

The Growth of E-books

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Looking backwards in time I remember first getting involved with e-journals in the 1980s. My first involvement with e-books came a decade later. When I ask myself the question-why this difference in time? then the importance of prior expectations and custom becomes apparent. E-journals were particularly acceptable in STM (science, technology and medicine) subjects. People in these fields were often well-acquainted with computers, and with handling short pieces of text on them. Abstracts in these fields provided some of the earliest electronic text databases. The STM journal articles were fairly short and could be scanned on a computer screen without too much discomfort. E-books were of greater interest in the humanities, or to general readers, than to STM readers. Such readers expected books to be portable and properly legible. Portable reading devices were worked on during the 1980s, but it was only in the latter part of the 1990s that viable personal digital assistants (PDAs) became available¹. These satisfied the portability requirement. The second requirement-legibility-also received attention. This meant satisfying the expectations derived from printed books. Readers typically expected to read black print on a white background, on a device that was no smaller than a standard paperback, and under all light conditions. Developments in both portability and presentation over the past few years have been sufficient to make e-book reading nowadays a generally acceptable substitute for reading the printed page.

PORTABLE DEVICES

The problem with the word 'e-book' is that it is used in two senses: it can refer either to the material being read, or to the device on which it is read. I will look at the second connotation first. One of the continuing debates since the early days of the e-book has been whether what is required is a dedicated device, or a multi-purpose computer. It has been argued that PDAs with appropriate book-reading software have been improving to such a degree that they can satisfy book readers' needs. The obvious example is the iPad. This provides an iBooks application which several major book publishers have been willing to use. Perhaps more interestingly, both

Amazon and Barnes & Noble have provided apps to allow their own systems (Kindle and Nook, respectively) to be used on the iPad. Arguments in favour of a multi-purpose device have usually hinged on the belief that owners of hand-held computers will not want to carry around more than one such device. Hence, there will be a convergence of all the activities that interest them onto one gadget. The proliferation in the number of apps now available certainly suggests that there is some foundation for this belief. However, it has been argued in the past, and is still being argued today, that reading a book is a different kind of activity from, for example, playing computer games. This argument depends especially on readers' expectations of books. People have been brought up with printed books and still regularly read them. E-books, it is argued, should stick to this expected model, and this may lead to a device that is not optimised for other apps. It may be, however, that people's reading expectations will develop in the future so that convergence on a single hand-held device becomes acceptable. For the moment, providers of book-length material have to accept that it will be downloaded to a range of different devices.

A major problem raised by this variety continues to be that of compatibility. Whenever a new type of device appears this question raises its head. The usual assumption is that competition in the marketplace will soon produce a market leader which becomes the *de facto* standard. The often quoted example is the history of videocassette recorders (VCR) in the latter part of the twentieth century. After a number of years of competition, one format-VHS-became the market standard. However, competition does not always work this way. An example is the long-continued competition between Apple computers, with their own operating system, and windows-based computers. Part of the reason in this case for the continuance of both was that they had somewhat different capabilities. I can remember stocking teaching laboratories with computers when it became necessary to put on electronic publishing courses. To reflect what was happening in the publishing industry, it was necessary to provide two laboratories-one with Apple computers and the other with windows-based computers.

This was because graphics-handlers in publishing preferred the former, while text-handlers preferred the latter. There is an important difference between this example and the VCR conflict, for the latter involved incompatible hardware. Nowadays, incompatibilities are more likely to be a software problem, and can usually be resolved by some kind of software fix on the original hardware. This makes it possible for different systems to coexist, though most people would agree that a universal standard is a better solution.

CONTENT

Turning now to e-books in terms of their contents, material to be read electronically was available well before portable devices for reading it. Project Gutenberg, for example, was already providing book-length content in the 1970s. The growth in the number of books that the project archived electronically was, however, fairly limited until the early years of the present century. (When Project Gutenberg began, getting the text into machine-readable form was a fairly tedious process; this difficulty had eased by the latter years of the twentieth century). Over the past ten years, the number of books stored by the Project has soared to nearly 40,000 titles. During this period, other sites have appeared and grown. One that I find useful, for example, is the Internet Archive, which currently has well over two million users each day. One development in recent years has been the way the resources available have become multilingual. Project Gutenberg, for example, was essentially a source of English-language texts until the early years of the present century, when it became explicitly multilingual. The common characteristic of these free databases is that they are restricted to material that is either out of copyright, or has explicitly been licensed for use².

Discussions of making the contents of printed books widely available, have been dominated by the question of copyright from the early days. The long-continued saga of Google Books in the United States reflects the difficulty of the problem. One of the big questions has been what to do with so-called 'orphan' publications. Many books are still in copyright but are out of print. Where the copyright is owned by an existing publisher it is straightforward enough to negotiate. But the copyright in many works resides with the author. (This contrasts with the typical position for journal articles, where there are correspondingly fewer difficulties with 'orphan' works). Tracking down each individual-sometimes even establishing whether they are still alive is a time-consuming process. But attempts to evade doing this soon run into legal problems: as happened with google books³. Even if negotiations with publishers over content go ahead, there are other pitfalls. For example, e-book platforms increasingly include a text-to-speech mechanism. From the viewpoint of the e-book provider

this is part of an integrated package. However, publishers have traditionally seen audio editions as being distinct from the printed version, and expect to negotiate for them separately.

An equally difficult question is the pricing of e-book contents. Publishers receive manuscripts in electronic form from their authors, edit them in that form in-house, and then transmit them to the printers for paper-based production. For e-books, this last step is omitted, so one would expect the e-book version to be considerably cheaper than the printed version. This is often not reflected in the price. For example, Amazon has found publishers unwilling for major cuts to be made in the price of e-book material. (one of the publishers' arguments is that they cannot allow the printed version to be undercut by too much). In consequence, if the print version of a monograph on Amazon costs about £30, the electronic version is likely to be priced at only a bit less than £25. Even for popular fiction, the printed paperback version may cost £5 and the electronic version £4. It may be that publishers are correct in financial terms. The results so far from Springer e-books, for example, suggest that the print and electronic versions of their monographs are managing to coexist in terms of numbers of purchasers.

The situation for books has always been appreciably different from journals. Authors of journal articles are not paid for publication: indeed, they may have to pay for the privilege. So they are usually happy to see their work reproduced as widely as possible free of charge. Authors of books may receive royalties for their work, and they are often more hesitant about providing free access. This is less true of research monographs, where the likelihood of significant royalties is small. Moreover, authors in this field worry about the prices publishers are asking for their work. Research monographs costing £60 are not uncommon, and publishing runs are rarely more than a few hundreds. So academic authors naturally worry more about the restricted access to their work that all this implies. One way round the problem is self-publishing. For example, using an on-demand publisher, such as Lulu in the United States, a monograph could be produced for £20 or less, while still including a royalty to the author. The problem with self-publishing lies, of course, in assessing the quality of the publication, since this typically relies on the author's own judgement. The problem is rather less important for books than for journal articles, since the value of a books has traditionally been established via reviews after publication. Nevertheless, most authors of monographs like to be published by a body that is seen as having a good reputation for quality. One result is a current growing interest in institutional publishing. Most universities are now accustomed to handle online archives of journal articles produced by members of staff, often using their library facilities. It is not too big a step from this to including original book-

length material in such archives. In fact, open access monograph publishing in the humanities and social sciences is currently on the rise, partly because of institutional collaborations of various kinds⁴.

SUMMARY

The concept of an 'e-book' materialised over forty years ago. For many years, the problem lay in developing a portable device which readers found acceptable for reading text. Over the past decade, this problem has mostly been overcome. The argument has moved on to whether readers will prefer to use a dedicated or a multifunctional device. Text for reading was already available when the first portable devices came on the market, and the use of material that is out of copyright has been reasonably straightforward. The problem has been with material still in copyright, where it is necessary to trace the copyright owner and recompense them. Publishers fully recognise the significance of the move to e-books, but are reluctant to pass on the savings which electronic handling can provide. This is providing

motivation for authors and their institutions to examine other channels for handling and distributing electronic texts. Considerable research on e-books, their problems and usage, has been done down the years: this now provides a solid background for detailed discussions of the points raised here⁵.

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