



Revolution or Renaissance ?

Is consumer education the answer as writers face digital 'Gutenberg'?

CONSERVATIVE PARTY CONFERENCE DEBATE: ***'Writers & the Web: creativity & the digital economy'***

At the Conservative Party Conference (7 October), the All Party Writers Group (APWG) sponsored this timely debate. It took place on the same day as US court discussions over the fairness of the Google Settlement – a settlement that potentially will see writers paid for the illegal digitisation of their works.

Panellists included Conservative MP John Whittingdale, Chair of the Culture, Media & Sport Select Committee and APWG member; Louise Bagshawe, 'chic lit' author and Conservative Prospective Parliamentary Candidate for Corby & East Northamptonshire; the Guardian News & Media's Director of Digital Content, Emily Bell; freelance journalist and publishing commentator Danuta Kean and National Literacy Trust Director, Jonathan Douglas.

The breadth of knowledge and experience represented on the panel ensured lively discussion and plenty of diverging opinions. They wrestled with the familiar argument: whether electronic formats would take over from the traditional book but they willingly recognised the utility and functionality benefits that new technologies bring and their value to consumers. The panel were also clear that whilst the digital publishing process is far easier than for traditional formats, the protection of copyright is far harder.

There were several critical issues over which they unanimously agreed: that the Intellectual Property (IP) and copyright of all creators', including writers, in the digital environment must be protected in order that they can make a living from their work; and that educating consumers of all ages was critical to ensure they understand the value of digital content and the need to safeguard those who create it.

IP theft continues to damage creative industries

There was clear consensus that the internet has had, and will continue to have, a disproportionately negative affect on the ability of writers (and other creators) to make a living from their work. The panel acknowledged that the average UK writer earns a lower hourly rate than a shop worker, however opinion was divided on how best to protect them. Whilst Whittingdale had originally believed in industry-led solutions he now supported a legislative one; Bell suggested that paid writing had an uncertain future and Bagshawe felt that the digital revolution is a key moment for writers with concerns that as it becomes more usual to have electronically delivered books, it will become more usual to rip them off. Kean believed it was important to note that websites set up to 'extend intellectual freedom' by enabling illegal downloading were in it for the money and were not the gallant 'Johnny Depp' of the high seas they like to portray themselves as.

Education, education, education.....

The panel voiced their concerns about the 'digital generation' who believed internet content should be free and that they have the right to download any material they choose as and when they please. Douglas also expressed his concern that many young people labelled themselves 'non-readers' in the traditional sense, though recent research had shown that they spent more time on the web reading or writing than ever before. They were clear that measures have to be taken to prevent illegal downloading and file sharing and that writers must be rewarded for their creativity and ideas from which consumers gains so much benefit. For the panel the solution lay in consumer education. Consumers of all ages must be helped to understand the value of creativity.

In conclusion

IP and copyright theft is having a significant negative impact on all the creative industries. If this issue is not addressed promptly there will be no motivation for anyone to create which will be deeply damaging to society in the long term. Whilst ideas for solutions are varied and a decision is yet to be taken, one thing is clear, there is considerable work still to be done educating consumers to ensure they value creativity in all its forms.

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The All Party Parliamentary Writers Group (APWG)

The Authors' Licensing & Collecting Society (ALCS) has supported the setting up of the All Party Writers Group (APWG) chaired by Janet Anderson MP. APWG is a forum for elected Parliamentarians in Westminster to consider and discuss matters of importance to writers. As a focal point for authors' interests, with its links to UK writer organisations, APWG is well placed to draw attention to the current issues facing writers amongst an audience of decision-makers at Westminster and beyond.