

Books Have a Bright Future and Not Just a Digital One

In regard to L. Gordon Crovitz's "The Digital Future of Books" (Information Age, May 19): Because I have always lived amid books printed on paper and spent a half century or so as a book publisher, my sense of the digital future is different from that of Mr. Crovitz and Jeff Gomez, the author of "Print is Dead" whom he quotes.

The idea that because books can now be stored and transmitted digitally they will necessarily be read on screens is a false inference from incomplete data. Digitization and the Internet will eliminate the traditional supply chain in which physical inventory is stored and shipped to specific retail locations. Instead a multilingual, deep backlist will reside on

Web sites of related interest, as well as with aggregators—and be transmitted on demand as swiftly as email to a decentralized world-wide market place where files will be converted to library quality paperbacks by automatic machines—ATMs for books.

Such machines now operate in locations from Egypt to Australia. The machine which we call the Espresso Book Machine because it automatically prints, binds and trims one copy at a time, on demand, quickly for an individual customer is being developed by On Demand Books, of which I am co-founder. Kindles and BlackBerry phones have a place in the digital future. But digitization, the Internet and the Espresso Book Machine will

provide readers everywhere the most economical, durable, and ergonomic format yet devised, what Robert Darnton, the Harvard librarian calls the "magic of words as ink on paper" and adds "... no computer screen gives satisfaction like the printed page," or can bring the magic of the digital revolution cheaply and quickly to as many readers.

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Mr. Epstein was the editorial director of Random House for 30 years. He was also co-founder of The New York Review of Books and founder of The Library of America and The Readers Catalog, the precursor to online bookselling.

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