

Back Talk — In the X Movie

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In the movie, *Jurassic Park*, one of the characters talks about the so called chaos theory “butterfly effect” and how life is not as chaotic as it seems, but there are causes not always seen by those at the blunt end of the effect. I have often thought back to this fictional conversation: That a butterfly in the Amazon could with the flutter of its wings set in motion a change/trend in our interrelated ecosystem which is then experienced world-wide. I have found this interesting because I have wondered about the consequences of behaviors or developments we are observing today — are they butterflies or inconsequential moths?

Recently, at an **American Library Association** (Anaheim, CA 2008) panel on library public relations and fund raising, the experience of the **New York Public Library’s** exhibition of the print on demand **Expresso Book Machine** by **Lightning Source** was discussed. It set me to thinking about the butterfly effect and whether print on demand (POD) was another butterfly which would change that corner of the world inhabited by *Against the Grain* readers? Specifically, would POD change the publishing world totally forever? Would POD’s ability to cost effectively generate a few hundred copies of X title super fast cause the demise of university presses, for example, which volume wise, seem to be the specialists at this level of non-fiction publishing.

We have, at the reading consumer’s end of the information chain, of course long had photocopying as a sort of POD option. In the ink on paper world, readers have printed what they wanted/demanded by pumping sufficient dimes into a photocopying machine to purchase that segment of a journal or book which they needed to fulfill their information needs. In the land of full text electronic information, photocopy POD has been replaced by USB memory sticks, hard discs, and/or the ability to save as much as we want and to email it to ourselves for later consumption. While some publishers seem obsessed with limiting the amount of text that can be easily saved for later reading, in general, photocopiers and personal electronic memory devices have not changed the publishing landscape: readers still need a range of publishers to publish interesting books and journals to do their part before readers can grab that part of what is published to meet their research/information needs.

Some publishers themselves have long employed a range of alternatives to 20th century typesetting to produce books. The technology of printing has been in continuous change and evolution since the advent of woodblock printing

nearly 2,000 years ago. But POD is more than changing the technology with which ink is put on paper; the magic of POD — if it exists — is the speed with which it can help information providers meet the demands of readers. The kind of speed with which an **Expresso Book Machine** can churn out a book is very impressive. I have tried to imagine what it would be like for someone like me in Hong Kong to be able to go to a bookshop, or my library lobby, and select what book I want and then be able to pick it up a half hour or so later.

But my wanting to get instant gratification is at the consumer’s end of the information chain. In the publishers’ segment of the process, POD is already beginning to shake things up. In a recent *Economist* article it was noted that “**Stephen DeForge** of **Ames On-Demand** says his POD business, which specializes in printing small runs of customised books for schools and universities, has been growing by 45% a year since 2001. Last year his firm printed more than 800,000 books in runs as small as ten copies at a time.”¹ In that same article, the impact of **Amazon’s** use of POD was also highlighted: “In March **Amazon** announced that it would require all the

POD books it sells to be printed by the company at its warehouses.

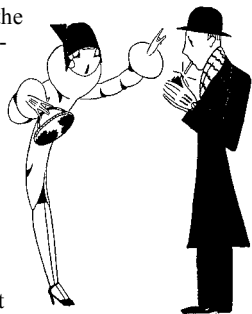
Mr Bezos [**Amazon’s** founder and chief executive] says that this enables **Amazon** to have a book ready to ship within two hours of an order being placed online. Between POD and the **Kindle** [also discussed in this article], **Mr Bezos** thinks he can sell ‘any book ever printed in any language.’”

In a similar vein, a recent news story reported in *The Bookseller.com* noted that while “Publishing output in the US grew only slightly in 2007, according to the US bibliographic provider **Bowker**, there was a “staggering rise” in the number of print-on-demand titles published with **Bowker** now reporting these books separately.”² This article quoted **Kelly Gallagher** of **Bowker** saying that “The most startling development last year is the reporting of ‘On Demand’ [p.o.d.] titles, leading to a stunning five-fold increase of new titles in the unclassified category, which mostly consists of reprints of public domain titles and other short-run books.”

It is intriguing to think about the potential side effects of short run publishing. **Melissa Tetreault** of **Digital Publishing Solutions** indicated that “Statistics from **InfoTrends, Inc.**, show that short run printing is the way of the future. Runs of 250 to 499 are seeing a 40 percent increase in print frequency, as opposed to runs of 50,000

plus, which are seeing a 44 percent decrease in frequency.”³ **Thomas Bacher**, in a comment regarding the revival of the **Rice University Press** which is using short run printing, indicated that “Many presses now print first runs of less than 150 copies, make print-on-demand an option and sell eBooks.”⁴ His point was university presses, many of which would have died out long ago without direct or indirect subsidies from their host institutions, could survive employing short runs. But I wonder what is to prevent commercial presses from simply expanding their purview into the narrow interest academic book business previously dominated by university presses.

Previously, an author whose book would only be sold to a hundred or so academic libraries plus the same or less number of academics and students could only resort to a university press because commercial press runs had to be in the thousands of copies to break even. But now? I wonder whether or not a large commercial publisher couldn’t rely upon the same POD technology to make academic book publishing profitable. Such monographic publishers could then go around like major European periodicals publishers collecting university presses. Each of these university presses could reduce their staffs to one or two people to recruit manuscripts regionally and then all the rest of the work would be picked up by the “mother publisher” whose distribution channels are much more extensive than those enjoyed by university presses. Maybe **Amazon** could be the collector of university presses? Were this to happen, the effects of the POD butterfly might not end here. With **Amazon** involved, what will happen to academic book vendors? Maybe **Amazon** could buy one or more of approval vendors and simplify the whole process. We live in interesting times. Watch out for butterflies! 🦋



Endnotes

1. “Bound.” (June 5, 2008). *The Economist*. [Electronic Version]. Retrieved July 23, 2008 from http://www.economist.com/business/displaystory.cfm?story_id=11504752.
2. **Jones, Philip.** (May 27, 2008). **Bowker** reports huge US p.o.d. surge. *Bookseller.com*. Retrieved July 23, 2008 from <http://www.thebookseller.com/news/59802-bowker-reports-huge-us-pod-surge.html>.
3. **Tetreault, Melissa.** (March 2008). Short run books: “Digital printers offer runs of one to many.” **Digital Publishing Solutions**. Retrieved July 23, 2008 from <http://www.dpsmagazine.com/content/ContentCT.asp?P=383>.
4. **Bacher, Thomas.** (July 31, 2007). **Rice E Press**. *Inside Higher ED*. Retrieved July 23, 2008 from <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2007/07/31/ricepress>.