to focus on the facts at hand—the two things going on today that will most influence publishing tomorrow:

Number one ... You know everyone too.

And number two ... E-books equal awesome.

To the first, though I am admittedly biased, we need to realize that our view of history is shaped in no small part by what has been published.

The ideas that sit on our shelves and in our libraries, the ideas that constantly nag at us, that are assigned to us as students, that we cite as scholars, and that we pour over as photographers. These are the ideas that define our past and help guide us to our future. What gets published here today, becomes our history tomorrow.

Of course what gets published is as much a reflection of the quality of the material as it is of the person, or people behind it. The so-called gatekeepers of culture.

Whether it's Alfred Stieglitz, the Museum of Modern Art, the New York Review of Books, or Grove Press—the enormous power of publishing has traditionally rested in the hands of venerable people and venerable institutions. Proving that it's not what you know, but who you know that matters, these were the people that knew the best editors, designers and publicists; the best printers, distributors, book reviewers, book buyers, and bookstore managers.

Today however (and here's that first fact again), you know everyone too.

Thanks to the revolution that is the Internet, we, as individuals, suddenly have access to an exponentially larger pool of people than we ever have before in history. In short, as an author I no longer need to go to MoMA or the New York Review of Books, or Grove to find great talent for my book. I can find those people myself. And they can find me.

Up until now there have been two basic options for authors looking to publish: the traditional publishing houses, and the online self-publishing services. There are advantages and disadvantages to both options, but to boil it down to the fundamentals: with self-publishing almost everyone can do it, but there's no accounting for quality; versus with traditional publishing there's so much accounting for quality that almost no one can do it.

I'm arguing that, thanks to that first fact we talked about, there's now a middle way. One that combines the openness and DIY spirit of self-publishing, with the professionalism and quality of traditional publishing. A way that takes advantage of the resource we now have in most abundance, friends.

And not just friends, but friends of friends, and friends of friends of friends, and onward until we find the right people with the right expertise to help make our book a reality. Now, we don't need to find an entire staff. In publishing there are really only a core group of people that have a direct impact on any individual book. Let's see if we can find them here ...

If I can have a show of hands, how many of you have written something about photography, are currently writing something, or have plans to write something in the future and would like to see it published? ... Our authors.

And how many of you here have any editing experience? Essays in a catalog, a wall label, an artist statement for a friend ... Our editors.

And how many of you have experience in graphic design or illustration? Perhaps you created your own website, made a flyer for a lecture you organized, or even helped with your brother's wedding invitation ... Our designers.

And last, how many of you have ever promoted anything? Your own work, an event, a gallery show. Maybe you've written a press release, or promotional material ... Our publicists.

And here we have, our publishing team: the four indispensable people most closely involved in the making of our book.

We've found these from just our small group here, but given a bigger pool of people (like, say, the millions online everyday) it's not unreasonable to assume we could find team members with the exact skill set we need for any given book: Museum editors working freelance, book designers with degrees in art history, publicists specializing in art fairs and exhibitions. A team of experts, perfectly tailored for the book at hand. Or, as we'll call them in our publishing equation, the talent.

Now that they're found, the next trick is: don't pay them. Instead of a flat fee upfront or a guaranteed hourly-rate, what if each of our team members is given an ownership stake in the book they work on? If the book does well, they do well. And if not, not.

While this spreads the financial risk and reward around, it also means that for a book to find the right team, everyone involved must actually believe in it. They must believe it will be read widely enough and sell well enough that they'll make money from it. Or, they must believe it is important enough to dedicate their time to without the promise of pay. Either way, their willingness to participate in this way also serves as a good initial indication of the quality of the book.

Finally, add to this equation the production, distribution and marketing muscle of a publisher. Whether it's a traditional publishing house, or a self-publishing service, the function here is to take care of all the things best taken care of at scale. Where the editing, designing and publicity must be tailored for individual books, things like book printing, warehousing, distribution and fulfillment can be handled fairly equally across many titles at once.

And now, suddenly, you've got yourself a book. Of course, this is the same basic equation as in traditional publishing, but where once the muscle was calling all the shots, now—able at last to efficiently find one another and band together—the talent is. All because you know everyone too.

Now, let's shift gears a bit and focus on the end of this equation. The book itself.

At the beginning of the presentation, when we were looking at “Camera Work”, Newhall's “History of Photography”, and the other books, some of you may have noticed I referred to ideas that sit on our shelves and in our libraries, rather than books. This was intentional. It is, after all, ideas that shape the history of photography, not books. Books are just the container.

We forget this I think. Publishers, who have built profitable empires on a system of print production and bookstore distribution forget it. But so too the authors who have become overly enamored with the perceived permanence and status of words printed and bound. This is wrong though. Publishing—we must remind ourselves again and again—is fundamentally about the spread of ideas, not the spread of paper.

And this brings us back to our second fact: E-books equal awesome.

Now, don't freak out. Don't stop listening to me yet. I love print too. I wallow in print. I breathe it. I like print like Alison likes photos—blood stained and smelly. But I love books more. The stories and characters, the narrative arc, the argument, the joy of entertainment, the satisfaction of enlightenment. These fundamental qualities can come in many forms. And the fact is, whether you like it or not, e-books are now one of those forms and ... they're awesome.

Back to the image ... aside from its obvious "awesomeness", there are reasons I chose the Pegasus. Or, maybe I should be honest and say that there are reasons this Pegasus I chose in jest actually says something meaningful about the reality of e-books today and what opportunity they hold for us tomorrow. For those of you taking notes, we're now entering the Extending-the-Metaphor Portion of the talk.

First, the obvious ...

Pegasus are either loved or hated. When asked, "What do you think about Pegasus?" no one is going to say, "They're fine I guess".

This is to say, e-books aren't for everyone. You love them or hate them, and that's fine. I'm not advocating the end of print, I'm advocating the addition of a new option. There will always be an important place for print. And as a matter of fact, I think if anything, the quality of paper books will only go up as e-books become more and more common.

In addition to this common sort of paper-philia, there are also issues of access. Even in my own enthusiasm, e-books will always have limitations. Limitations both in what they can do technologically, and in who will be able to buy and then read them. While Internet and especially mobile phone usage is exploding in some countries that were previously left out of the book supply chain, there are others for whom the lack of a straight-forward print copy would mean a total loss.

Pegasus are at least partially mythical.

Though e-books have made tremendous strides in just the last five years, I'll admit we still have a way to go. Much of their ultimate promise rests to some degree in steps yet to be taken.

It's still the Wild West out there. The big publishers are busily repeating the music industry's mistakes and putting out e-books with needless encryption. Discount publishing houses are flooding the market with cheap, unchecked, scan copies of classic books. And e-reader manufacturers haven't adopted consistent standards so the quality of the reading experience from publisher to publisher and device to device is variable, at best.

All that said however ...

Pegasus can run and fly.

With e-books you can search the complete text of a book, or of multiple books at once. You can look up the definition of a word instantly. You can highlight a passage, make a note on that passage, and then copy and send it to all of your friends. You can connect it to your social network. You can connect it to the web, and you can follow it out into the real world.

Or you can just read. As much as you'd like, for as long as you'd like, with a library and bookstore in your pocket that's accessible at a moment's notice. In other words, everything you can do I can do better.

In mythology, wherever the winged horse struck his hoof, a spring came forth.

In the Fifteenth Century, thanks to the revolution that was the printing press, books became suddenly available to an exponentially larger number of people than had access to them before. And of course, this remains true today. Any number of books can be printed, bound, packed and shipped just about anywhere to be sold at not-so-unreasonable prices. But don't kid yourself. For the average author, for the average small press, sometimes even for average medium press, getting books into stores, and then into people's hands is not at all easy. And for a crucially large part of the population, buying books at 14 or 17 or 25 dollars and up is not easy either.

The spread of books is the spread of ideas. And while the printing press help spread ideas across countries and continents, e-books will spread ideas at a global scale—geographically and culturally. Because e-books are cheaper to produce, cheaper to distribute, and cheaper to buy, they open the door to new ideas being published by new authors, and being read by new audiences. May ideas spring up everywhere.

So, what does this all mean?

With book development powered by your network of contacts [You know everyone too] and production and distribution now essentially free, instant, and global [e-books = awesome], you can—by which I mean anyone can—publish a book of a quality and reach equal to that of any major publisher, anytime you want, for next to nothing. That bears repeating. Anyone. Anytime. For nothing.

If you're an author who wants to publish with more control of the process and a greater percentage of the reward; or who has an older book that's gone out of print that they'd like to bring back; or who has something to publish that's just esoteric enough, and just doesn't fit cleanly enough in any given category for traditional publishers—now you can.

If you're a center for arts and humanities and want to tell the story of say, the hunt and discovery of the first photograph by reproducing the texts of documents from your research and archives—now you can.

Or, if you're an independent publisher and move to Tucson, and you meet a photographer who's also a prolific and talented writer about photography, and you want to publish his collected writings—now you can.

The future of publishing is anyone, anytime, for nothing.

Thank you.