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The Seybold Report (ISSN: 1533-9211; USPS 020-953)
Online subscriptions (PDF) are available for \$399.
Print and PDF subscriptions are available
for \$499 per year (24 issues mailed semimonthly).

POSTMASTER:

Send address changes for **The Seybold Report** to:
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Brave New Books: The Tools of Change Conference

By John Parsons

At the Frankfurt Book Fair, traditional publishing companies grappled with long-standing issues of digital rights, e-distribution, outsourcing realities and, above all, the challenge of marketing their wares in a multichannel media universe. While topics like search and social networking were on the minds of many, the emphasis was largely defensive: How can traditional publishers survive in a Web 2.0 world?

By contrast, the O'Reilly Media event, Tools of Change (Feb. 11-13), has a distinctively Seyboldish flavor, embracing disruptive technology rather than strategizing to cope with it. Survival tips for existing publishers will undoubtedly be available, but the majority of educational offerings are tailored to would-be futurists looking for opportunity in a radically changing world. The focus is on books, to be sure, but what the word "book" means has become a wide-open question.

An Upside-Down World?

From the opening keynote ("Information 3.0: Will Publishers Matter?") to numerous sessions on user-directed or user-generated content, the tone seems to be "everything in publishing has changed forever — get over it." Changing media consumption habits will feature prominently, as will the practical aspects of "free" content, the e-book debate (again) and the rise of often confusing new distribution models. In addition to the keynotes, sessions that stand out include:

- "The Book as Beta" examines a trend covered at length in TSR: With the emergence of short-run printing and manageable content data, books should be thought of as an ever-evolving work, not mass-market commodities.
- "Books as Conversations" will explore the interactive annotation possibilities of digital, Web-connected books.
- "Audience as Authors: Creating, Managing and Sustaining a Community of Contributors" will take a hard look at the challenges of managing user-generated content.
- "Blogs as Books, Books as Blogs" will discuss the long-term impact of

authors attempting to embrace both media types.

- "How Open Does 'Open' Need to Be?" promises to be a lively discussion of free access, value and compensation models.
- "DRM, Digital Content and the Consumer Experience" will attempt to apply lessons from the music recording industry to the eventual rise of e-books (whatever that eventually looks like).
- "Best Practices in Cross Media Publishing," by Steve Paxhia and Seybold contributor Bill Rosenblatt, will be an in-depth look at the latest tools and systems for collaboration, design and management of print and digital publications.

These highlights are not exclusive, of course. The first two days' sessions also include case studies and a smattering of vendor-centered presentations. But the overall educational fare is very promising. The final day includes tutorials on a wide range of topics, including search engine optimization for book publishers and a high-level overview of XML for publishers.

The exhibitor list at Tools of Change is not long, but represents an interesting, if somewhat eclectic group consisting of major players (such as Adobe, Microsoft, Accenture and Ingram), as well as several smaller companies.

As with other O'Reilly events, Tools of Change is not for the faint of heart. Existing book publishers will find much to keep their businesses ahead of the new media curve — if they dare apply that knowledge. They will also find many newcomers ready to use these ideas to break down the walls and create a paradigm as foreign to many as Gutenberg was to the scribes of his day. **TSR**

Special Offer

Tools of Change attendees qualify for four free issues of **The Seybold Report**, if they act before March 14, 2008. Contact customer service, info@risiinfo.com, for more information. Mention code **X82Z**.