HOW WE WILL READ: KEVIN KELLY

*This is the fifth post of **"How We Will Read,"** a Findings interview series exploring the future of books from the perspectives of publishers, writers, and intellectuals. See our kickoff post with Steven Johnson here.*

Kevin Kelly is a scholar of the future. There seems to be no better way to encapsulate his myriad intellectual endeavors, which have sought to explain the new economy, technology as an extension of the self, and the mechanisms of complex organization. Even the creators of *The Matrix* recognized his brilliance — they made his book *Out of Control* required reading on set. It's impossible to speak to him without it realizing that you are talking to someone who has a wide and incredible knowledge of the world. A humble and extraordinary man, Kevin has so many ideas for the future, he doesn't quite know where to put them all.

Currently, Kevin maintains an active presence on his website, KK.org, where he blogs on several different personal projects he is pursuing, including the sequencing of his own genome and incisive analysis of gadgetry. A founding editor at WIRED and prolific writer of nonfiction books, Kevin's explorations have never been far from text. So that is precisely what we wanted to ask him about. And who better to ask about the future of books than a scholar of the future?

You're posting your book *New Rules, New Economy* in blog posts over the course of a couple of years. I noticed that the posts are formatted in a way that makes them seem annotated. Can you tell me about that?

I long ago got in the habit of marking up books as I went along — talking to it, marginalia, dog-earing, all that kind of stuff. I'm an active reader, and I mostly read to write.

This project is a recycling of that book. When the book was out of print, I decided to re-issue it as blog posts page-by-page. I had some heuristics, and my assistant Camille went through the book. It's her
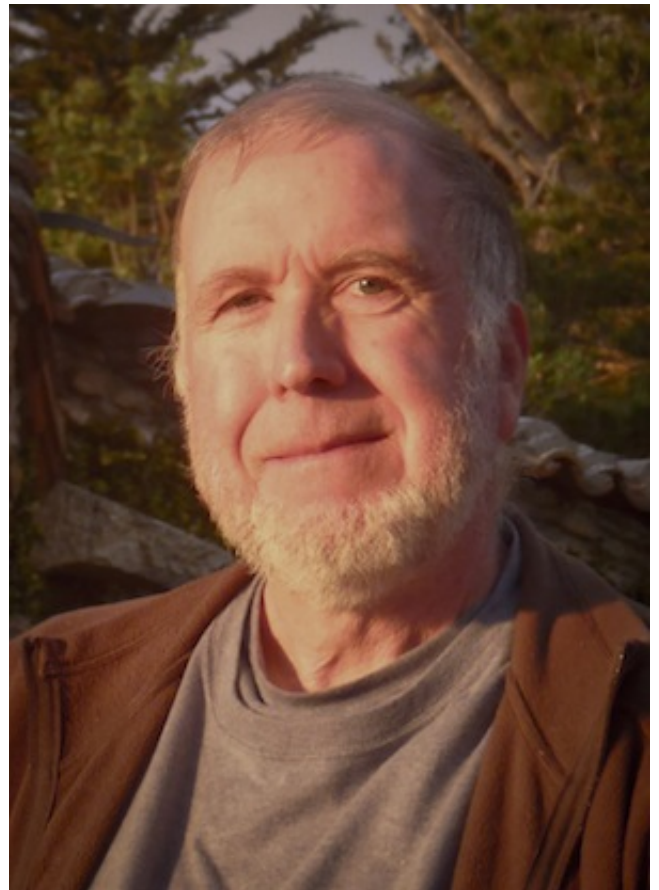
work. There was some emphasis elements that we decided on, and on her own judgment, she followed through emphasizing in more than one manner.

I have had an idea of actually republishing the book in paper in the kind of annotated way. That was inspired by Tom Peters, the business guru, who does these books where he has a kind of kinetic typography. I always liked that, so I thought I'd try to imitate it here.

Why post your book as blog posts at all?

I'm so far onto the left of the copyright issue. I believe that the natural home of all creation is in the public domain. I believe that is naturally where it wants to reside. I think that works enjoy a temporary moment where they are monopolized and you can charge for them, but they'll revert back to the free. So putting it out free was basically my habit. I believe — I'm not sure — but I believe I was the first person ever to put an in-copyright, in-print book on the web for free. I happened to have owned the digital rights. Because when it was contracted in 1989 or 1990, nobody knew anything about digital rights.

I don't think my publishers even know. I just decided to do this. I have no idea whether I own the digital rights or not. I'm no longer even concerned about how many books I sell. I'm really concerned about how many books people read. I'm almost willing, right now, to pay people to read my books.

Wow! Really?

Yes. So I'm actually working on ideas right now where if you read my book you get paid. Or you pay $10, and if you read it, I'll give you $9 back. Because people aren't reading books — particularly books, particularly long-form books. They're still buying a few, but they're not reading very many of them. There's just so many other things to do or read or whatnot that getting someone to read a book is just really hard.

That's where my real focus is. My real focus is actually making it as easy as possible for someone to read the work. Make it easy as possible for them to hear about it, make it as easy as possible for them to get it, make it easy as possible for them to get into it, to read it. Right now any kind of impediment in any of those fields and you're gone. Making it free was just one step in that direction.

Okay, two questions: Why books over other kinds of text? And how do you make money off of that model?

I don't think people are going to make money off of books for very much longer. Just like music. How do you make money doing music? The real reason you do music is because you love it, and if you're lucky, you'll make some money from it. There are people making money writing, and there are paid

journalists, and other things that pay in other ways, so I'm not really concerned about the economic model — I should be, because I'm playing both sides. I make my living doing it.

Money follows attention. Wherever attention goes, money will follow. I don't know the exact revenue model, but I know money will come. The real key is getting people to pay attention. I've always had the belief that if you are getting people's attention and keeping people's attention, focus on when to monetize then. I'm not really focused on the monetizing aspect, because I don't think we know yet.

So what have you learned? How do you keep people's attention?

Well, this goes back to the question about the book. There is less attention for books, for the long form. However, there is *some* attention to it. And what a book is, in my kind of formulation, is a coherent, sustained long argument or narrative, with a beginning, middle, and end. I don't buy the idea that we have a total shorter attention span. I just think we have an expanding variety of attention spans. We are able to service some forms of attention that we had not been able to service before, and so we're filling those out.

But there is still an appetite for long form, though it's not huge. It may be a niche appetite. That's why, again, I'm not looking at the money. It may not be enough of an appetite to sustain a huge business or industry, but nonetheless, there is an appetite for it. The real key is to build, serve, and cultivate that appetite. And protect it from being trampled by all the other options that are out there.

In my weaker moments, I think that if I really truly believed in trying to reach as many people as I could, I would simply do YouTube videos. Because that's what people are paying attention to. My TED talks have a far greater audience than any of my books ever will. I mean, how long did I prepare for a TED talk? I don't know, 18 minutes? You just kind of do it. If I were to spend as much time on those as on preparing my book, I would spend a couple years working on a series of TED talks, 18 minutes each, that totaled up into a really fantastic experience.

Besides the fact that I'm not quite ready to do this big experiment, I also feel that the tool set is not quite ready as well. We don't actually know how to do that yet, because you're trying to do two things at the same time — which is not only make a fantastic book but also invent the entire platform for doing it. That's a high risk thing. You're almost certain to fail in getting the format right. That doesn't mean I'm not going to try it. But certainly that's what's preventing me from doing it right now.

It sounds like you're more interested in getting your ideas out than you are about the mode for doing so.

Yes, because I'm not a born writer. I'm a natural editor. And also, I started off as a photographer. I think very visually. I don't have much allegiance to the literary aspect of books. I'm more utilitarian in

that sense. In conveying ideas, my allegiance is not to the flow of words, per se. I don't expect books to go away — and I don't want them to go away — but what technology brings us, and this the theme to *What Technology Wants*, is increasing options. We're inventing new ways to read. Those are not going to replace listening to words or reading words, they're going to supplement and expand. They're going to be additional options. Those who really need to read only words on their own will always have that option. Paper books aren't going away. They may become very very expensive, or all at once become really, really cheap, but I think anybody who wants to read something in a book will always have that option, if they're willing to pay for it.

If you take a look at any prolific author's reading space you've got books in all kinds of formats: hardcover, softcover, audio, Kindle version, trailer — and that's just going to increase. In fifty years you'll have fifty different ways to approach the material. I'm not saying you can have shovelware and just move things from one medium to another — there are limits to that. A website does not want to be a book. Even my *New Rules, New Economy* — we did something to try to change it to make it more appropriate for the blog and it would be better, maybe, if we did more.

But I do think what we're engaged in is unbundling the book. There's many ways to unbundle the book; for example, you can read things by page. But there's also unbundling in the sense that what a classic paper book did was it performed many functions. And we're teasing apart those functions and assigning some of those functions to different media, and maybe even reassembling, or rebundling those into different bundles of functions. A book was a very powerful device because it did so many different things. We're taking some of those apart. And we're adding new things that books can now do that they didn't do before. Long-term, I see that we're inventing new ways of reading, not eliminating old ways.

If you could move one feature of paper books to digital books, what would that be?

Hmm. Just one.

You can have as many as you want.

Well, I'll take all of them. *(laughs)*

I do miss the general three-dimensional navigation aspect, of really being able to tell where I am, and then to get there really fast. There is something, that is probably the result of a number of different factors, that makes a paper book so much easier to browse. There's something about the bandwidth of seeing it and the general scale of it in your hand. So far no e-book that we have is able to do that.

I'm not convinced that e-books will end up as single planks, as this kind of a flat tablet. There's no reason in my mind that you can't make an e-book that's a sheaf of flexible electronic pages that resemble a book that you turn. The difference is that it may be touch sensitive, so you can do your swishing and capturing and stuff, and then you tap it on the spine and it changes the book. I think we're just at the beginning of the form factor. I don't see any reason why we can't bring most of the qualities the paper book, eventually, to the e-book. You may have your favorite leather-bound container, that you read for years and years, to read all size-A books on it. I don't see why that's not possible.

Can you recall the moment you first fell in love with reading?

My first job ever as a kid was I was a page for our local library. I grew up in suburban American New Jersey. I tell my own kids — it's really hard to imagine how parochial that life was at that time. I'd never seen Chinese people, I'd never eaten Chinese food. You couldn't hardly buy anything fresh in the grocery market. We never went anywhere. We never took vacations ever. It was a very different world.

In the library, while I was putting books away, there was this book called *Stalking the Wild Asparagus*, by Euell Gibbons, and it was about eating wild foods. That idea *electrified* me. I remember hiding the book out of place so no one else would find it so I could keep reading it! It was *my book*. *My* discovery! That was the beginning of the end for me, in the sense that I discovered the *Whole Earth Catalogs* and decided not to go to college. The Whole Earth Catalogs was this sort of alternative universe where you could invent your life, and here were the catalog of possibilities, and it was things just so far beyond anything that I had experienced in a white suburban East-Coast town. I was in junior high school, or something. That was the thing that opened up the portal saying, there is a big world out there you don't know anything about. That was the book that did that.

Last question — user-submitted, from our friend Sahadeva Hammari, who is a fan of yours: Why do you think people are afraid of the future?

That's a really good question. I think it's because we have become unable to articulate a plausible future that we actually desire. Most of the visions of the future are very dystopian, very fundamentally broken in some way. There's no place that any of us wants to go to, in any of these futures. But I believe, actually, that we are headed towards a future that is very desirable. Why can't we see it right now? That's a question that I don't really have a very good answer to. I suspect it's because in many ways it'll look an awful lot like what we have now, in the sense that it's not going to be spectacularly whiz-bang — and the kinds of things that will be special are things we have trouble imagining right now. I mean, I know for a fact that if we were able to get on a time machine and go back thirty years to describe to people what we have right now, it would seem completely implausible. And this is what I

call the plausibility paradox in futurism. Any future that is going to be correct is going to seem to us implausible. And anything that is plausible is probably not going to be correct. So we have this dilemma that the future — while maybe desirable — is going to appear to us right now as implausible. And that's the catch. If someone from the future were to come back now and describe it, we'd say, "that's impossible."

So what do we do, keep our minds open?

I don't know. I go around saying we have to believe in the impossible. That's what I've learned from this time on the Internet — believe the impossible. Wikipedia is impossible. Everything we know about human nature says that Wikipedia cannot happen, but there it is. That should help us learn to believe in the impossible. It's economically impossible to have Google Earth, Google Street Maps, stock quotes for free, weather all around the world — it's economically impossible to have all these things. But we have them all for free. We have to learn to expect the impossible.

*Find Kevin at his **website** and on **Findings**.*

(All interviews conducted by Sonia Saraiya.)