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Source Code



Technology Breathes Life into Print

One corner of the giant convention hall offered a glimpse of a future where paper and ink are obsolete. The opposite corner at BookExpo America in Los Angeles featured a demonstration of high-tech digital printing technology that can produce books with paper and ink within minutes on a machine about the size of your office copier.

Somewhere in the middle was a booth where the American Booksellers Association, an alliance of independent booksellers, was promoting its new online sales vehicle, BookSense.com. The new Web site is designed to help the little guys compete against the big chains by creating, in essence, a new chain to go up against the established chains.

Indeed, the power and promise of technology created so much of a stir that you had to remind yourself that this wasn't a computer trade show but the annual gathering of one of America's oldest industries. Even when the topic turned to the hottest new books due later this year, technology took center stage. The publishing world is eagerly awaiting best-selling author Michael Lewis' *The New New Thing* about Silicon Valley.

One of the newest things in publishing is a device called the Rocket eBook, from NuvoMedia Inc. in Mountain View. The Rocket is a paperback-sized electronic book that weighs just 22 ounces and stores 4,000 pages of text, the equivalent of about 10 novels. It's available from barnesandnoble.com, but at \$499, it's certainly no bargain.

Early reviews are decidedly negative and center on the price, the limited availability of electronic titles and a sense that this piece of hardware will soon be obsolete, if it isn't already. Nevertheless, the Rocket has overcome one liability of computers that supporters of the print medium have cited for years. You can take the Rocket with you anywhere, even into the bathroom.

Despite its limitations, you've got to like the concept of being able to easily import text to a hand-held device and read it at your convenience. It wasn't long ago that I sat around a conference table with other editors and talked about a distant time when newspapers and magazines might be delivered electronically while readers slept. Imagine the savings from being able to eliminate the cost of printing and distribution.

With the Rocket, that distant time may already be here. If publishers are smart they'll soon be beating a path to NuvoMedia to talk about finding ways to bring the cost down to the point that every subscriber could own one. My sense is there will soon be a Rocket, or something better, in every American home.

Does that mean the print medium's days are numbered? Absolutely not. In fact, rapid advances in digital printing technology promise a bright future well into the new millennium.

One company on the cutting edge of technology is InstaBook Corp., based in Gainesville, Fla. For book publishers, the new technology heralds a time

when no book will be printed before it's sold. Individual books can be made to order on laser printers that could easily fit in the corner of your favorite book store, your neighborhood Kinko's or even at an airport kiosk. The cost of printing a standard paperback would be as little as \$2.

In any case, if you love the printed word, thanks to technology the future is so bright the possibilities are limitless. About the only drawback I can see is that for a couple of bucks, anyone will soon be able to call himself a published author.

—*Tim Graham*
Editor in Chief

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