

Creative Reading Charter

The digital conversation: will publishers and librarians take part?

by Victoria Barnsley, publisher and chief executive officer, HarperCollins

The greatest cultural developments of the last 500 years have, as far as reading is concerned, all been triggered by advances in technology. William Caxton's printing press of 1476 really created a written culture as we know it and more recently the invention of offset printing at the beginning of the 20th century quietly produced another revolution.

This was the technology that in 1935, enabled Allen Lane to create a new format for the book – the paperback. Using the distribution network of Woolworths, a force to be reckoned with in those days, Penguin was able to create a new mass market for literature, previously regarded as the preserve of a cultural elite.

Today technology is about to produce an even more significant revolution in the history of reading, which will finally make the polarisation of written culture between 'high brow' and 'low brow' redundant.

In only a few years, it is likely that any reader will be able to access all forms of narrative texts – from great literary classics to popular blockbusters – anywhere and at any time, through the click of a single button. What's more, by escaping the confines of printed media, texts can now be consumed alongside many other forms of entertainment, such as music or video.

By dramatically increasing the accessibility of written communication, digitisation has actually increased the numbers of people reading. Our love affair with the written word shows no signs of abating. However, it is the reader's relationship with the written word that is changing. In the digital age the reader is master of the universe.

Until the invention of the Worldwide Web, reading tended to be a solitary, private activity. The internet has changed all that by turning readers from the passive consumers of text into the active participants in an interactive conversation. Whether it be through chat rooms, blogs, or community sites, readers are now engaging with writers and each other, and in many instances are becoming writers themselves.



This blurring of the acts of reading and writing makes even more nonsense of attempts to elevate certain forms of narrative, by giving them more cultural status. Are blogs a form of art? Why not? Is user-generated content to be excluded from the cultural canon? Are recommendations produced by the wisdom of crowds intrinsically less valuable than those from a critic? In this new world these questions seem increasingly irrelevant.

What is more relevant, is what publishers and librarians and others involved in the dissemination of written culture, are doing to adapt their businesses and institutions to cater for today's new hyper-connected digital natives – for today's new kind of readers.

As publishers move into the digital future – and the digital present – we must redefine our role. We are now on the cusp of a profound change in the way we produce, market, sell and deliver content to readers. Although the printed book is unlikely, as some suggest, to completely disappear, an increasing percentage of written culture will, in all probability, be delivered and consumed on-line.

In some ways, this won't hugely affect our business models. We might have to focus less on the supply chain but we'll still need to select, nourish, market and sell narratives as we've always done. However, I believe something more will be required of us. If we are to avoid the threat of disintermediation, in a world where any writer can publish directly on-line, we're going to have to add value, not just to the text, but to the experience of reading that text. We're going to have to engage with the experiences around texts; with the socialisation of reading. The publishers that prosper in decades to come will be those that contribute to the experience of readers, those that facilitate the interaction of readers, with writers and with each other.

One example at HarperCollins, and there are of course many others, is our partnering with the Institute of the Future of the Book on a project featuring Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*. They have created an online, annotated version of the book so that writers, academics and others can read the text together online and offer comments as marginalia; readers in turn will then be able to read Doris' text and the annotations and offer feedback. This creates a rich, online dialogue around a seminal text, for now not revenue generating, but aimed more at increasing the continuing relevance of Doris Lessing's work to a new generation. But it also illustrates the kind of value that can be added by a publisher to the experience of consuming a text.

So for publishers the new activity will largely be virtual, through online communities and platforms. However, for libraries, there's surely an opportunity to mirror this socialisation of reading and writing, in a bricks and mortar world. The modern library could become the physical embodiment of this new interactivity: a real social networking site for reading.

As the web provides an antidote to the increasing homogenisation of our culture, by catering for individual communities and niche interests, can't libraries provide the physical manifestation of this localisation? Libraries should aspire to becoming the ultimate book clubs – places where readers can engage, around texts, to find a resonance and relevance that are particularly applicable to their own communities and catchment areas.

In our new digital world, publishers and librarians should no longer see themselves as the gatekeepers, or providers of culture, but as the guides or facilitators to the experience of consuming and interacting with that culture – and its creation.

Technology has opened up a line of communication between writers and readers on an unprecedented scale. It's incumbent upon us to make sure that we're listening and participating in this conversation.