The E-Revolution & You

By Blair Bancroft

When Gene Roddenberry created the world of Star Trek, he envisioned a future where all information was retrieved from computers. Whether displayed on a monitor screen, a hand-held device, or spoken aloud, information on paper had become obsolete. Classic printed books were treasured artifacts.

TV viewers lapped it up; imaginations caught fire. A generation weaned on *Star Trek* set about making Roddenberry's vision a reality. Yet I doubt if anyone expected the changeover to all-electronic information to gain a serious foothold in our lifetime.

But it's happening. Just look around. The Web, no longer tethered to a wire, surrounds us, providing instant worldwide communication and information.

Is it the great marvel of our age? Or are we caught in an infinite spider's Web, irretrievably tangled with no hope of escape?

Do we want to escape? Do we want to escape television, airplanes, the telephone, cars, electricity, flush toilets—each, in its day, a startling innovation?

You get the message.

Bill Gates, in his 1995 book *The Road Ahead*, declared that the Internet—the Information Highway, as he called it—would become a dominant force in our lives. Not in the negative sense of Big Brother, but as a connector to a vast world of information, services, and communication. If you're reading this article, you are "online." You are already part of the Information Highway, the World Wide Web—the Internet. Would you give it up? Lose your ability to have instant communication with distant children, parents, your old school buddies? Lose your instant ability to check the sports scores, research clothing in Medieval Times, print a map, order a gift basket for Aunt Tillie, download a book to read, chat with someone in New Zealand, even Antarctica?

In 1997, when the Internet was a scant six years old, a group of experts got together to predict the dollar amount which would be generated by the Internet in 1998. They decided on a figure of eight billion ($8,000,000,000). When the numbers were totaled at the end of 1998, the actual figure was one hundred two billion ($102,000,000,000). In other words, the experts missed it by a mile. And the Net

continues to grow at an ever-increasing speed.

The controversy over music downloads was still with us when the Internet went wireless, with new handheld gadgets popping up left and right. Blackberries and i-Pods became household names, now joined by the i-Phone, and with an infinite number of innovations just around the corner. The Tri-Corder lives. Gene Roddenberry would have loved it.

And, overshadowed by showier Internet toys, a new publishing industry was born: E-books. Books of all kinds are now available on the Net. Technical books, business books, fiction and non-fiction of all genres, including animated and interactive children's books.

Note: In this article I am talking only about books published by reputable e-publishers who provide editing, artwork, a professional web site, and pay royalties to their authors. There is an unfortunate misconception that "e-published" means "self-published." This is not so. Yes, it's possible for people to self-publish on the Internet, just as it's possible for authors to spend thousands of dollars to a small press for print publication. Neither is the type of publishing being discussed here.

So what is an Electronic Book? The simplest is a download from the Internet to your computer that can be read onscreen. Prices for fiction are modest, usually four to seven dollars. Prices for items like textbooks are usually dramatically lower than the print volumes sold in college bookstores. But many people prefer reading on hand-held devices rather than onscreen. Something you can take to bed and cuddle up with. E-readers are also enormously convenient. In these small handheld devices you can store a hundred books or more. They're easily transportable, and many are backlit so you can read at night without additional light.

But e-readers are also one of the problems slowing the development of e-books. In themselves e-readers are wonderful, but so many companies jumped on the e-reader bandwagon that we're all caught in an e-reader war. Until the major tech companies settle on a universal download format and produce e-readers at a reasonable price, most people who want to cuddle up with a book are going to stick to print. And that's really too bad, because there are a lot of good e-books just hanging there in cyberspace, begging to be read.

The e-reader wars could be described as a modern-day Tower of Babel, a problem that must be resolved before e-books can develop their infinite potential. Meanwhile, keep in mind that the Internet is still in its infancy–you could even call it The Dark Ages. It has nowhere to go but up and out until, eventually, it brings the world to the most remote corners of the planet.

The catch phrase to remember? *The Internet is not a fad. The Internet is the future. The future is NOW.* The Internet, spurred by the need for fast global communication during the Gulf War, was born in 1991. Now in its teens, it is a genie that is not going to go back into the bottle. The vast Information Highway is here to stay. And it's growing . . . and growing . . . and growing.

So what does the future hold? To quote Bill Gates again:
We are watching something historic happen, and it will affect the world seismically, rocking us the same way the discovery of the scientific method, the invention of printing, and the arrival of the Industrial Age did. . . . Some people will seize upon the setbacks and proclaim that the [information] highway never really was more than hype. But on the highway, the early failures will just be learning experiences. The highway is going to happen.

Are You Ready? The Internet Age is NOW. We must learn to live with it, learn how it works, and how to take advantage of the exciting, incredible opportunities it offers.

For more information on fiction e-books, see "E-books" in my Authors' Corner.

Quote source:
Gates, Bill. *The Road Ahead*. New York: Penguin, 1995.