

Speech for the Opening of the Frankfurt Book Fair

By Paulo Coelho

A few months ago I was watching a movie, "Giordano Bruno", the story of a "heretic" condemned by the Vatican and burned at the stake in 1600 for his beliefs. The reason I'm mentioning this here is the following: in the film there's a passage in which Giordano Bruno mentions that he just visited the Frankfurt Book Fair to meet some publishers of his work. And here we are, 4 centuries later, not only to meet publishers, but to discuss new tendencies, as well.

Between Giordano Bruno's visit and this morning, a lot of new platforms to share ideas have seen the daylight. The very first Frankfurt Book Fair was, for instance, a consequence of a new invention, movable type printing. Indeed, when Gutenberg invented this in Mainz, only a few kilometres away from here, it inspired local booksellers to organise this fair. We all know that Gutenberg's invention was a major – probably the most significant – step towards creating a movement called The Renaissance, during which ideas could travel more freely. Thanks to this new printing process, ideas could be shared and the world could be reshaped according to these ideas.

Contrary to other platforms, like dance, or painting, or theatre, where the physical presence of the creator was required, the book – and later on, the press – immediately began dominating all other ways to share ideas, because it could be produced on an industrial scale. Books, as vessels for ideas, were ideal for several centuries until their monopoly lost terrain to other media, such as the radio, the cinema and television.

So the core of this discussion is this: sharing ideas. The examples given above all point to the following: the technologies that succeed are the technologies that enable ideas to circulate and touch the widest possible audience. Laws subsequently adapted themselves to this new context (and not the opposite!) – the legal concept of copyright grew in direct line with this new industrial age, in which production and distribution costs were relatively high.

Yet, for the past 10 years we have seen the advent of the web, this incredible machine that is imposing a new way of sharing ideas and defying old economic models. As Kevin Kelly, editor of Wired Magazine, mentioned in his TED speech in December 2007, this new machine, in terms of data, is "swooshing" around the equivalent of the Library of Congress every 2 seconds.

However, there is a difference to other platforms which came before it: the web does not involve production and distribution costs. And because of that, we are seeing a paradigm shift. From this moment onwards, the democratisation of an idea, made first possible thanks to the Gutenberg press, starts to reach a whole new scale. Little by little, people start to understand that a] they can publish virtually anything and put it on the web for anyone to see if so they wish, and b] they are their own broadcasters, i.e. they have their own television channel – such as YouTube – or their own radio show – such as BlogTalkRadio. This way, they are no longer passive spectators of society's transformations, but interfere in the collective process. Consequently, as long as you have an Internet connection, the creature becomes the creator. The user becomes someone that not only has something to tell, but who is also able to share their likes and dislikes.

There's an important element to this which most people are not fully aware of: people are sharing what they deem pertinent in a free way and they expect that the same thing to occur in all systems of mass communication.

The usual mass communication channels have a hard time understanding this: the first "victim" was the music industry. Instead of understanding the emergence of a new way of sharing, executives of multinational music labels preferred to hire lawyers, rather than reducing the price of music. They managed to close down Napster in 2001 and other music websites. They won a battle, but not the war. In fact, this move failed to prevent other peer-to-peer websites to emerge and carry on the flame of freely shared content. Now imagine, if instead of sending lawyers, they had had the brilliant idea of charging 0.05 cents per song? Nobody, back in 2000 would have seen a problem in this, especially since this price would be significantly lower than the price of a traditional CD. The great innovator Napster got closed down in 2001 and later on was acquired by Bertelsmann – but this action came too late. Since then, other peer-to-peer sites were opened and, still today, any teenager can download the song they desire from any torrent site of their choosing for free.

Only now can we see that the music industry is learning from its mistakes and mending their ways. iTunes, for one, has understood the current times and allows users to download a song for 0.90 cents. The consequence of this is that it became the first online distributor of music in the world. Another logical consequence of the changing of an age is the fact that merely a few months ago, the social community MySpace signed an independent joint venture in partnership with Universal Music, Sony BMG and Warner Music Group. They are creating a site where visitors will be able to listen to free streaming music, paid for with advertising, and share customised playlists with their friends.

The second "victim" of the Web is, of course, the film industry – films and television series alike. Thanks to better performing computers and wider bandwidths, movies can be downloaded, at a very good quality, to any computer in matter of hours.

But this industry is also finding new ways to tackle the problem. Producers are allowing users to see television series in sponsored portals (Southpark on Comedy Central's website for instance). Other tactics include adopting new ways of promoting films through viral marketing (for instance King Kong or the Brazilian film "Tropa de Elite") and creating communities around shows (for instance, Oprah Winfrey's television show also has a community on the web).

As we can see, the dematerialisation of the traditional forms of music as well as film (CDs, DVDs), coupled with instant sharing, are forcing the producers of these industries to find alternative ways of creating, selling and promoting their content.

As long as producers refuse to give the floor to what they perceive as passive consumers – they will be losing audience.

And what about the publishing business? Apparently, it seems more "protected" from these web tendencies than music or film. Actually, when you think of it, publishing has been spared up until now because, compared to other media, it has more advantages in this new technological environment.

To start with: production costs are infinitely lower than in film or music. Secondly, the Internet is a medium that relies heavily on reading and writing and since the 1990s we have seen the publishing business actually soar thanks to this re-acquired taste for the written form by the public. Not only that, but the writer became – again – the catalyst of the

momentum. The writer became a pop star, as musicians were during the 1960s.

More importantly – we still haven't seen the dematerialisation of the book as a vessel for ideas.

For fifteen centuries, as a media form, the book has proven unsurpassable. Of course, e-books are slowly claiming ground and it's likely that, in due time, the digital form may override paper. But this will still take a few more years, which gives us – publishers, booksellers and writers – a precious moment before the web makes its move.

Yet what I saw as a writer came as a surprise, and a lack of understanding of the web on the part of the industry. Instead of seeing in this new media an opportunity to invent new ways of promotion, publishers concentrated on creating micro sites, which are totally outdated, and a few of them complained about the "misfortunes" of the other cultural industries, perceiving the web as the "enemy". This is probably the same attitude the copyist monks had with regards to printed books back in the 16th century.

Yet, given that books as media are still widely used, why not share the *whole* digital content of books for free? Contrary to what common sense tells us – and common sense is not always a good guide, otherwise publishers, booksellers and writers would probably be doing something more profitable – the more you give, the more you gain.

I was lucky enough to see this happening to my books in Russia, back in 1999, where I had a very difficult beginning. Given the great distances, my books were very poorly distributed and the sales were very low. Yet, with the appearance of a pirated digital copy of *The Alchemist* – that later on I included on my official website – sales took off in an amazing way. In the first year, the sales had jumped from 1,000 copies to 10,000 copies. In the second year they soared to 100,000 copies and the year after I sold a million books. To this day, I have reached the mark of over 10 million books in this territory.

The Russian experience stimulated me to create a site: *The Pirate Coelho*. According to Wikipedia, a free source online encyclopaedia, the English "pirate" is derived from the Latin term *pirata*, and ultimately from Greek *peira* (πειρα) "attempt, experience", implicitly "to find luck on the sea". Of course, later on this original meaning was modified by the facts, but we all know that at least one of the biggest empires on Earth has a lot to thank to their pirates – who later became "Sirs" and "Knights".

The Pirate Coelho was there for three years, being fed by readers worldwide, and nobody in the industry noticed – because my sales were steadily growing. However, from the moment that I mentioned it at a Technology Conference at the beginning of this year, I start hearing some complaints. However, in the end, my US Publishing House, Harper Collins, for example, fully understood the possibilities. So once a month during 2008, I have uploaded one of my titles, unabridged, to be read online. Instead of seeing a drop in sales, I am pleased to say that “The Alchemist”, one of the first titles to be made available online, by September has completed a full year on the NY Times bestselling list.

This is living proof of our industry’s momentum: use the web to promote and you will see the results in the physical world. This, at least, is the idea behind my website Pirate Coelho, where I simply compile the torrent links of all my books to download. People will be able to decide for themselves if later on they will purchase the physical book. So far, this has not only allowed me to interact more directly with my readers, but it has also stimulated the development of some mutual projects, like, for example, The Experimental Witch.

In the Experimental Witch Project, I invited readers to adapt my book, The Witch of Portobello, to film. This experience, launched last year with the sponsoring of HP, MySpace and Media Groups (Bertelsmann, Burda, Prisma Presse, O Globo), had an impressive feedback. Filmmakers from all over the globe uploaded their creations to MySpaceTV and when the winners were announced last August – I had 14 professional short movies of outstanding quality. Also, as a consequence, there was a buzz on the Internet about the book, which made “The Witch of Portobello” go to the NY Times bestselling list as soon as it was released in paperback in the US.

This shows how, even on hostile ground, such as film, where production costs are extremely high, this type of endeavour is possible. This also points to a major shift in cultural production and distribution: interactivity. The reader is no longer just a passive receptor, but they have the chance to play a more active role – and understand that they can make a difference.

Yet, do things end here? It’s also necessary to think about the future of the book, without being a material product. And I believe that what appears at this stage is another vital element – readers need to be involved. We all have stories, we all share ideas, publishers and writers

have always stimulated the debate of ideas. So why refrain from doing this on the web?

I launched a blog in which I post multimedia content and, weekly, I invite readers to give their opinions and voice their stories. I even invited them to be here, in spirit, with us. For example, I've asked them to send me their photos, holding their favourite books of mine so I can show them at my party tomorrow. I had more than 600 photos by the end of September. Readers and authors, thanks to the Web, are closer to each other than ever.

Yet, there are still two problems to tackle: copyrights and the sustainability of the publishing industry. I don't have a solution, but we are facing a new era, so either we adapt or we die. However, I did not come here to share solutions, but my own experience as an author. Of course, I make a living out of my copyrights, but at this very moment I am not concentrating on this. I have to adapt myself. Not only by connecting more directly with my readers – something unthinkable a few years ago – but also by developing a new language, Internet-based, that will be the language of the future: direct, simple, without being superficial. Time will tell me how to recover the money I myself am investing alone in my social communities. But I am investing in something for which every single writer in the world would be grateful: to have his texts read by a maximum of people.

The Internet has taught me this: don't be afraid of sharing your ideas. Don't be afraid of engaging others to voice their ideas. And more importantly, don't presume who is and who is not a creator – because we all are.

To illustrate what has been mentioned in this speech, I will – the moment I finish this talk – publish the entirety of this text in my blog – my webmaster is just a phone call away to receive the green light. Given that the traditional press can't cover everything that happens here, the Internet gives us the possibility to truly share ideas, independently of outward agendas.

In a way, there's an irony behind all this: Giordano Bruno was punished for voicing his ideas. In today's world: you will be punished if you don't.

Thank you