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"NEW MEDIA FOR OLD"

by

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As a professional writer and the author of 13 full-length books produced and marketed by traditional mainstream book publishers on both sides of the Atlantic, I have witnessed -- at first admittedly with some scepticism  -- and now embraced enthusiastically -- yes, I know, there is nothing worse than a born-again convert, the smoker turned non-smoker -- the emergence of so-called "new media". I use this all-encompassing term to denote the various manifestations of electronic publishing primarily on the Internet, including HTML-generated sites on the World Wide Web, PDF publishing (which will, I predict, become ever more mainstream and important especially for those coming from traditional paper publishing backgrounds who wish to maintain control over design- and text-and-illustration-rich work), and new and still-emerging electronic forums utilising virtual reality, truly interactive multimedia, and whatever else that has just appeared or been created since I last blinked.

It is easy to get carried away: to be seduced, like from some fantastic scene from the *Arabian Nights*, by the lamp seller in the bazaar, crying out, "New Media for Old!", and even to consider, for a moment, that all this new electronic hullabaloo can, will, one day soon come to replace all traditional publishing media: the brave new world of the paperless book, the electronic newspaper, the ezine, or whatever. But are we on the verge of letting loose some omnipotent, even uncontrollable genie in our frantic quest to embrace the so-called new media?

The dangers are not, I maintain, entirely imagined or fabricated, and web site creators would be wise to heed, or at least be aware of some of them. Because much of new media publishing is being undertaken by organisations and individuals who have not come from traditional publishing backgrounds (neither book nor magazine editorial or design), there is undoubtedly a new energy, an incredible excitement and dynamism to the industry (if we may even call it that). And indeed the sheer ease of publishing material on the World Wide Web at minimal expense and even with minimal technical know-how now that HTML editors are all the rage means that virtually anyone can set himself/herself up as a "new media publisher". Ensclosed in front of our latest model PCs and Macs with multimedia 17 inch colour displays with stereo speakers and the fastest internal modems, we may well scoff at the stuffy, comfortable, bookish image from another era that is invoked by the mere term "traditional publisher".

Reality, however, is not always what it seems. I have worked with all types and sizes of mainstream publishing houses in both Britain and America, from multinational mega-giants such as HarperCollins to small, old-fashioned Bloomsbury presses such as Andre Deutsch, to specialist publishers with a high degree of technical, electronic and new media expertise such as Websters International Publishers. The publishing industry, certainly, compared to the pace of change taking place in new media, may seem slow-moving in the extreme, the business of producing a book -- commissioning, writing, production, and printing, an entire process that rarely takes much less than 18 months to two years -- a time-consuming, laborious and expensive process for all concerned, from author to editor, to copy-editor, to designer, to proof-reader, to sales, marketing and publicity boffins. The electronic publisher, naturally, has the advantage of being able to bypass many of these stages. But beware: in doing so, much traditional publishing expertise that has been honed and perfected in an industry that has been around since the beginning of history (or at least since Herr Gutenberg perfected moveable type) is also missed. And the lack of

this professional expertise is something that is far too often missing in too many web sites: the proliferation of poorly written and edited copy, poorly proofed copy, unsuitable design, and most of all, a basic publishing failure to write for and to address (in both editorial copy, design and illustrations) a specific and precise market.

Traditional publishers, on the other hand, perforce must address such concerns, primarily because if they don't, no one will buy their wares -- their books, magazines, newspapers, their magic lanterns. The new media publisher? In the midst of all the excitement and razzle-dazzle, the hustle and bustle of the electronic bazaar, the market itself -- the electronic reader -- is often the last consideration in the frantic quest for web site creation, the buzz of web site strategy and design that incorporates the latest and most fashionable buzzwords. The quest to put in as many tricks, the process of pulling the electronic genie out of the lantern (no matter how long it takes to do so -- the inevitable slow-stroke of download times) can produce a smoke screen that both negates whatever special effects said genie is able to produce while at the same time obscuring, even losing completely the main message -- the essential act of communication.

As far as I am concerned, whether new or old, the medium is never -- or never should be -- the message itself. Rather, in my book (whether paper or electronic), content is king -- it must be compelling, it must be entertaining, it must convey information that the readers wants to or needs to know. The medium, on the other hand, if not the message itself, is ultimately no more than a means of delivering that message. Undoubtedly, in the case of the Internet, that medium can be a very effective means of delivery indeed. On the other hand, poor design, slow download speeds, too large images, too many fancy effects that add little to the content, poorly dithered colours, non-streamed, slow-loading audio: these and many more such peccadilloes can and do certainly obscure the message of many web sites (assuming that there is a worthwhile message underlying all the razzmatazz to begin with -- something which is by no means always the case).

Some hard truths? Perhaps, but hey, don't shoot me, I'm only the lantern seller. "New media for old?" The traditional publishing industry is certainly not under direct threat from new media publishing, not yet anyway. But while new media publishing undergoes its necessary evolutionary process of development, I do maintain that the industry could do worse than to take a paper leaf or two from traditional publishers through the invention or creation of its own set of "traditional" electronic publishing values and standards. Care in content creation and editing, careful proof-reading and spell checks, professionalism in site design, vigilance in site maintenance, and a constant eye to the precise market requirements of your chosen cyber-reader are probably not bad places to start.