



Beyond the Book San Francisco

Taking on Technology:

Bay Area's *Beyond the Book* Finds Changes & Challenges

SAN FRANCISCO – Innovation in technology aims at change for the better, one way or another. Yet on occasion, inventors and engineers will discover that not everything needs improvement.

“As a technology, books have proven quite a trustworthy format,” [Gary Luke](#), editorial director of Seattle-based Sasquatch Books, told an audience of writers, editors, and publishing staff attending the latest *Beyond the Book* conference sponsored by Copyright Clearance Center, and broadcast nationally on C-SPAN's Book-TV.

According to Luke, the development of so-called “e-books” – a term describing a variety of electronic formats that have in common an absence of paper and ink – has only highlighted the advantages of the printed page. Indeed, writers and publishers working in these early years of the twenty-first century still produce books the “old-fashioned” way, said Luke, and for good reasons.

“A book is infinitely portable, and in many ways the index in the back of a book can be faster [to use] than a search engine on a screen,” he explained.

From Clipper Ships to Silicon Chips

In December, *Beyond the Book* traveled to the San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park Visitor Center on picturesque Fisherman's Wharf to offer authors and freelance journalists insights on the influence of new technologies on the business of writing and publishing, and how writers can benefit.

The Bay area, with Silicon Valley nearby, proved a fitting setting for such a discussion, given the local history, noted [Glenna Matthews](#), author of *Silicon Valley, Women, and the California Dream*, and a Visiting Scholar at the Institute of Urban and Regional Development, University of California, Berkeley.

As a result of the Gold Rush, Matthews explained, “Hydraulic mining... created a tremendous demand for technical capacity. There was a very precocious technical and scientific development here even in the late nineteenth century, long before Bill Hewlett and Dave Packard” began working together in a Palo Alto garage the late 1930s.

Scientific expertise is hardly the region's only advantage when it comes to generating innovative ideas and inventions. “The Gold Rush brought a mix of people to the Bay Area that had never been seen in human history before,” Matthews explained, “and even though there was racism, it was not possible for any single group to dominate, as often happened in other parts of the country and the world.”

Embracing Disruption

In barely more than a decade, the Internet has recast the shape of writing and publishing. Changes to every aspect of their profession require authors to make tremendous adjustments in their working lives. Not surprisingly, such “disruptive” technologies have not always enjoyed a warm welcome. In the early 1800s, Luddites were infamous for violent opposition to the introduction of industrial machinery to England.

Nevertheless, the great volume of all kinds of writing appearing online reflects what [Ken Goffman \(a.k.a. R.U. Sirius\)](#) called, “a great flowering of interest [in new technologies], with people wanting to embrace the contemporary world.” At the same time, he added, this information explosion has also led to what Goffman called “text inflation” – a condition, according to Goffman, that may lower the fiscal value of writing, while raising it in other areas.

“Good writing still tends to rise to the top, but the rewards are less and less monetary ones,” said the author of the newly-published *Counterculture Through the Ages* (Random House, 2004) and co-founder of *Mondo 2000*, a now-defunct magazine that pioneered coverage of emerging technologies. “Writing is becoming more about the writer building a reputation, being embraced by community, controversy, discourse, and those things.”

Caught in the Web

The accelerating velocity of communication affects the relationship of writers to their editors and publishers, usually by bringing them more closely together.

“As a small press, Sasquatch Books invites submissions from individual authors – they don’t have to come through agents,” said Gary Luke. “Many authors have found me just through word of mouth, and I invite them to e-mail a proposal, which speeds up the response.”

The Internet also affords editors like Luke a window into a writer’s past. Almost as soon as he has opened an e-mail containing a proposal or sample chapter, Luke will do a Google search. “If an author is sending me something, and I’ve never heard of [him or her], I want figure out who this person is. Are we talking about an expert here, or someone who has developed one way or another a large following that demonstrates an interest among the public in the topic? That kind of stuff matters, and it’s pretty easy to find these days.”

Watch For Hype in the Road

The ubiquity and immediacy of news and information in the Internet Age does not always mean that what’s published is of the best quality, noted [Michael Kanellos](#), CNET editor-at-large and a freelancer for many leading newspapers and magazines. “You get the news much quicker than you ever did before. At the same time, there’s slightly more of a chance for errors,” he said.

With technology reporting in particular, excitement surrounding a breakthrough can dissipate literally overnight. “Often you’ll find the analysis of an event will evolve over the first few days,” Kanellos explained. “People will downgrade it from the greatest thing since humans first chipped arrowheads out of obsidian, to, well, kind of an interesting development.”

For Glenna Matthews, replacing her typewriter with a personal computer has proven a boon in a number of ways – “I cannot tell you how many drafts I laboriously typed of my doctoral dissertation at Stanford, which became *Silicon Valley, Women, and the California Dream*. It’s amazing to me that I survived that process because it was so traumatic to make a mistake.”

“And if you ever need to take a break from your writing, do you have a favorite pastime?” asked [Christopher Kenneally](#), the conference moderator and Director, Author & Creator Relations for Copyright Clearance Center.

“I play computer solitaire,” Matthews admitted with a hearty laugh. “When I go back to work, I have some distance from my prose. I didn’t expect to make such a confession on national television, but there, I’ve come out with it – I play computer solitaire.”