

Book industry meets over uncertain future

May 30 2009, by Luis Torres De La Llosa



A man reads a book at a bookshop in Manhattan, New York. Publishers, booksellers and authors are holding a major annual convention in the city this week as the industry reels from a global recession and readers migrate to digital formats.

Publishers, booksellers and authors are holding a major annual convention in New York this week as the industry reels from a global recession and readers migrate to digital formats.

"What is a book?" asked Lance Fensterman, director of BookExpo America, held through Sunday at New York's Jacob K. Javits Convention Center.

"A book of pages, something you can listen to, or is it a book you can read on your handheld device?" such as Amazon's Kindle or the Sony Reader Digital Book, he added.

The debate is on, but all sides agree that the publishing world always focuses more on distributing content over format.

"The format that the content is in is secondary to the content," Fensterman told AFP. "Publishers are evolving to content providers, not just printers of [books](#)."

BookExpo America is the biggest book fair in the United States, the second-largest worldwide after Frankfurt in Germany and the biggest English-language fair of its kind.

Some 1,500 publishers and booksellers from across the world congregate at the event, as well as a thousand authors and 30,000 visitors, according to the organizers.

From best-selling authors to celebrities like actress Julie Andrews or the pilot of Chelsey Sullenberger, the pilot who safely landed his crippled jet in New York's Hudson River, the guests are varied and numerous.

What's hot these days in the book world? "Anything digital right now," Fensterman said.

"Electronic support presents an opportunity to deliver your content in a much cheaper fashion. You don't need to print something, you don't need to ship it, you don't have to worry about refurnishing, or restocking or returns."

According to industry analyst Book Industries Trend, three billion printed books were sold in 2008 in the United States, 1.5 percent less than in 2007.

But the figures do not reflect the true impact of the crisis. Borders, one of the biggest bookseller chains in the country, reported a 12 percent

drop in sales during the first semester this year.

The sector is still struggling to adapt to changing the format for readers.

"Everybody is trying to find their business models: how do we accomplish that? ... How do we protect our intellectual rights?" Fensterman asked.

Rick Royce, chief marketing officer for The Perseus Books Group, has launched a new project to respond to the challenge.

During the three-day fair, visitors can help create a "book of the future," from its content to its format.

We are going to publish this book in every format we can, including audio, text, digital," Royce said.

According to Nielsen BookScan, [Amazon](#) and Sony's digital formats saw their sales increase by seven percent in 2008 for a total of 113 million dollars.

But Fensterman still had some optimism from printed books.

"There will always be people to consume the content in the printed book form. The question is what percentage of the population would that be? Would it be 3 percent or 75 percent? We don't know, but we have to offer the option as an industry," he said.

Janet Brown, of ThingsAsian Press, which publishes Asia-inspired books, called for an overhaul of the traditional book industry.

"The hard cover book is becoming so expensive now, that people are beginning to think that there has to be another way of doing this. You

can do a high quality hard cover book produced in a way that will be economical for the consumer," she said.

"Face it, nobody wants to go reading with an e-book at night, a Kindle is not cosy," she added.

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