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## Waxing Philosophical, Booksellers Face the Digital

By **MOTOKO RICH**

John Updike would not be pleased.

A year ago that literary lion elicited a standing ovation in a banquet hall full of booksellers when he exhorted them to “defend your lonely forts” against a digital future of free book downloads and snippets of text. But this year, at BookExpo America, the publishing industry’s annual convention that ended yesterday, the battering ram of technology was back.

Chris Anderson, the editor of *Wired* magazine who made his own splash last year with his book “The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business is Selling Less of More,” returned to the convention to talk about the possibility of giving away online his next book — which he fittingly intends to title “Free” — to readers who were willing to read it with advertisements interspersed throughout its pages. (He still intends to sell the book traditionally to readers who’d rather get their text without the ads.)

Google and Microsoft both had large presences at the expo at the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center in New York, where about 35,000 publishers, booksellers, authors, agents and librarians attended the four-day carnival of promotion for the all-important fall lineup of titles. A panel sponsored by MySpace.com, the social networking site, drew a standing-room-only crowd, as did another discussion on the influence of literary blogs. Vendors offering to digitize books proliferated.

There were also the usual flashy parties, giveaways and autograph signings at the convention, which is not open to the public. Celebrities sold out \$35-a-head breakfasts and lunches (Stephen Colbert, Alan Alda and Rosie O’Donnell all had books to hawk), and impersonators stalked the exhibition hall. (Elton John, Borat and a twinkling star who could be mistaken for a banana with arms were all sighted.) And publishers and booksellers attempted to figure out the Next Great Book (popular galleys included Denis Johnson’s “Tree of Smoke,” Alice Sebold’s “The Almost Moon” and “Loving Frank,” a debut novel by Nancy Horan.)

But in what has become another rite of the BookExpo in recent years, the industry continued to grapple with its evolving techno-future with a mixture of enthusiasm, anxiety and a whiff of

desperation.

“I think there is going to be a lot of sturm and drang before we figure this out,” said Eamon Dolan, editor in chief of Houghton Mifflin. “There is a huge undertaking ahead. It is going to be rocky.”

Many of the independent booksellers, who have been buffeted by technological change for years, seemed quite philosophical about the need to move forward. Clark Kepler, president of Kepler’s Books and Magazines, an independent store in Menlo Park, Calif., visited a booth for a company that scans books and digitizes them, a technology that, on the face of it, would seem incompatible with a physical bookstore’s mission.

“In terms of the traditional bookstore it would not be good for us,” acknowledged Mr. Kepler, whose store closed its doors nearly two years ago because of financial problems set off in part by fierce competition from online retailers like [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com). He was able to reopen shortly afterward when venture capitalists from Silicon Valley and other community members invested in the store. “But ultimately I think it is good for all of us as readers and seekers of knowledge to have that information available, so as a bookseller I need to rethink my position instead of saying, ‘I wish the world would stand still,’ ” he said.

In a pavilion outside the main exhibit hall Jason Epstein, the former editorial director of Random House and the creator of the Anchor Books paperback imprint, and Dane Neller, founders of [OnDemandBooks.com](http://OnDemandBooks.com), demonstrated their Espresso Book Machine, which can print a small paperback book on site in less than five minutes. “This could replace the entire supply chain that has been in existence since Gutenberg,” Mr. Epstein said.

Chris Morrow, whose parents founded Northshire Bookstore in Manchester Center, Vt., three decades ago, said he would be installing one of the machines. He said he planned to print local histories and Northshire-brand titles from the public domain, like “Middlemarch” or “Moby-Dick.”

“There are lots of challenges in bricks-and-mortar book selling, and I see this as a way of expanding our business,” Mr. Morrow said.

The idea that technology could enlarge, rather than replace, existing sales intrigued David Shanks, chief executive of Penguin Group (USA). “There are millions of gadgets out there where we could sell a lot of product digitally,” said Mr. Shanks, before turning his attention to the keynote address by [Alan Greenspan](http://AlanGreenspan.com), the former Federal Reserve chairman, who appeared with his wife, the NBC correspondent Andrea Mitchell, to promote Mr. Greenspan’s

forthcoming memoir, "The Age of Turbulence." (Penguin is hoping to sell a lot of copies of the book — in whatever form — to recover the \$8.5 million advance it is paying Mr. Greenspan.)

Other uses of technology provoked unease. At a dinner party given by Alfred A. Knopf for some of its authors, Vivien Jennings, president of Rainy Day Books in Fairway, Kan., railed against authors who link from their Web pages to [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com) or even sell autographed copies of their books directly to consumers. "We host a lot of book signings," Ms. Jennings said. Authors who sell their own books "are particularly hurtful to us."

[Tina Brown](#), the former editor of both *The New Yorker* and *Vanity Fair*, who appeared at a lunch at the Modern to promote "The Diana Chronicles," Ms. Brown's book about [Diana, Princess of Wales](#), was more concerned about the possibility that authors' work could be offered free online.

"Giving an author's book away for nothing on the Web as a way to market books seems a mirage to me," Ms. Brown wrote in an e-mail message after the lunch. "All it does is feed the hungry angles of journalists and bloggers who plunder it without any of the author's context or nuance and makes the reader feel there is nothing new to learn from the genuine article when it finally limps on its weary way to a book shop." Although "The Diana Chronicles" will be excerpted in *Vanity Fair*, Ms. Brown pointed out that both the author and publisher are generally paid for such excerpts.

Back in the aisles of the exhibition floor Deal Safrit, a wiry bookseller from Salisbury, N.C., boasted of a well-worn method for coping with technological developments. "I don't spend a lot of time worrying about it," he said. "We just do what we can do well. We are determined to sell books that we think people should read."

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