

On the Books in Browsers Moment

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In memory of journalist Porter Anderson, beloved chronicler of Books in Browsers and its community.

“One Does Not Simply Put a Book in a Browser”

So claimed the T-shirts that we received at the registration desk for Books in Browsers 2012 in San Francisco. Books in Browsers was a conference – but more than that, it was a “moment.” The brainchild of Peter Brantley, who in those days worked for the Internet Archive (more recently he is head of Strategy at UC Davis Library), Books in Browsers ran from 2010 until 2016 as a West Coast–based publishing tech conference; its San Francisco identity contrasted starkly with the NYC publishing scene. It attracted, in those years, a group of enthusiastic techno-optimists: small startups, researchers, and the odd digitally savvy rep from a big publishing company. I watched the 2011 version live-streamed and then attended all of the rest of them in person. It was a defining moment, and the *Journal of Electronic Publishing* (JEP) was there.

I call Books in Browsers a “moment” because for me it captures the zeitgeist of the years following the release of Amazon’s Kindle, in which the long-promised ebook became a reality and sparked the imagination of a generation of web developers, writers, publishers, and dreamers. Those were the days when the publishing industry and big publishing tech came together to define the EPUB standard (even though Amazon didn’t participate). And the fact that the EPUB format was almost exactly “a website in a wrapper” led a lot of people, myself included, to foresee a future where the ebook and the web would somehow merge (*books*, that is, *in browsers*) and glorious things would result. Books in Browsers was such fun! A wildly varied and motley crew of thinkers and developers turned up with their manifestos and demos; the cross-pollination of ideas was almost overwhelming.

The conference’s variation on the “One does not merely . . .” meme apparently came from a conversation between Brantley and Kat Meyer from O’Reilly Media: “Peter said the point of the conference was that one simply does put a book into a browser. And

I got all up in arms and said, no, the sessions this year are almost all about the act of taking it beyond simply putting a book in a browser; that everything ‘webby’ people have been doing to push the limits of the Web experience, booky webby people can and are doing, too.”¹

We saw Adam Hyde introduce the first versions of browser-based book typesetting; Blaine Cook and Maureen Evans demoed a pen-based iPad app for making copyediting marks in Markdown files; Pablo Defendini showed responsive comics layout done in CSS; Small Demons’ Richard Nash dramatically narrated the evolution of writing in the face of technological change; writer Kate Pullinger showed us what interactive novels could look like; James Bridle enthused about new horizons of networked literature; and Brian O’Leary sagely admonished us to distinguish the forest from the trees, the content from the container. Kobo’s Michael Tamblyn shared insights from the early days of the tracking of reader behavior in apps; he openly *shared* these insights, and we in turn were all fascinated by all the data one could gather from an ebook app! It was a more innocent time . . .

In 2013, University of Illinois’ Maria Bonn took over the editorship of *JEP*, and her very first act (or even a little earlier if the chronology in my email archive is right) was to offer to publish the proceedings of Books in Browsers (BiB). That turned out a bit more complicated than she’d first imagined, as a good portion of the proceedings turned out to be videos of the talks rather than *papers*. Maria quipped, “It turns out that one does not simply put conference proceedings online either.”² In any case, *JEP* did publish BiB IV and BiB V, which cemented my relationship with this journal. I’d had a couple of articles here earlier (owing to Shana Kimball’s stewardship), but Maria Bonn’s full embrace of the Books in Browsers community made it seem that “all the cool kids” were now publishing in *JEP*.

But that moment – looking back a dozen years later – feels like another planet. Those of us who knew the web, and who also appreciated the immense legacy of book publishing, could glimpse an imminent explosion of possibilities; nothing would be the same again. In a reflective post after BiB III, I wrote, “It felt like the day the universe changed. In hindsight, I’m now less sure how much of that feeling was due to what was actually presented onstage and how much was more about the place, the atmosphere, the light. . . . You must understand that news of the Random House–Penguin merger was released on the morning of the first day of #BiB12, and the way that news was received there – with a kind of bemused sigh – tells you something about the event.”³

1. Porter Anderson, “Big Ideas from Books in Browsers IV,” *Publishing Perspectives*, October 31, 2013, <https://publishing-perspectives.com/2013/10/the-big-ideas-from-books-in-browsers-iv/>

2. Maria Bonn, “Editor’s Note,” *Journal of Electronic Publishing* 17, no. 1 (2014), <https://doi.org/10.3998/3336451.0017.100>.

3. John W Maxwell, “Books in Browsers 2012 – A Watershed?,” *Publishing@SFU* (blog), Internet Archive, <https://web.archive.org/web/20121205063104/>, <https://www.sfu.ca/publishing/news/editorials/books-in-browsers-2012.html>

It's pretty ironic now. I'm not at all ashamed of my frothing enthusiasm, but *did we ever* underestimate the ability of powerful, well-capitalized incumbents to protect their territory. The Penguin-Random merger was one thing; around the same time was the famous American DOJ case that accused Apple and the "Big 5" publishers of price collusion in an effort to limit Amazon's power in the ebook market. Whatever the legal outcome of that case, the result was a bifurcation of the ebook market and, importantly, of ebook pricing: Amazon was left free to own the self-publishing sector and let prices go as low as they liked, while the traditional publishers would maintain their price points, and their control of the trade book industry would remain unsullied. Whether this was the death knell for innovation in digital reading is arguable (buy me a beer, I'd love to talk . . .), but it seems clear to me that the Books in Browsers moment was just that – a moment – and not the exciting opening we all hoped for. John Warren, in a *JEP* piece from 2022, wrote, "A joke shared wistfully by Brazilians about their country goes, 'Brazil is the country of the future, and always will be.' The same sentiment may apply to the eBook: the eBook is the future of publishing, with vast potential, but its promise is always in the future, just out of reach."⁴

Many of us have, in the years since, pursued innovation and thoughtful reflection, and *JEP* has chronicled a great swath of that work. It is worth noting that we are now as far in time from the first BiB conference as that moment was from the initial launch of *JEP* in 1995. In my teaching and my conversations with publishers, industry approaches to EPUB production haven't changed at all, really: A good chunk of this is still done by cheap labor (or "AI") in South Asia; Adobe's dominance in production software means that web-native skills are still a relative rarity in publishing houses; and publishers are still stumbling over accessibility, despite there being clear thinking around it dating back to the 1980s in the electronic publishing world.

Sad but true, it appears that *one does not simply put a book in a browser* after all. The forces that aligned to maintain that boundary are social, cultural, and economic rather than technical – which makes excellent material for our graduate seminars about innovation and publishing. Another world is still possible, but it's not as close as it once seemed.

A note on sources:

The original Books in Browsers websites no longer exist, but not surprisingly they are available through the Internet Archive. Here are a couple of snapshots, from 2014 and 2017 respectively:

- <https://web.archive.org/web/20160419132001/http://bib.archive.org/category/updates/>

4. John W. Warren, "Always the eBook of the Future," *Journal of Electronic Publishing* 25, no. 1 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.3998/jep.1954>.

- <https://web.archive.org/web/20171211104736/https://booksinbrowsers.org/past-bibs/>

An excellent “Compilation: Slides and Other Materials from Books in Browsers 2011” in Gary Price’s infoDOCKET is at <https://www.infodocket.com/2011/10/28/compilation-slides-and-other-material-from-books-in-browsers-2011/>.

And at least some of the videos from the conference are still available on YouTube:

- <https://www.youtube.com/@booksinbrowsers6245/videos>
- <https://archive.org/details/BooksInBrowsers2011Videos>
- <https://archive.org/details/BooksInBrowsers2012Videos>

Here’s a much younger me, banging on about XML at BiB III:

- <https://archive.org/details/BooksInBrowsers2012Videos/05-theWebbyFuture.mp4>

The two special issues of *JEP* that covered BiB IV and BiB V are here:

- https://quod.lib.umich.edu/j/jep/3336451.0017.1*
- https://quod.lib.umich.edu/j/jep/3336451.0018.1*