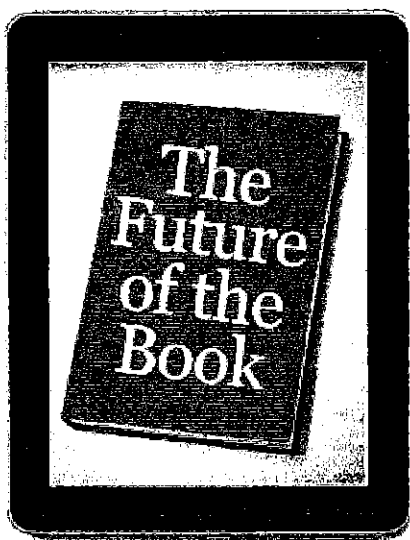# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.
WSJ.com

MEDIA & MARKETING | JUNE 3, 2010

'Vanity' Press Goes Digital

By GEOFFREY A. FOWLER And JEFFREY A. TRACHTENBERG

Writer Karen McQuestion spent nearly a decade trying without success to persuade a New York publisher to print one of her books. In July, the 49-year-old mother of three decided to publish it herself, online.

Journal Community

Eleven months later, Ms. McQuestion has sold 36,000 e-books through Amazon.com Inc.'s Kindle e-bookstore and has a film option with a Hollywood producer. In August, Amazon will publish a paperback version of her first novel, "A Scattered Life," about a friendship triangle among three women in small-town Wisconsin.

Ms. McQuestion is at the leading edge of a technological disruption that's loosening traditional publishers' grip on the book market—and giving new power to technology companies like Amazon to shape which books and authors succeed.

Much as blogs have bitten into the news business and YouTube has challenged television, digital self-publishing is creating a powerful new niche in books that's threatening the traditional industry. Once derided as "vanity" titles by the publishing establishment, self-published books suddenly are able to thrive by circumventing the establishment.

"If you are an author and you want to reach a lot of readers, up until recently you were smart to sell your book to a traditional publisher, because they controlled the printing press and distribution. That is starting to change now," says Mark Coker, founder of Silicon Valley start-up Smashwords Inc., which offers an e-book publishing and distribution service.

Fueling the shift is the growing popularity of electronic books, which few people were willing to read even three years ago. Apple Inc.' s iPad and e-reading devices such as Amazon's Kindle have made buying and reading digital books easy. U.S. book sales fell 1.8% last year to $23.9 billion, but e-book sales tripled to $313 million, according to the Association of American Publishers. E-book sales could reach as high as 20% to 25% of the total book market by 2012, according to Mike Shatzkin, a publishing consultant, up from an estimated 5% to 10% today.

The Stars of Self-Publishing

It's unclear how much of a danger digital self-publishing poses to the big publishers, who still own the industry's big hits, whether e-book or print. Many big publishers dismiss self-published titles, noting that

Amazon.com, Jeff Bezos, CEO Bloomberg News

Kindle Digital Text Platform lets publishers and writers upload books for sale on Amazon.com, and the e-books can be read on Amazon's Kindle e-reader or other devices that support Amazon apps. Starting later this month, Amazon will give 70% of the price of the book to authors.

Barnes & Noble, William Lynch,

Bloomberg News

CEO

PubIt! system, coming this summer, lets publishers and writers upload books to Barnes & Noble's online e-bookstore, which can be read on the company's own Nook and other devices that support its format. Revenue share terms with authors have yet to be announced.

Apple, Steve Jobs, CEO
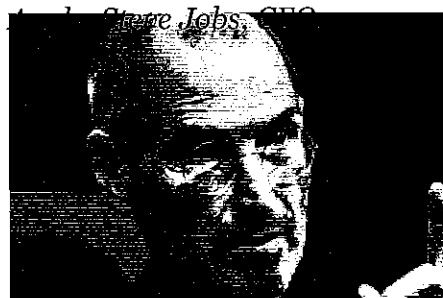
Asa Mathat/All Things Digital

Allows authors to upload and distribute books to its iBookstore, which can be used on the iPad and soon on the iPhone. Apple gives 70% of the price of the e-book to authors.

Lulu, Bob Young, CEO

Lulu

Print and digital self-publishing company publishes approximately 20,000 new titles each month. The company doesn't charge authors to publish, but does charge for a range of services that include editing and cover design. Lulu.com takes 20% of the revenue from each sale.

most disappear, in part because they may be poorly edited and are almost never reviewed.

But some publishers say that online self-publishing and the entry of newcomers such as Amazon into the market could mark a sea change in publishing.

"It's a threat to publishers' control over authors," said Richard Nash, former publisher of Soft Skull Press who recently launched Cursor Inc., a new publishing company. "It shows best-selling authors that there are alternatives—they can hire their own publicist, their own online marketing specialist, a freelance editor, and a distribution service."

Amazon has taken an early lead, providing service tools for authors to self publish and creating an imprint last year to publish promising authors in print and online.

This month, Amazon is upping the ante, increasing the amount it pays authors to 70% of revenue, from 35%, for e-books priced from $2.99 to $9.99. A self-published author whose e-book lists for $9.99 on Amazon's Kindle e-bookstore will receive about $6.99 for each book sold. The author would net $1.75 on a similar new e-book sale by most major publishers.

The new formula makes digital self-publishing more lucrative for authors. "Some people will be tempted by the 70% royalty at Amazon," Mr. Nash says. "If they already have a loyal fan base, will they want 70% of $100,000 or 15% of $200,000 for a hardcover?"

Traditional book-industry players and tech companies are jumping on the digital self-publishing bandwagon. Apple last week announced a digital self-publishing program for its iPad giving 70% of revenue to authors, similar to Amazon's formula. Last month, Barnes & Noble also announced a service called PubIt!, allowing authors to post and sell e-books online.

Last fall, Jane Friedman, former chief executive of News Corp.'s HarperCollins Publishers, started Open Road Integrated Media LLC, which focuses on e-books, including authors who are willing to be published digitally before going into print. Traditional publishers such as Nashville, Tenn.-based Thomas Nelson Inc., a religious publisher, have struck alliances with Author Solutions Inc. for print and online self-publishing.

And a flurry of tech-focused startups now offers self-publishing services, including Smashwords, FastPencil Inc. and Lulu Enterprises Inc. Website Scribd.com says it publishes 290,000 independent books annually on its site, which authors sell at a price they set themselves.

One of the largest repositories for digitally self-published works for sale is Amazon's Digital Text Platform. Steve Kessel, an Amazon senior vice president, says the company launched Digital Text along with its Kindle in 2007 to give writers and small publishers simple tools to add books to the Kindle store. Today, the Kindle store accounts for about 70% of the U.S. market for e-books.

Smashwords, Mark Coker, Julie Parayno
founder

Offers a digital distribution platform that supports a variety of e-bookstores, including Sony, Apple and Barnes & Noble. Gives 85% of the net proceeds from the e-book's sale back to the authors. Has published more than 12,600 titles.

FastPencil, Steve Wilson, CEO

Fast Pencil

Website with social networking features for authors to simplify writing and creating books. Site offers services for publishing in print and in a variety of e-book formats.

Scribd

Website for publishing documents that can be read online or on a range of mobile devices. Allows authors to give e-books away for free, or set prices and sell them on the site. Authors get an 80% share of revenue.

Author Solutions, Kevin Weiss

Author Solutions, Inc.

CEO

Self-publishing company charges authors to prepare, market and sell their titles. Imprints include AuthorHouse, iUniverse and Xlibris. The company says it has published more than 125,000 titles by more than 85,000 authors.

Amazon has used its retail clout to make deals directly with brand-name authors. It has won exclusive e-publishing deals from authors such as Stephen King and Stephen Covey.

And in May 2009, Amazon launched its own publishing imprint, Amazon Encore. From a sea of self-published titles, Amazon plucks a few with promise, then edits and distributes them online and through print retailers. It began with the book "Legacy," written by then-14-year-old Cayla Kluver. Amazon Encore has announced 19 books so far.

CEO Jeff Bezos says Amazon wants to be a partner, not a threat, to publishers. "I think the real risk is that there are a multitude of publishers. Some of them are really forward leaning, and are really going after this new e-book area," he says. "If you are not one of those publishers, then I would be worried."

The industry says that most authors will stay with their print publishers. More than 90% of sales still come from physical books. In addition to the editing and marketing support for their manuscripts, many writers depend on the advances they get from their print publishers. For some, this means seven-figure payments long before their titles hit the bookshelves. Self-published authors only generate revenue when their books are sold to consumers.

Yet as tens of thousands of authors self-publish their work, publishers' control continues to weaken over how titles are distributed and which books are offered for sale. Some publishers fear that one of the big technology companies now distributing e-books will compete for the industry's best-known authors, by offering advances in a bid to gain market share. Some best-selling authors write several books a year, and may be tempted to test the market if they have a manuscript that isn't under contract.

The market is likely to shift into two tiers, "branded/high-quality" and "cheap/good enough," predicts author and lecturer Seth Godin. Mainstream publishing houses have long depended for much of their profit on selling backlist titles, books in print for more than a year. In coming years, there will be adequate substitutes for many of those works at a quarter of the price, he says.

Digital self-publishing, or "vanity" publishing, is creating a powerful new niche in books. WSJ's Geoffrey Fowler joins the Digits show to discuss how this is threatening the traditional book industry.
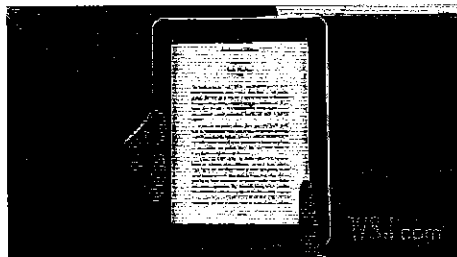
Long before there were iPads and Kindles changing communication as we know it, there were other disruptive technologies and breakout information delivery systems. Like the printing press. And the Guttenberg Bible. WSJ's Marshall Crook offers a brief history of the book.

Digits: Vanity Publishing -- the 'YouTube for Books'

"Not for the books of J.D. Salinger or George Orwell, but for a book on stretching, certainly," he says. "And books on stretching have long helped pay the bills at many publishing houses."

The proliferation of cheap digital books concerns even publishers who don't think readers will defect to self-published titles. "There is some truth to the idea that low prices will drag down our prices," says Dominique Raccah, owner of Sourcebooks Inc., an independent publisher in Naperville, Ill.

Pricing was at the heart of a public spat between Amazon and five of America's top six publishers this spring. Amazon had been retailing most top e-books for $9.99. Publishers argued that price devalued work they sold for more than twice as much in paper form.

Publishers worried that readers would get used to paying so little for e-books that it could devalue the industry's cash cow, hardcover books. The publishers won, and Amazon adopted an "agency" model, in which publishers set prices for books, and distributors such as Amazon take a cut of the proceeds.

Digital self-publishing is attracting even top-selling authors. F. Paul Wilson, who writes the popular "Repairman Jack" thriller series published by Tor, an imprint of Macmillan, says he posted on Amazon five science-fiction novels published earlier in his career at $2.99 each.

"This stuff was just sitting around, out of print, doing nothing," says Mr. Wilson, who has written about 40 books. He thinks he'll eventually make as much as $5,000 to $10,000 a month when he lists all his older titles.

Mr. Wilson doesn't foresee abandoning print, but some authors do. Thriller writer Joe Konrath says that, as more consumers buy e-books, the economics will tip.

Under the pen name Jack Kilborn, he sold 50,000 copies of his last novel, "Afraid," published by Grand Central Publishing, an imprint of Hachette Book Group, in all formats. He earned about $30,000. But if he sold it as an e-book on his own, he could make that much in 18 months by selling 800 e-books a month, he estimates.

Mr. Konrath says he's already earning more from self-published Kindle books that New York publishers rejected than from his print books. In the past 14 months, he has sold nearly 50,000 Kindle e-books, and at the current royalty rate, he makes $58,000 per year from his self-published works. When Amazon royalties double this summer, he expects to bring in $170,000 annually.

Jon Lowenstein/NOOR for The Wall Street Journal

Karen McQuestion has sold 36,000 e-books through Amazon.com.

"I'm outselling a bunch of famous, name-brand authors. I couldn't touch their sales in print," Mr. Konrath says.

Most self-published authors don't have popular followings and see modest sales. Caroline Weiss and Margaret Wallace self-published their novel "Stalking Bret Easton Ellis" last year. Ms. Weiss estimates sales of the book at fewer than 400 paper copies and 100 digital copies. "It's a lot of work to promote your book, definitely," says Ms. Weiss. "Social media helps, but you have to be very aggressive."

Still, the success of Ms. McQuestion's debut self-published novel, "A Scattered Life," illustrates perhaps the biggest long-term threat to traditional publishers: a replacement for their ability to curate and market books.

Ms. McQuestion, who lives in Hartland, Wis., says she wouldn't have entertained a self-funded print run of her books. But she uploaded her first e-books to Amazon's Digital Text because she read that it worked well for another author. "I thought, if nobody buys it, I can just take it down," she says. When people began buying her e-books, she says she wondered: "Who were these people, and how did they find my books?"

The Future of the Book

Topics: E-Books

Previously: E-Books Rewrite Bookselling

The answer: Amazon has proven adept at using its technology to merchandise the so-called "long tail" of niche goods. While traditional publishers rely on name-brand reviews, Amazon has millions of customers posting reviews. Amazon offers free, instant, sample chapters to hook readers. And it makes computer-generated recommendations based on other readers' purchases. So, the more people that bought Ms. McQuestion's books, the more often the site recommended her work.

For new writers, Ms. McQuestion says, Amazon levels the playing field, since it doesn't differentiate between self-published and big-publisher titles. Ms. McQuestion says low prices—the novel sold for less than $2 on Amazon's Kindle—play a role in her success.

Amazon executives say they signed Ms. McQuestion to the Encore imprint after noticing the positive user-generated reviews of her books. Thanks to its vast database, Amazon not only knows what people buy but also how they consume e-books—such as which passages readers most often highlight.

Ms. McQuestion and Amazon won't disclose the terms of their deal for "A Scattered Life." Seattle-based Amazon will issue a new version of her e-book and produce a paperback version targeting book clubs.

"All of this time I have been trying to get traditionally published, I was sending my manuscript to the wrong coast," says Ms. McQuestion.

Write to Geoffrey A. Fowler at

A New Page in Publishing
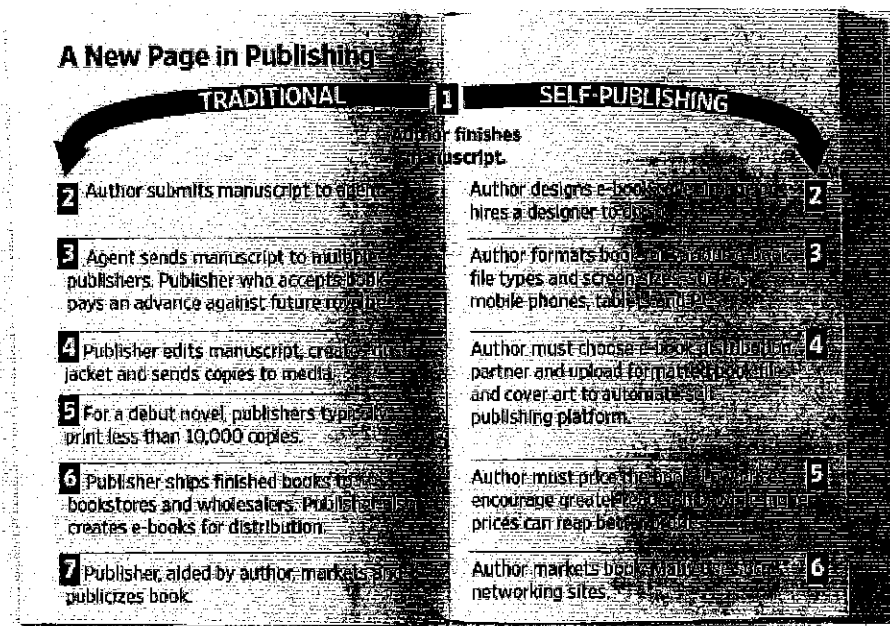
Source: WSJ research (traditional); Smashwords (self-publishing)

geoffrey.fowler@wsj.com and Jeffrey A. Trachtenberg at jeffrey.trachtenberg@wsj.com

Popularity of Books in Digital Platforms Continues to Grow, According to AAP Publishers February 2011 Sales Report

Thursday, 14 April 2011 | Andi Sporkin

E-Books Rank as #1 Format among All Trade Categories for the Month

April 14, 2011; New York, NY-- Powerful continuing growth of books on digital platforms--both e-Books and Downloaded Audiobooks--are highlights of the February 2011 sales report of the Association of American Publishers, which is being released today.

The report, produced by the trade association of the U.S. book publishing industry, tracks monthly and year-to-date publishers' net sales revenue in all categories of commercial, education, professional and scholarly books and journals.

According to the February results, once again e-Books have enjoyed triple-digit percentage growth, 202.3%, vs February 2010. Downloaded Audiobooks, which have also seen consistent monthly gains, increased 36.7% vs last February.

For February 2011, e-Books ranked as the #1 format among all categories of Trade publishing (Adult Hardcover, Adult Paperback, Adult Mass Market, Children's/Young Adult Hardcover, Children's/Young Adult Paperback).

This one-month surge is primarily attributed to a high level of strong post-holiday e-Book buying, or "loading," by consumers who received e-Reader devices as gifts. Experts note that the expanded selection of e-Readers introduced for the holidays and the broader availability of titles are factors.

Additionally, Trade publishing houses cite e-Books as generating fresh consumer interest in--and new revenue streams for--"backlist" titles, books that have been in print for at least a year. Many publishers report that e-Book readers who enjoy a newly-released book will frequently buy an author's full backlist.

For the year to date (January/February 2011 vs January/February 2010), which encompasses this heavy post-holiday buying period, e-Books grew 169.4% to $164.1M while the combined categories of print books fell 24.8% to $441.7M.*

According to Tom Allen, President and Chief Executive Officer of AAP, "The February results reflect two core facts: people love books and publishers actively serve readers wherever they are. The public is embracing the breadth and variety of reading choices available to them. They have made e-Books permanent additions to their lifestyle while maintaining interest in print format books."

Allen added that book publishers have been leaders among content providers in identifying and serving new audiences. "Publishers have always strategically expanded into all the markets and formats where readers want to find books, whether it was Trade Paperback, Mass Market or now digital. By extending their work as developers, producers and marketers of high-quality content to emerging technologies, publishers are constantly redefining the timeless concept of 'books.'"

Other highlights in the February 2011 report (all February 2011 vs February 2010 unless otherwise noted):

Digital categories:
E-Book sales were $90.3 Million, growing 202.3% vs February 2010. Downloaded Audiobooks were $6.9M, an increase of 36.7%.

Trade categories:
Adult Trade categories combined (Hardcover, Paperback and Mass Market) were $156.8M, down 34.4%. Children's/Young Adult categories combined (Hardcover and Paperback) were $58.5M, a decline of 16.1%

*Year-to-date 2011 vs YTD 2010: E-Books increased by 169.4% while all categories combined of print Trade books declined by 24.8%

Religious books:
February sales of $48.5M were an increase of 5.5%; this reflects growth as well in the category for year-to-date, up 6.1% to $93.9M.

Education categories:
Higher Education sales for YTD (January and February 2011) were $406.9M, down slightly by 5.6% vs YTD 2010. In K-12, YTD sales were $173M, declining 8.9% from 2010.

Professional/Scholarly categories:
Total sales for professional books and journals were $42.9M, a slight drop of 3.6% vs February 2010. Combined sales of University Press (hardcover and paperback) were $6.7M, falling 6% vs last year.

The AAP monthly and year-end sales report represents data provided by 84 U.S. publishing houses representing major commercial, education, professional, scholarly and independents. Data on e-Books comes from 16 houses. The report does not include all book and journal net sales but provides what's acknowledged as the best industry snapshot currently available.

AAP also produces a separate in-depth report of total book sales, available in May. For more information about this, please contact the appropriate person below.

Contact for media:
Andi Sporkin: asporkin@publishers.org 202-220-4554

Contact for investment companies and those wishing to purchase the full report:

Nieman Journalism Lab

With three cups of luck, Byliner builds pre-launch buzz for its longform-focused platform

By Lois Beckett

Byliner. We'll find you something good to read.

When former NYT Magazine editor Gerry Marzorati spoke at Berkeley earlier this spring about saving long-form journalism, he tossed out an interesting idea: Someone should assemble a "hive" of long-form journalists and build a website to attract readers and showcase the writers' work. New Yorker writer Mark Danner suggested that the hive could be a one-stop shop, providing writers with marketing, social media help, and event coordination, in addition to publishing their work. Marzorati emphasized that the endeavor would need to rely on popular, big-name journalists to establish its cachet.

Across the Bay in San Francisco, it turns out, a plan very much like this one was already in the works. Byliner, which will launch in May, combines a publishing platform for original, long-form journalism with a website that aims to be the Pandora of narrative nonfiction — and to make itself the main curator for that kind of storytelling on the web.

Three Cups of Deceit

It's an ambitious project, led in part by an editor with deep connections to some of the country's most established nonfiction writers. As editor of Outside magazine, Mark Bryant won five National Magazine Awards, and he's worked with Michael Lewis, Susan Orlean, Jon Krakauer, David Foster Wallace, Annie Proulx, Sebastian Junger, Mary Roach, Bill Bryson, Ian Frazier, and Denis Johnson.

So yes, they've got cachet.

Byliner had a more or less picture-perfect debut last week with the publication of Jon Krakauer's "Three Cups of Deceit," an investigation into the finances and real biography of *Three Cups of Tea* author and Nobel Peace Prize nominee Greg Mortensen. The story was available free for the first 72 hours, and more than 70,000 people had downloaded it as of yesterday. (It's currently at #1 in Amazon's Kindle Singles store.) The company has also worked out a partnership with Read It Later, which will give them immediate access to roughly 4 million registered users, Bryant said.

While some of the details about Byliner won't be clear until after the launch, I spoke with Bryant about the strategy behind the project, and how he envisions the site will fit into the existing publishing world.

Bryant described Byliner as less a competitor for existing publishers and more a central gathering place for long-form journalism. It will provide some of its own content, he said, but also direct readers to stories elsewhere.

"If we can help create this narrative nonfiction community, and if Byliner can become a clearinghouse for that, that will help float everybody 's boat," Bryant said. "We're friendly with The Atavist," and "I really admire groups like longform.org. They're all great, and I think we can help each other."

In talks with companies like Amazon, Apple, Google, and Barnes & Noble, it became clear that the web giants were eager to see more long-form reporting produced, Bryant said. The companies were particularly excited to build a relationship with publishers with a proven history in the field of nonfiction — and who would "guarantee them a steady diet of quality work." (Byliner aims to publish an original piece every two weeks or so.)

In 2009, Bryant and his former colleague, Techland editor John Tayman (who had also previously launched MotorMouths.com), had started talking about ways "to help preserve long-form journalism" in a world where

magazine ad sales — and with them, magazine budgets, page numbers, and story word counts — were shrinking. But the technology they needed to do that simply wasn't in place, Bryant said, and they set the idea aside. Last summer, with the iPad ascendant, they went back into planning mode.

Partnership and community

Their startup has two branches. The more straightforward of them is "Byliner Originals," which will edit and publish new journalism for a tablet platform. (They're aiming for pieces in the 8,000-to-35,000 word range — long by most journalism standards, but still short enough to be read in one sitting.) To complement that endeavor, Byliner will also launch what sounds like a fairly elaborate website for nonfiction afficionados. The site will include author pages that will allow Byliner's writers to tout their personal brands and connect with readers — an intuitive choice — and will also aggregate conversations about those stories from around the web.

"On the writers' pages, the writers are encouraged to actually join in the conversation about the pieces, to talk about what they're reading, what they recommend," Bryant said. He thinks the site will be "a great place for writers to build fan bases."

Byliner's COO, Ted Barnett, provides the social media chops: AOL acquired one of his early companies for $225 milion, and he most recently founded a virtual world site for kids. To promote its brand and its authors, Bryant said the company will not only employ traditional marketing techniques, but also focus on social media. (They're planning on hiring a full-time social media expert.)

Writers will get an advance, and will split the sales profits 50-50 with Byliner. "We really see it as much more of a partnership than a business relationship, and the authors have come with us in part because of our personal relationships with them," Bryant said. "They trust us to handle their work right."

But Byliner.com is going a step further: Its founders want it to be the central location for narrative nonfiction on the web, and they are creating an archive of 25,000 suggested stories, both current and classic, together with a recommendation service — the Pandora for longform — that will note readers' preferences and suggest authors that they might like.

Tayman, the CEO and primary strategist behind the Byliner website, wrote in an e-mail that the archive will ultimately feature "more than 2,000 of the best non-fiction writers working."

"We're curating the full author directories by hand — the writers don't need to do a thing — and we'll roll them out in stages," he wrote. "For our beta launch, almost 200 writers will have dedicated archives that will allow readers to find that writer's newest or classic articles, their books, and — if they've written one — their Byliner Originals."

"The idea is to give a reader the opportunity to do deeper discovery or cross-discovery related to an article or a writer, in a way that's simply not possible now online."

Byliner won't host full articles on the site; the archive is more of a referral service. It will include headlines, decks, and the beginnings of each story, Bryant said, and will then send users directly to the site where the story was originally published — or to the place where they can buy the book. This linking out, in fact, is a small part of Byliner's business model. (Think Amazon affiliation fees.)

There will also be publication pages on the site that will include links for readers to subscribe to a given magazine — Esquire was Bryant's example — or to buy the magazine's iPad app, or to find links to top stories from Esquire selected by Byliner editors.

Bryant said the archive is being curated with the help of roughly twenty young editors, some working part-time. It sounds like a massive endeavor, and it may also be a risky one.

Writing about Byliner last week, Sarah Lacy, who is in talks to be a Byliner contributer herself, called the archive a "distraction" from the more promising work of the Byliner Originals.

I just don't think people are sitting around waiting for more long-form pieces to read. If you're like me you

already have a stack of books you are trying to find time to get through and stacks back issues of the New Yorker, the Economist and Vanity Fair are taking over your house...I think there's a niche group who will love this site. But largely, I think it's designed for a mass audience that reporters like me wish existed.

In response, Tayman took issue with the idea that people have too much to read. "I don't think readers ever suffer from having too many *great* stories to read," he wrote. "The idea is to save readers from wasting their time on reading that might not be satisfying — to steer them away from unsatisfying stories, and point them to stories that not only are great reads, but great reads that will resonate with them. We think that people don't suffer from having *too* much to read, but from not being able to easily find stories they know that they'll enjoy."

"Aesthetically beautiful stories"

At least initially, however, the Byliner Originals will provide the major revenue stream for the company. The site will not feature advertising, at least not until its traffic hits a certain threshold, Bryant said.

He called the popularity of Krakauer's free PDF story "kind of extraordinary."

"Yeah, we were giving it away for free, but you know, I think the sales numbers would still be pretty significant," he said. And while most of Byliner's original pieces "will not be taking an investigative bent," he said he does hope that many will be "highly relevant." And they'll run the gamut in their tone and content. "I think some of them might be quirky from time to time, a little surprising," Bryant said. The idea is quality over category. "There's a place for deadly serious stories. There's a place for humor."

"I think if you looked at the first year's worth of Byliner Originals," Bryant said, connecting them all "would be the idea that they're all smart, they're all really well reported, they're aesthetically beautiful stories." While Byliner's first dozen authors are mainly veterans of long-form, Bryant is also recruiting younger writers. "We're willing to take chances with people," he said. "Generally speaking, we're looking for people, whether they're 23 or 73, that their skills are pretty well honed and that they know what they're doing."

And as for the echoes between Marzorati's "hive" proposal and Byliner? Not a coincidence. "I had spent three years consulting full-time from The New York Times and working directly with and for Gerry," Bryant said, "and I was fortunate to be able to hear a lot of his ideas."

Posted April 25, 10:30 a.m. | Tags: Amazon, archives, Byliner, Gerald Marzorati, Greg Mortensen, John Tayman, long-form journalism, longform, Mark Bryant, Mark Danner, narrative nonfiction, Outside magazine, Pandora, personal branding, Sarah Lacy, Ted Barnett, Three Cups of Tea

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Poynter.

How Technology Is Renewing Attention to Long-form Journalism

by **Mallary Jean Tenore**
Published Aug. 12, 2010 4:39 pm
Updated Mar. 4, 2011 3:24 pm

When we're constantly inundated with information via e-mail, text messages, push alerts, tweets and Facebook updates, it's hard to make time for that 5,000-word New Yorker essay we bookmarked or the serial narrative we keep telling ourselves we'll read but never do.

For as much as technology can distract us from long-form journalism, though, it can also be a gateway into it.

Five guys — Nate Weiner of Read It Later, Marco Arment of Instapaper, Max Linsky and Aaron Lammer of Longform.org, and Mark Armstrong of @LongReads — have found ways to use Web tools to renew attention to long-form journalism, increase its shelf life and make it easier for people to consume and share it.

The tools they're using to create an immersive, focused environment for reading are the same ones that challenge our ability to avoid distractions at work and when we're out with friends: mobile apps, websites and Twitter.

Tools, mobile apps that let you read with fewer distractions

Nate Weiner calls himself a "dude with a lot to read, but not a lot of time." He knows what it's like to get caught in a "conundrum of connectedness" — a pattern in which you're so overwhelmed with information that you rarely have time to pause and make sense of it.

In the past, he said, he would come across magazine-length stories that he wanted to read, but never had a good way to save them for later. To remedy that he created Read It Later, a tool that enables people to save stories from their computer, smart phone or iPad, and makes them available for offline use. The tool, which just turned 3 years old, has more than 3 million users.

Read It Later is different from social bookmarking sites such as Digg and Delicious, which are tools that save, share and organize URLs. Read It Later saves the entire article page, making it available when you're offline and have spare time. Users who want a less distracting experience can select the "text view" option, which strips out just the text.

Weiner said he's talked recently with journalists and publishers about the importance of making it easy for readers to save stories — particularly longer-form ones that take awhile to produce and can get easily lost among other content on a news org's website.

The biggest question he gets from publishers is, "Why would we want to allow the reader to read off our site, away from our advertising and other articles?"

"Read It Later is essentially the article's second chance. It actually improves the likelihood that the article will be seen," Weiner said via e-mail. "If any article is there, the user put it there. And in order for a user to have put it there, they would have to have visited the publisher's site."

Marco Arment, who developed Instapaper, told me, "The best thing authors and publishers can do is give the world great content to read. Without that, all of this technology is pointless."

Similar to Read It Later, Instapaper is a tool for saving Web pages to read later — a "DVR for Web content," as Arment said in an e-mail interview. It also lets you create a customized RSS of the stories you save on Instapaper and it features "Editor's Picks" that showcase the most popular bookmarked content.

Arment, who is also the lead developer behind Tumblr, said Instapaper.com gets about 3 million page views per month and that the service has a few hundred thousand active users altogether.

Arment is working with publishers to integrate Instapaper buttons and links directly to their sites, similar to other sharing tools that most sites already have. And he's made mobile accessibility to long-form stories a priority, saying that Instapaper's iPhone and iPad apps "play a critical role" in its success.

Some may find it strange that a cell phone — a source of distraction for many of us, with its texts, e-mails and alerts — could be conducive to reading narratives. But compared to a laptop, Arment says, a cell phone is the better option.

"The modern computer is packed with distractions. Your hands are always on the controls, waiting to click around and find the next bit of information. Every few minutes, something beeps or pops up a balloon or displays a big red number," Arment said. "Long-form content requires attentive reading, and attentive reading requires a distraction-free environment. You need to pull

people away from their computers."

A website that builds community around long stories

After discovering Instapaper, Max Linsky and Aaron Lammer created Longform.org, a site that aggregates long-form journalism dating back as far as 1899. The goal of the site, they say, is to give people a go-to place for this type of content — and to give it a second chance on the Web.

"We wanted to have a bunch of awesome stuff to read all the time and we assumed people would too, " said Linsky, a freelance journalist.

Lammer, a book editor who never used to make time for magazine-length content, says Instapaper and his work at Longform.org have made it easier to share and keep track of longer stories. The site has also helped him develop, and become part of, a community of people who love narratives.

Visitors of the site, who Linsky and Lammer describe as "long-form journalism addicts," regularly send them suggestions of stories to feature.

"We have a bunch of people get in touch with us who have kept their own archives," Linsky said. "The coolest sources have kept their own personal archives on Delicious or a manila folder in their house."

The number of people who turn to the site to share stories rather than storing them in a folder is proof that technology is breathing new life into long-form content, Linsky said. He's such a big believer in this that he proposed a South by Southwest Interactive panel called "The Death of the Death of Longform Journalism."

A Twitter account that makes it easy to share long reads

Similar to Linksy and Lammer, Mark Armstrong was inspired by Instapaper to start his own collection of long-form stories. In April 2009, he created a Twitter account called @LongReads and has since tweeted about 1,200 stories.

Each day, Armstrong tweets links to about five recent long reads, some of which he finds through the #longreads hashtag he created. The @LongReads account has about 4,500 followers — which spiked after the iPad was released — and continues to increase by about 15 percent each month. (Longform.org also has a Twitter account with about 1,700 followers.)

Armstrong, director of content for Bundle, said Twitter is a good place to post longer-form content because people can easily retweet links to the stories and advance their exposure. He explained the goal of @LongReads in a phone interview.

"I think that ultimately, 1) we want to drive more traffic to publishers who do this kind of work, and 2) encourage people to help organize the Web in a way that makes it easier to find this stuff," said Armstrong, who uses Instapaper and encourages his followers to do so.

All of these tools are connected; as a reader, you can follow @LongReads, save the story to Instapaper or Read It Later, and send it to Lammer and Linsky to post on Longform.org.

Armstrong said he'd ultimately like to see websites start to use a "long reads" tag to aggregate all of the longer content they publish. Inspired by @LongReads, The Awl made its site searchable by "long reads" this week.

"I'm pretty excited about this development," Armstrong said, "and I think we'll start to see more publishers follow The Awl's lead in organizing their sites to help surface substantive, longer content."

As more people drive traffic to long-form journalism via the Web, Twitter and mobile apps, they may give publishers more reasons to produce it.

"We're hitting a point where hopefully the traffic will justify the level of effort that goes into writing and reporting these stories," Armstrong said. "They're not disposable."

Tags: Narrative journalism , Twitter

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