

Print books or the e-media. The arguments are one too many. The voices loud and aggressive. Print journalism is nearing its end, some cry. Others shout back that the internet has never and will never be able to win this war and surpass the print media. To aggravate the debate, we saw the entry of news aggregator sites. What is that, you ask? An app that compiles syndicated web content – like online newspapers, blogs and vlogs in one location for the easy viewing of readers. Does that mean that journalism as we know it is nearing its end? Is the print media truly going to vanish into oblivion?

“When MP3s were launched in the market, CD sales just crashed. When e-books were launched in the mainstream market in the late 1990s, it didn’t affect the print books market much. In fact even today e-books constitute of 33 percent of all books sales,” says Isaac Fitzgerald, editor of BuzzFeed Books and co-founder of the popular Tumblr site Pen & Ink.

Author and columnist Tahmima Anam, who moderated the Hay Festival session titled ‘In the Age of the Aggregator’, concurs with Fitzgerald, who was a panellist at the session, adding that people are actually talking about books and not just about consuming different mediums. “It seems like the two are going to co-exist,” she says.

The session, which saw the participation of other eminent panellists like award winning staff writer for LA Times, Carolyn Kellogg and Dwight Garner, well-known critic for The New York Times, offered an optimistic view of the future of journalism. Instead of arguing about the merits and demerits of print and digital media, panellists focussed on subjects and issues that attract readers to a particular news medium.

With the advent of newer outlets and technology, the way we read books is changing. Earlier on, recommendations would be taken from friends and fellow book lovers to identify books that best suited our taste and needs. We now have access to literary sites such as Goodreads and BuzzFeed Books that suggest books based on our reading choices, thus making things much easier for the busy reader. Despite such advances, the role of the book critic and the reviewer is still very central to the reading experience.

Dwight Garner, who wrote for The New York Times, LA Times and was also the founding books editor of the extremely popular news website Salon, says that different news organisations demand a

different approach to reviewing and critiquing books.

“The New York Times is a busy place with the newsroom bustling with activity. Before computers, the books editor would read every book and write down notes on cards before typing down a review on a typewriter,” says Garner.

Working for Salon, on the other hand, was a completely different experience. “It was more like kids reinventing the game.” Dwight says that working for The Daily New York Times makes him feel fortunate as he is one of the three main book reviewers there.

IN THE AGE OF THE AGGREGATOR

Critics, reviewers and a writer discuss the future of journalism

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“Over time people are able to identify my voice. They understand what I care about, what I don’t care about and they respect me as a critic, even if they might not always agree with my reviews. It’s an honour and I enjoy it,” says Garner.

Carolyn Kellogg, who is on the board of the National Book Critic Circle, adds that as a critic she feels that even though newer literary venues have a lot of power, younger critics have a harder time of breaking out and making themselves heard. “I might be wrong about it but I feel like it’s the senior critics who are the most read and who have the most loyal readers,” she adds.

As the books editor of one of the most loved websites on the Internet, Isaac Fitzgerald explains that they have a simple process of choosing books for their reading lists. The mini reviews and book recommendation lists are the most popular section of the BuzzFeed Books newsletter, which has around 85,000 subscribers. Fitzgerald was also informed by people that the introduction of the newsletter has



At the Hay Festival: (From left) Tahmima Anam, Carolyn Kellogg Dwight Garner and Isaac Fitzgerald.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

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affected readers as they were actually buying books based on their recommendations.

The other thing that BuzzFeed Books does to draw readers to newer books is to invite promising writers to write personal essays for them. “I ask the writers to imagine that they have a microphone and that they have to write their best possible piece that will connect with readers, forcing them to share it with others,” he explains. The whole idea is to get them to be hungry for more and so a by-line is added that

explains that if the readers want to read more from this writer, they could follow them on their social networking sites or buy their books.

When asked if people actually go through their lists, Fitzgerald stated that according to their statistics, on average 87 percent readers go till the end of the page. “So people are definitely reading,” he adds.

The reason why BuzzFeed’s lists are so popular and reach a larger audience is that they always try to find the right frame that will attract the right audience. “For example, we had a list called ‘65 books to read in your 20’s.’ That’s a great frame; young people could be looking for books that they haven’t read yet and they can choose from these recommendations. Or say, ‘33 books to get you through a hard time’ – it caters to a certain segment who are bound to check out the books on the list,” he adds.

All the panellists agree that if avid readers are not seeing the type of criticism that they’d like to see or are not seeing the book that they love being discussed, they should start their own platform to address that. “That’s the thing about the Internet, you don’t need the permission to start anything,” says Fitzgerald.

Print or digital – that’s not the question. The question is whether we are ready to expand our minds and read because we love doing so or are we going to waste our time indulging in senseless debates that will take us nowhere. So instead of wasting your valuable time, take out your favourite book or reach out for your Kindle and start reading! It does wonders for the brain.