The Next Big Thing is Already Here

Ebooks Turn the Page

Anyone fortunate enough to have gotten a **Kindle**, **Nook**, **iPad** or other ereading device over the holidays knows that the ebook revolution has arrived. The choice of devices, formats, and amount of available content is exploding. But amidst the noise and fanfare, just where the revolution is going can be a bit confusing, because it's still up in the air.

The technology is still being developed. We're at a stage where a wide variety of opportunities and possible directions are temptingly visible. The big corporate players are even now warily considering where to place their bets. Individuals with big ideas and luck and persistence might yet make a mark as the shape of the new digital playing field takes form.

Paper v. electrons

While traditional publishing is facing fundamental changes with **print-on-demand** and the death of bookstores, how the ebook revolution will affect it is unclear. Electronic books offer some obvious advantages over the paper kind, being infinitely more **portable**, easily **searchable** by keywords, and should be much more easily **updateable**, too.

At this point, ebooks are approaching the graphic quality of printed books in some ways, but remain seriously limited in layout and style options. As it was during the intense competition between Web browsers, so it is with ebooks. Each manufacturer is also a publisher using **proprietary formats** so their offerings can only be read on their devices or apps. This is slowly changing as ebook formats evolve, but it is still an important consideration when choosing.

While the black-and-white Kindle's e-ink is much easier on the eyes for reading than other screens, the Kindle Fire and the iPad offer full color. Technical efforts have focused tightly on duplicating ink-and-paper books because **universal readability** turns out to be a major problem. Just making text and graphics legible and attractive on various gizmos at different sizes and screens has been quite difficult.

Since the World Wide Web had to overcome the same problem, most ebook formats are based on **HTML**. What made the Web truly revolutionary was the ability to **link** content both within a document and with others half a world away; however, applying this in ebook development seems to be lagging. Other formidable challenges involve generating tables and specialized indices, placing footnotes and graphics, and handling large masses of data, like maps, especially on tiny black-and-white screens.

Beyond paper

As for **multimedia**, so far Kindle and other ereaders have some text-to-voice capabilities, but that's about it. There are a few ebooks out there with embedded audio and video clips, but these have generally been specially crafted as technical demonstrations.

Though described as "enhanced", "enriched", or "amplified" ebooks, these, the glossy coffee-table volumes of the epub world, in reality have been specialized applications in themselves. With video and audio clips, so far these have worked best on recent history and biographies, like one called *Nixonland*; beloved media properties, such as the Beatles' *Yellow Submarine*; general science, like a picture-book about *The Elements*; or with current movie tie-ins.

As novelties and prototypes, such titles have been difficult and expensive to produce, but that's changing, too. Many different publishers are experimenting, but Apple, Amazon, and Barnes & Noble have been the leaders in regularly offering such services, and until recently only for special projects. In short, a lot of work must be done before electronic books and devices reach their full incredible potential.

All ebooks come with significant downsides and some serious questions. Specialized ebook reading devices, for instance, are more delicate than paperbacks, often needing protective cases and other accessories, and requiring regular recharging. And while paperbacks may not be tub-friendly, at least wrinkled pages are readable, once they dry out.

Tablets are widely regarded as the natural home for ebooks. But people are still learning the best way to actually handle these devices. They might be a good tool for reading, but not so much yet for writing, unless the stylus makes a comeback. And studies have already shown that even with stands, prolonged use of iPads can cause neck and arm strain.

Ownership issues

Less tangible aspects are also important. What about ownership rights – both of the creators provided for by **copyright** but also the traditional rights of the purchasing **reader**? Amazon, for instance, shortly after introducing their Kindle ereader, quietly flushed everyone's copy of *1984*, of all things, down the memory hole when they realized they didn't have the right to sell it. They later updated a novel that was found to have errors in it, also without notification; another action right out of Big Brother's playbook. These are not reassuring precedents at all.

Though one can acquire ebooks from other sources and load them onto a Kindle, the situation under Amazon's dominant model is in some ways rather like **Netflix**, minus returns. A reader does not really own anything but the reading device. Rather, he or she pays to **rent** books and magazines indefinitely from a central library run for profit. And like a book from a library, they are for individual reading *only*. The renter may not dog-ear pages, underline text, make notes in the margin, or re-lend it to someone else.

Efforts are being made to fix this – Amazon now has a lending program of sorts. Apple's iPad has an individual note card capability for their new books. The Kindle allows people to create and share bookmarks, highlights, and annotations. If desired, Kindle users can even aggregate their notes with those of others, all accessible right there on their ereaders.

However, since users *cannot* save or print out any of this information, they don't really own it, Amazon does. This might be a minor nuisance for casual readers, but it could become an important matter for serious students, critics, and researchers later on.

Textbook tyranny

Ironically, ebooks have largely been aimed at the diminishing class of **pleasure readers**, few of whom really need to carry an entire library around with them. The real ebook revolution lies elsewhere.

The bad news is that the expense of making and injecting movies and other media into fiction may make the process of publishing bestsellers even more like that of Hollywood blockbusters than it already is. But the good news is that the cost of incorporating news clips and audio files into textbooks should be much less. The wealth of documentary material already on hand is one of the reasons most of the enhanced demonstrations have been non-fiction. Their application to textbooks seems inevitable.

The late Steve Jobs really wanted to revolutionize the schoolbook industry. Students today are burdened with backpacks as heavy as those shouldered by Roman soldiers, crammed with costly but required books that wear out and must be updated.

Sadly, Apple's new **iBooks 2** initiative can't "reinvent textbooks" for college students, as it's aimed only at the lower grades. But the company has opened their etextbook platform to all who wish to participate, creators as well as consumers. Their **iBook Author** tool will allow developers to publish their own media-rich ebook texts. The catch is that those books *only* work on the iPad as the .ibooks format, though close to upcoming standards, is *only* used by Apple.

For college and post-grad students, the revolution will probably come piecemeal as more publishers slowly become involved. Savings will probably not be immediately apparent. Files for "optimized" ebooks can be many times larger than regular ebooks, and thus more expensive. But many ebooks can be taken anywhere in a single handheld device. Perhaps that's revolutionary enough in itself for now.

Though many powerful interest groups have enormous stakes in how it turns out, the future depends as much on what customers want and will accept as on technology. Consumers need to keep informed so they can choose wisely. SWCP will continue to do what we can to help. Stay tuned.

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