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OPINION

SATURDAY, 30 DECEMBER 2000
OPINION STORY

The phrase 'out-of-print' may soon be obsolete

06 NOVEMBER 2000

Janet Chambers' vision of the future: There is an obscure out-of-print book you have just learned about, and you think you might like to obtain a copy. So you pop down to the local shopping mall, and visit the book kiosk that sits between the Coke machine and the automatic teller machine.

You quickly find the book you are interested in, read reviews, browse the entire book on screen, decide to buy it, and swipe your credit card. You then take care of some other shopping, and an hour later you return to collect your book!

Your book has been printed, collated, trimmed and bound in minutes, in a machine the size of a large refrigerator, and it is virtually indistinguishable from traditionally offset titles.

Is this a scenario in some distant future time? No. This is a routine that is becoming increasingly common in the United States, and it is only a matter of time before it takes place in New Zealand.

Print-on-demand technology offers printed books on paper, but with some of the advantages of digital technology – quick turnaround and customised print runs.

Books that would traditionally have gone out of print can be stored on disks and given infinite shelf lives. Some industry analysts believe that one day soon there could be print-on-demand units in every bookstore or quick-print copy shop. Eventually self-service kiosks in malls could replace book stores.

Publishers are especially interested in embracing this new technology. It offers the combination of improved responsiveness to the market at a substantially reduced cost. A significant cost to the conventional publishing business is the warehousing of titles, and the returns of unsold books. By being able to print on demand, these costs are eliminated. Furthermore, uneconomic small runs can become economic, and books that have been out of print can be easily published and sold.

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"We want to make the words 'out of print' obsolete," declares Barnes & Noble vice-chairman Steve Riggio. "There are about 1.3 million titles considered to be 'in print' but about 90,000 titles go out of print every year, and we think that is a travesty. We want to make available any book, any time any place, in any format the reader wants."

Increasingly, traditional publishers are using print-on-demand for titles that experience unexpected demand, while self-publishing authors are finding that it enables them to leap old barriers to entry to the market.

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Publishers are increasingly establishing print-on-demand systems at their distribution centres, using conventional channels to get the books to bookstores. They are also experimenting with them at the retail level.

According to Graeme Grant, associate director of emerging channels at America's second-largest bookstore chain, Borders, the chain is testing kiosks in three Michigan stores, where customers can look up and order books they don't find on the shelves. Borders intends to place print-on-demand equipment in its retail stores this year. These kiosks will provide customers with access to millions of titles.

Random House, the largest trade book publisher in the US, announced last December that it was preparing to invest in state-of-the-art print-on-demand equipment for its national distribution centre.

Barnes & Noble, the top ranked bookstore chain in America, last December announced an agreement with IBM to provide print-on-demand equipment for its distribution centres, to allow it to quickly convert digital books into conventional print versions one at a time.

There are two main print-on-demand printers, made by Xerox and IBM. Both print at a rate of several hundred pages per minute, and by the time the pages are collated, trimmed and bound, production of a single book takes about five minutes. Most are soft-bound, though some are hooked up to specialty binding units to produce hardcovers.

Instabook, another print-on-demand system, is about the size of an office photocopier. Customers can search an online catalogue of available titles from home or at the shop where the device is located. Or a user can search for key

words in the text of books, which raises the possibility of printing custom books from chapters of multiple titles. The device can paginate, print, fold and bind a soft cover, 200-page book in less than five minutes. It prints black-and-white line art and photographs and accepts preprinted cover stock. The cost per book is about US75 cents (NZ\$1.87). The purchase price of the unit is US\$29,000.

Muze kiosks are increasingly found in American bookstores, and they are replacing the bookstores' computer search monitors. Muze has a 1.6 million title database, and it taps into its own continuously updated global catalogue of music and books in print. Its print-on-demand technology produces both hard-bound and paperback books, at a cost of about US\$5 for a paperback.

As this technology becomes increasingly common in the US, it can be expected that New Zealand will not be far behind in implementing it. Most of the main New Zealand book publishers have strong business links with or are owned by American companies.

So, it probably won't be long before you will be able to send your partner down to the local shops for a carton of milk, a loaf of bread, and a copy of Beowulf.

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