“Never mind the Web. Here comes the book.”: Continuity and discontinuity in the fate of reading.

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Affiliations: 1: Miha Kovač lectures in the Department for Library and Information Science and Book Studies, School of Arts, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia, where he originally earned his PhD in 1999. Before returning to academia to teach, Kovač was editorial director of Mladinska Knjiga, one of the largest publishing houses in South-East Europe. Kovač has been a visiting scholar at Oxford Brookes Centre for Publishing Studies, and at the School of Information and Library Science at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. He also worked as a consultant for the World Bank and the Soros Foundation in various East European countries. In 2005, he became editor-in-chief of the Slovene edition of National Geographic magazine. The following article, adapted from a paper Kovač presented at the SHARP (Society for the History of Authorship, Reading & Publishing) conference in 2008, discusses topics found in the author’s new book, Here Comes the Book: Never Mind the Web, Chandos Publishing (www.chandospublishing.com), 2008.

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At the end of the 1990s, there was a fear that printed books would soon be replaced by reading devices. However, Steven King’s 2000 novel The Plant on his web site was a direct downloading by readers, failed to sell as well as his previous novels. The prediction of the rapid rise of e-books from 1999 onwards did not materialize. Furthermore, Arthur C. Clarke’s prediction of the rapid rise of e-books from the 1990s on, and Forester Research’s prediction of the fast development of e-textbooks starting in 2000, were both proved wrong. In the first years of the millennium, producers of e-book reading devices started to disappear from the halls of the Book Fair, and the second biggest World Book Fair in 2002. In short, the much-anticipated expansion of e-books just didn’t gain any traction till the end of 2007, when the Kindle appeared. At the time this article was written, it was too early to predict whether the Kindle would be successful or not.

Most critics of e-books blamed this failure on low screen resolution, bad batteries, and poor software. However, when we look closer at the book publishing process, it becomes quite clear that the reasons run much deeper. Book publishers are far from being technologically conservative, and their open embrace of technology in editing, production and marketing is evident. As a matter of fact, in the whole publishing process, only the book itself — the book printed on paper — remains a tangible product. On the one hand, the whole publishing industry is changing, but on the other hand, a reading rationale in them, especially a reading rationale in them, such as the Kindle — successfully sold in the 2000s.

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