

E-Reading Between the Lines: A Glance into the New Territory of E-Books

CLAIRE SHALINSKY



WRITER'S COMMENT: *As an English major, the written word—its content, its form, and its structure—has always captivated me. As a consumer and producer of written content, my inspiration for this piece stemmed from an honest personal curiosity as to how the accelerating prevalence of technology in people's everyday lives affects their relationship to the written word. After all, medium has a huge effect on message—and some communication theorists even argue that medium is message. While I began this article very biased against digital media (as I unashamedly admit in the first paragraph), I admit that after researching the new technological landscape, e-readers certainly seem to have a useful place in modern society. I hope you, reader, come away with an awareness of how e-readers are changing one of humanity's oldest and most significant practices, writing; but more importantly, I hope that no matter what "side" you fall on, you continue to read avidly regardless of medium.*

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: *For the final assignment in UWP 104C (Writing in the Disciplines: Journalism), students write a full-length feature article on a topic that especially interests them. Intrigued by claims that the physical book will cease to exist within a few years, Claire Shalinsky set out to investigate the world of e-books and the ways they are affecting reading and education. Drawing on a rich array of primary sources, she carefully examines what e-books offer us, and whether the future of traditional books is indeed in danger. The resulting article, just one of several exceptional pieces Claire wrote during the quarter, showcases her impressive investigative skills, mastery of craft, and lively journalistic style.*

—Cynthia Bates, University Writing Program

Civilization has a new expiration date, but this time it has nothing to do with the Mayan calendar. MIT media expert Nicholas Negroponte has delivered the worst news our modern world could ever hear: the physical book will be dead by 2015. Thanks to the rapidly growing market of e-books and e-readers, print publishing is dying a quick and painful e-death. For me and other staunch defenders of physical books, this news impels a response almost as drastic as medieval book burnings—this time with Kindles and Nooks piled high. Though my knee-jerk reaction is to kick the Kindle to the curb, let's pause in our writing of the printed book's obituary for a moment to examine what is *really* going on in the new and uncharted land of e-publishing.

A Changing Landscape

The impending death of print has been a recurring fear throughout history. *New York Times* writer Leah Price notes that the evolution of technology has often been a hard phenomenon to adjust to—the printing press threatened manuscript scribes, the radio endangered the newspaper, and now e-books are signaling the extinction of the book. “Every generation rewrites the book's epitaph; all that changes is the whodunit,” she says wryly.

Nevertheless, e-books and e-readers have drastically and permanently reshaped the literary landscape. Amazon recently announced that it sells more e-books than hardcover and paperback books combined, a trend also reflected by the exponential increase in e-reader sales. Undeniably, readers are changing the way they read, choosing digital formats like e-books and audio books over traditional print texts.

The book publishing industry has had to scramble to keep up with these changing times in the wake of e-reading. Publishing companies are faced with one choice: e-publish or perish. Nicole Flewellen, assistant editor at educational publishing house Bridgepoint, observes that digital content is never far from her editorial department's mind: “We do think about what ancillary materials we can develop for the e-version of our content...we talk about multimedia or cool graphics we can add to make it more engaging.” Developing digital content is paramount to a publishing house's success as e-reading changes the way material is consumed. Flewellen notes, “Because everybody has a smart device, they can get content *now* and are not solely limited to what [they] can buy at a bookstore, so with that switch the publishing companies have

had to really change the way they develop products.” More importantly, publishers have been forced to rethink their role in book production altogether: as digitized material becomes more prevalent, authors can avoid contracting with publishing houses and instead self-publish their work online. The bestseller *50 Shades of Grey* was originally self-published on the Internet before being taken up by print publishers only *after* the novel’s success was already established. Publishing houses have had to embrace digital content to stay relevant in this new digitized world.

But e-books have changed more than just the behind-the-scenes publishing landscape—the growing market of digitized content has drastically altered the role of the bookstore. Having worked at Barnes and Noble for over three years, Flewellen has witnessed firsthand how the new digital realm has affected the marketing and selling of books: “I know that the one reason why Barnes and Noble is still around and Borders isn’t is because [Barnes and Noble] embraced the trend towards digital when [it] came out with [its] Nook device four or five years ago.” Flewellen recalls that Barnes and Noble employees had certain digital sales quotas to meet and specific instructions on how to sell the Nook device—marketing techniques that kept the company thriving as massive chain stores like Borders closed down around them. E-books have altered not only the company’s internal marketing plan, but also the very layout of the store. Instead of tables laden with bestsellers, Barnes and Noble’s front doors now open up to modern-looking tables with sample Nook devices—a layout more like an electronics store than a bookstore. As e-books are the new standard, booksellers have had to either get on board or end up like Borders.

What’s the Appeal of E-Books?

Book publishers and distributors would not be changing an infrastructure that has sustained them since the invention of the printing press if consumers were not buying the new product. As an owner of a Nook device, Flewellen admits that e-readers are very convenient and compelling products. Flewellen is attracted to the Nook’s obvious portability, the ease of storing a lifetime’s worth of literature on one lightweight device, and the way font, color, and type can be adjusted to create a custom reading experience. Even literary giant J.K. Rowling has experienced the thrill of reading on an iPad, as she stated last year in an ABC interview: “I loved knowing I had over two hundred books to

choose from with me, having a little library.” For Rowling, the bottom line is that “we should be delighted people still want to read, be it on a Nook or a Kindle or whatever the latest device is.”

Ironically, however, one of a digital device’s most appealing features is that it offers so much more than just reading. What started out as a device for avid readers quickly evolved into a multitask tablet capable of different multimedia applications. Fleweller explains that “people don’t want a device that can only do one thing...the first e-readers were a great device for someone who [was] obsessed with reading, but [companies] wanted a bigger customer base.” Since the invention of the iPad, other e-reading competitors have emulated the tablet function by creating touch screen, full-color devices capable of music, Internet browsing, pictures, and email. Because Nooks and Kindles are significantly less expensive than iPads, owning a device that can do so much other stuff *on top of* reading is simply, in Fleweller’s words, “the icing on the cake.”

A New Niche: Education

With so many attractive features and benefits of e-readers, even staunch defenders of the physical book like me cannot help but see the advantage of digital content in education, particularly at the university level. As controversial tuition hikes around the country prompt a reevaluation of our education system, e-reading devices seem to respond to the dire need for an affordable education. From her experience in academic publishing, Fleweller has found that textbooks sold in a printed medium can be up to twice as expensive as material sold digitally. Fleweller says that creating digital editorial content is one of her favorite aspects of her job at Bridgepoint: “I think it is really exciting to see the ways in which digital platforms can be used to make education more accessible to more people who might not necessarily have access to printed books.” This smaller price tag, combined with the physical convenience of storing textbooks on one lightweight device, seriously lessens a college student’s burden.

Digital material in education is not necessarily a win/win for the students *and* the publishers, however. While students may benefit from the reduced prices of textbooks, authors and publishers make up to 50% less profit from digital than from print content, according to Jeffrey Trachtenberg of the *Wall Street Journal*. Educational publishing previously relied upon the issuing of new editions to offset the used textbook market, but not even this marketing strategy may be enough

to compensate for the profits lost in digital publishing. These profit reductions, combined with the possibility of content piracy and/or sharing, have negative implications for publishing houses.

Digital devices are even trickling down to elementary school education, though they have had a more ambiguous reception than at the college level. The San Diego school district of Janet Shalinsky, a second-grade teacher for over thirty years, recently gave her and all the teachers in her district a single iPad to use as a teaching tool in the classroom. Shalinsky contends that the devices are drastically changing the way young students learn—and some of these changes are not for the better: “School districts eventually want an iPad in the hands of every child because they see the value of some of the apps in education... But as the kids become more and more used to working with iPads, their attention span is becoming shorter and their interest harder to stimulate. It’s hard as a teacher to compete with the instant gratification of an iPad.”

One example of an application that Shalinsky’s school district has encouraged her to use is an app that allows her to record her voice reading a story, which the students can then listen to on the iPad. Shalinsky, however, views this digital reading experience as less valuable to her students’ learning than a live reading: “Why would I want my students to listen to a recording of my voice when I could *actually* read aloud to them, engaging them and interacting with them?” Digital devices may have a useful place in the educational world, but they might also have a cost.

Printed Books: The Last Chapter?

As digital content becomes more and more integrated into publishing, marketing, and educational realms, are we seeing the end of the printed book? Is the print apocalypse upon us, when lovers of books must run to closing bookstores to save these antiques from an e-death? *Huffington Post* analyst John B. Thompson claims that it is too soon to predict the death of print: “I’ve studied the publishing industry closely for the last 10 years and I’ve seen how often the predictions of so-called experts—often expressed with a great air of authority—have turned out to be wrong. We are living through a revolution of sorts, and one of the few things you can say for certain about a revolution is that when you’re in the middle of one, you have no idea where and when it will end.” The future of the physical books lies largely with consumers, whose choices in our supply/demand economy dictate the products companies will produce. When

asked about the digital future of reading, J.K. Rowling asserted that she would always want her books to be printed on ink and paper—so perhaps the print industry is safe after all!

Despite e-readers' many advantages, the aesthetic experience of reading is undeniably lost. Readers don't have the same opportunity to "bond" with books—to feel their weight and texture, and to dog-ear pages, highlight passages, or scribble marginalia. In Rowling's ABC interview, Amazon founder Jeff Bezos confirmed that what people miss most with e-readers is the smell of a book's glue. Besides, with printed books, one doesn't have to worry about reading near water or running out of battery power. Though these factors may seem petty and irrelevant, they are—in my opinion—a crucial aspect of the reading experience. I adore the process by which books become personal through natural wear and tear; I cannot help but feel connected to a history of readers when I hold a library or borrowed book in my hands. For me, e-readers offer a sterile and synthetic reading experience, while printed books are warm and personal relics to be proudly displayed on shelves or passed on to loved ones.

Nevertheless, while e-books may change how people read, J.K. Rowling is correct in saying the most important thing is that people *are* reading. According to *The Guardian's* Shiv Malik, the U.K. is currently experiencing a "renaissance of reading," as Kindle users are buying four times as many books as they did prior to owning a Kindle. This kind of reading revival is something we can all stand behind, for as bookseller and publisher Nicole Flewellen wisely observes, the purpose of the written word is to disseminate information—and that information is not suddenly rendered invalid if it is consumed in a digital format. Besides, more e-book readers just mean more printed books left for unwavering ink-and-paper bibliophiles like me.

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