

Frankfurt Book Fair 2005 – A Retrospective

Let's get physical – again!

By Alastair Paul

The traditional scientific book fair seems for me to have revived in the form of a *physical global* marketplace. The book fair *per se* has re-emerged as a real hands-on exchange and as a selling of information products between players in a *new* global order. There suddenly seems to be so many of these fairs taking place throughout the year!

Therefore the **motto** of the Frankfurt Book Fair 2005 for me is:

After the Fair is before the Fair – the next one somewhere else!

Book fairs, where you "*really need to be*", are relentlessly dictating our business year. We are moving from Frankfurt to Delhi, to London, to Teheran, to Beijing, with a side-step to Moscow, and back to Frankfurt again – you may fill in the spaces at will from your calendar!

Thieme International came back from one of the most lively and most successful (in terms of received orders) Frankfurt Book Fairs ever. It was a real sell-across-the table marketplace.



Members of Thieme International and local sales representatives at the Frankfurt Book Fair

I was beginning to think that in this day and age of electronic communications, both in business and in science, that the book fair in the physical form we know it was dying out – wrong, wrong, wrong! In the late 1990s, I had this recurring vision (or nightmare?) of a huge electronic globe, connected to the real Mother Earth by a data highway/umbilical

cord, which was growing at an ever accelerating rate to eventually swallow up our home planet with one big slurp – slooosh, plop! Home planet to homepage!

Abstraction is indeed a very devilish activity and has always been a dodgy and dangerous business for us mere mortals. It gives us a power with which we think we can extend amazing and limitless control over the universe, but it can also lead to a severe dose of alienation.

Now, the new media and the new electronic products are vital for our future, and we in the publishing trade must keep up and even take the lead in such developments. And indeed the book itself is also a form of abstraction, but at least *you can touch it and hold it close*.

We still need *real physical things*, like people, like printed books, like book fairs. Here are some of my personal reflections in the wake of the book fair...



From left to right:
Cliff Bergmen, Executive Editor
and Alastair Paul, International
Sales Manager from Thieme
International

The Economical Re-sorting of the Earth – Where exactly, for example, is *South Asia*?

Globalization was for me a rather abstract concept. You hear about the exponential growth of China and India, and you see production being transferred to faraway places – much further for us in Germany than even Eastern Europe. Then I was confronted in Frankfurt with the reality of **“South Asia”**!

I had never heard of this geopolitical term in school – the nearest I can get to it is the “Indian Subcontinent”. At Frankfurt I was confronted with this geopolitical-economic identity face to face.

It means India in the middle, with Pakistan on its right flank and reaching right out to Malaysia on the other side. It is a huge and energetic economic fact – a block that is taking its own place within the economic order that has been standard for the last 50 years.

And, in our small economic corner, the publishing concepts at Thieme, our special brand of didactics and quality information and presentation, work for them as for others before them. Of course, we have to adapt to these markets, but we have the tools and the

know-how to do this. AND through meetings in Frankfurt and at other Book Fairs, we are finding the partners to work with for our *mutual* benefit. We are investigating a whole range of topics including *what* to publish in *which* form and *where*. The business that is growing in South Asia will change the way of conducting business in all parts of the globe – even in publishing and bookselling.

The really interesting thing for me, however, in Frankfurt was how they handled, *literally handled*, our books and journals. They took them off the shelves. Of course, they know that there are other media outlets for information and knowledge, but the printed *linear* book is still a very important anchor and starting point for learning.

The key role of the printed book in teaching and learning

I like stones. Everywhere on Earth I go, I try to collect them. I bought a small pocket guide to identify the stones and then went through the following procedure:

I start to think and learn through the book. I need more information. I go to the wonderful virtual world of Internet. I love it – it is a paradise of well-arranged information – a Garden of Eden with sometimes even a very good gardener. However, I get exhausted with all this abundance and lose myself in its labyrinths. I go back to my book and consolidate my thoughts and ideas in peace and quiet. I have learned something. It started with a book.

The printed page is still the ideal interface for reading (a guy from Bertelsmann's Electronics Division said that!). It facilitates learning for the *long-term* memory. However, the book has to be highly efficient and do its own job.

Books are not just hardcopies

Books must become more efficient in face of the competition from other media, and they definitely have to work in combination with the other media. Perhaps they will soon be *delivered* differently (logistics, downloading, print-on-demand), but they will still need to be *conceived and produced* by organizers like publishers.

Take DVDs for an example of recent developments in scientific book publishing: Two years ago the question was, "Does this book have a CD-ROM or DVD *version*?" Now they ask me, "Why doesn't this book (surgical ones usually) come with a DVD in the back? The DVD has a role *in the back* of the book, to show live video sequences, but the book has definitely kept up its end!

Remember that wonderful Middle Ages publisher, *Alphonsus C. Index*? He was the first person to put an "index" in his books. Soon thereafter his readers asked him why there were still some books *without* an index. Every scientific book now carries an index *as an integral part!* And would you pay *extra* for an index?

There have been many impressive developments on the level of electronic platforms of scientific information, platforms that incorporate or subsume information that has been produced initially in printed form. But where is the STM electronic book? There is still a lot of work to be done to identify and extract the features from a stand-alone book that can create added value for individual users. Once we have done that, we can find the media and the technology to transport it. Then we will offer "electronic books" to individual users – at book fairs, to intermediaries....

Local Communities

I heard this phrase used several times at the Book Fair this year. It reminded me of the catch-phrase *think globally, act locally*. Again, I gained a little insight into what a local community is by applying it to my own personal environment:

I subscribe to a major local newspaper. This newspaper is also my Internet provider (not the cheapest, but reliable). They are now my telephone provider (here they *are* cheaper). And I feel at home, safe and sound in my *local community*.

Booksellers and agents have provided services for their local clients for centuries now. In the turmoil of the global Internet bookselling, we have forgotten that local loyalty is still a factor. If the financial parameters are right, then local enterprises can still maintain a big foot in their marketplace. They obviously need to improve their services and identify their core skills.

Example: Thieme had a wonderful offer to use a super-duper website in a land beyond the mountains. We had wonderful products to place on this website. We were never able to find a way to use this offer. It was like having the most wonderful car standing outside your door and you or your wife has the most wonderful ballroom dress to wear, but you don't know how to drive the car! Now someone came along at the Book Fair and offered to drive this limousine for us! They were neighbors of the other website provider. They *literally* spoke the same language.

Local communities will play an increasingly important role in this global world. Don't be dazzled by the razzamataz of the global player. *They* need the local talent!

Bumping into old and new friends

Last item! The book fair is a *physical marketplace*. You meet real people in a real-time world. I bumped into, rubbed shoulders with, and shook hands with old and new friends. And, I am really beginning to enjoy book fairs again – see you all at the next one!