

# Digital Reading: The Transformation of Reading Practices

Gustavo CARDOSO<sup>a,1</sup>, Carla GANITO<sup>b</sup> and Cátia FERREIRA<sup>b</sup>  
<sup>a</sup>*CIES, ISCTE-IUL*  
<sup>b</sup>*CIES, ISCTE-IUL and UCP*

**Abstract.** The paper aims to present the preliminary results of a two-year project having as scope the future of the book and libraries stemming from the current reading practices in Portugal. In the scope of the project, the presentation of the findings will be focused on the mobile consumption practices in Portugal. This research is based on a mixed methodology: a quantitative survey – Network Society in Portugal – articulated with a qualitative analysis of the discourses of the representatives of what Thompson calls the *publishing chain* (librarians, publishing houses, authors, and content and soft/hardware providers). To understand the impact of mobile devices on reading practices is crucial for libraries and publishing houses. Mobile devices offer augmented mobility – a mobility that is connected, networked and collaborative. Although the hype is currently around eBooks, we are still faced with a market where the vast majority still reads books on paper. The sales of devices have exploded but eBooks are lagging behind. What do people use their tablets, iPads, and eReaders for? What are they reading and where? How do they articulate their readings with other media and cultural consumptions? Those are the central questions that we are aiming at answering.

**Keywords.** digital reading, mobility, publishing chain, Portugal, libraries

## Introduction

The act of reading is changing. The tendency has been to analyze reading practices by focusing on what people read, on contents. However with the rise of convergent technologies it is also crucial to understand how they are reading nowadays. Gutenberg and his printing method with movable types established a format that allowed books to become a cultural product with potential to be massified: manufacturing costs became lower, the format allowed for comfortable reading, and easy transport. Books were, then, transformed into a mobile tool for information and/or entertainment purposes. For long time the traditional book format seemed the ideal one; nevertheless with the complexification of digital contexts, this format is being questioned and experiments are being conducted to narrow the existent gap between print books and digital media practices.

These media practices rely on a new form of mobility. Mobile devices offer augmented mobility – a mobility that is connected, networked and collaborative. We now speak of locative media where, besides content, context also plays a major role.

---

<sup>1</sup> Corresponding Author: CIES, ISCTE-IUL – Avenida das Forças Armadas, 1649-026 Lisboa – Portugal; E-mail: [leituradigital@googlegroups.com](mailto:leituradigital@googlegroups.com).

We will propose that digital reading presents itself as an invisible activity. Reading is still very much associated with the printed book and all other reading activities, namely the ones performed on screens, are seldom considered reading, which pinpoints to a need to develop new survey practices.

Digital reading is also often seen as a replacement activity, when in reality it is a cumulative activity with survey results pointing to the fact that those that already have intensive reading habits in paper will also be the ones that will read more digitally and vice-versa. Digital reading functions as an extension of paper. Another misconception associated with digital reading is that age functions as an obstacle to the uptake, but we will propose that digital reading, as so many other digital practices, is much more correlated with lifestyles, life-cycles and roles performed. Digital reading does not present a linear uptake curve.

The digital format is becoming widespread which raises the importance of studying the impact of reading books and documents in digital format. Although the hype is currently around eBooks, we are still faced with a market where the vast majority still reads books on paper. The sales of devices have exploded but eBooks are lagging behind. What do people use their tablets, iPads, and eReaders for? What are they reading and where? How do they articulate their readings with other media and cultural consumptions? Those are the central questions that we are aiming at answering. We believe that we need to understand, not only that people read more printed books than eBooks, or that publishing houses still do not sell so many eBooks as expected. But what do people read in the printed form and digitally; what are their expectations and needs? Our starting point is the consumption practices of those that already use digital reading devices but also of those that read on screens (blogs, e-mails, websites, text messages, social networking sites).

The paper aims to present the preliminary results of a two-year project having as scope the future of the book and libraries stemming from the current reading practices in Portugal. During the research the Portuguese market will be analyzed in detail as well as the practices of digital reading in this country. The intention is that the Portuguese case study can be used as starting point for the analysis of the digital reading reality in other countries in Europe (with a special focus in the UK and Spain) and North and South America (with a special focus in the USA and Brazil, respectively). In the scope of the project, the presentation of the findings will be focused on the mobile consumption practices in Portugal. This research is based on a mixed methodology: a quantitative survey – Network Society in Portugal – articulated with a qualitative analysis of the discourses of the representatives of what Thompson calls the *publishing chain* [1] (librarians, publishing houses, authors, and content and soft/hardware providers).

## **1. Digital Reading – Research Project Scope and methods**

The research project ‘Digital reading and the transformation of reading stimulus and of book institutions’ results from the collaboration between the Centre for Research and Studies in Sociology (CIES/ISCTE) and Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. The two main presuppositions that frame the project are the fact that the publishing industry is still dominated by the print book, albeit the e-book is growing and the number of digital reading platforms sold is becoming very significant; and the fact that there is already available data regarding the use of reading digital platforms among the

Portuguese population. This research project will map successes and failures of the publishing industry (of contents, hardware and institutional access) and their evolution, aiming at creating an analytic matrix that combines experimentation and adoption of digital reading, in the business and consumer dimensions. The main goal of this research is to produce knowledge regarding the cases under analysis that may be transferable to other worldwide contexts.

The present research aims to contribute nationally and globally to the following areas: publishing market, libraries, and sociology of reading. We intend to contribute to the publishing market by presenting recommendations to digital books and documents publishing; and through the creation of a platform where the different elements of the book publishing chain can cooperate and network. We intend to contribute to libraries through the identification of the necessary support when implementing digital reading devices, especially regarding how these units function, human resources training, and programs that help to encourage e-books reading. We will pay special attention to specialized libraries and the impact of digital reading on its operating modes. We intend to contribute to sociology of reading through the identification of digital readers' typology and meanings they attribute to the digital reading practice.

We will discuss the role of libraries in relation to a country where reading does not play a central role in peoples lives and where we still face a considerable digital gap. Libraries face huge challenges in adapting to the new digital environment, in performing new roles, in becoming a social center that allows for open access that empowers users. We want to answer some of the questions that libraries are struggling with: how can they introduce eBooks; what training does their staff require; how should they promote digital reading; what are the specific needs of users; how are schools and universities tackling digital reading and how can they serve these communities. We will also discuss the challenges that the publishing industry is facing: the lack of standards and stable business models. Publishing no longer equates with publishing a book, a newspaper or a magazine, but rather means producing content that is then provided across different platforms for a community of users that are themselves producers. The publishing industry now face the same challenges that digitization brought to the music industry, namely the erosion of profits by piracy and self-publishing.

Our research aims at having intensive qualitative characteristics. Regarding the methodologies, it will be based on interviews to the players in the digital publishing value chain; at a second stage we will organize focus-groups in order to identify digital readers' typology and to understand the meaning they attribute to the digital reading practice; and in the final stage we will collect quantitative data through a survey to digital readers. In this paper we present the preliminary results of the interviews. These were conducted between January and March 2012 and involved players from the following organizations: public libraries, university libraries, school libraries, publishers, authors, media publishers, mobile phone companies, bookshop-chains and independent bookshops.

## **2. Digital Reading's Ecology**

In order to understand the digital transformation of reading practices, we considered it essential to understand the state of the art of what we defined as being the digital reading's ecology, a system that combines the role played by industry, technology,

legal and juridical questions, and social and consumption standards. In this section we will explore some of the main trends that are being witnessed worldwide.

### 2.1. Trends

The massification of digital technologies is contributing not only to the emergence of a different relationship with broadcasted contents – from the way we access, consume and share information and entertainment contents, but also to a new understanding of what it means to read. The digital revolution seems to be finally reaching the book sector and it is important to understand how the *publishing chain* is getting adjusted to the emergent digital contexts for the consumption of written contents:

“Out there in the world, there are as many different kinds of reader as there are different types of book. New technology gives us the opportunity to reach out to those readers: to offer different kinds of business model ever more tailored to the multitude of different needs, from the academic researcher to the occasional beach reader. The digital transition stands to revolutionize how we access information. And the emergence of alternative ways of reading – in particular e-books – stands to transform the publishing sector”. [2]

The international publishing context is changing, but contrary to the announced ‘death’ of the print book [3, 4, 5], we are witnessing the remediation<sup>2</sup> of traditional reading objects through the emergence of more and more sophisticated digital books [6, 7, 8]. Nevertheless, it is necessary to understand the impact that digital contents and reading practices are having, or may have, in the global publishing market. To contribute to a better understanding of these practices, we need to acknowledge the main challenges for the book sector, how digital technologies are being integrated by publishers, and what the main adopted digital publishing strategies are so far.

Technological advances regarding book production tend to be well accepted by publishing houses, as well as by the printing industry. Among those that were rapidly accepted are: the use of word processors and page layout software, the possibility of sending digital files to be printed, offset printing through ctp (computer-to-plate), and digital printing [9]. These new practices have in common the possibility of reducing editing and printing costs. Nevertheless, the development of new information and communication technologies may contribute to a greater change in the publishing industry, and the new reading devices may play a decisive role in this process. The first digital strategies adopted by publishing houses were related to marketing, communication and distribution strategies, and resulted in adjustments of the traditional business models. However, these adjustments do not answer to all the changes we are facing concerning cultural products consumption. Contrary to what happened to the music and cinema/television industries, the book sector seems to be lagging behind the digital revolution. Among the main digital publishing strategies adopted by publishing houses worldwide are: the use of web 2.0 technologies, making available backlist titles for print-on-demand and/or digital printing; making available e-books through

---

<sup>2</sup> Remediation in the sense proposed by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin in *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (2000): new media result from the remediation of the main characteristics and functionalities of previous media forms. For instance, Internet allows us to see movies as television, and to listen radio as traditional radio systems.

aggregators; e-books direct sales; and making available front-list titles for print-on-demand and/or digital printing [10, 11, 12, 13]. Adopting these strategies highlights that:

“[b]ook publishing is a combination of many businesses working in harmony. Advanced Web technology and its applications will not only provide avenues of opportunity, but will also present associated pitfalls that need to be avoided. In face of a virtual maelstrom of technological development, publishers must enhance and refine their organizational and management skills, and re-assess their capabilities and their relationships with other industry stakeholders, not the least with readers”.

[13]

Regarding technology we witness the appropriation of new technological devices for reading practices. – eReaders, tablet PCs, mobile phones, and laptops, for instance, have three main characteristics that may be associated with digital reading practices – they foster social collaboration, participation and mobility more than any precedent reading device, even if we compare them with the traditional book. For the first time we can share our opinion of a book that we have just read, not only with the members of our ‘traditional’ social networks, but expand this sharing through our online networks. Collaborative writing is an emergent phenomenon. And these renewed practices may be close related to concepts like community and identity: communities of readers, authors, fans, or (re)mixed ones; and the valorization of reading practices as an identity element.

Digital reading is also related with an augmented dimension of mobility. For the first time we may not only read in any location, but we can read in any location without giving up being connected to our networks. Reading may become a network and collaborative activity through its association with mobile technological reading devices.

The main challenges regarding the technological dimension of digital reading are the ‘Big Data’ and the management of big amounts of data; the inexistence of ‘global’ standards; and the development of digital literacy skills.

Legal and juridical questions are also a main concern for the players in the industry. As this topic is not central for the argument of the present paper we will not further explore it, but we would like to suggest that regarding legal and juridical questions we are witnessing the emergence of more and more complex contexts marked by instability and conflict, especially regarding authors’ rights, open access and the impossibility of net neutrality.

## *2.2. Libraries*

Libraries are particularly concerned with the developments in the industry. They are being pressed between public policies that actively promote the adoption of eBooks in order to cut costs and the publishers that do not provide good eBook solutions for libraries in order to delay digital adoption. In the United States 82% of Public Libraries already offer eBooks (ePub Direct) and South Korea plans to make their school curricula digital by 2015.

Libraries are facing the need to reinvent their role, changing it from accumulation to access. In times of crisis this role can become even more important in order to ensure public access to those that can not afford to access eBooks and the Internet. Libraries also face the role of helping developing digital reading skills and helping users building knowledge by using library information resources. Libraries are becoming social centers that provide a wide range of services from finding a good job to reading the classics or the latest novel.

In dealing with this transformation libraries have to deal with difficult issues such as, how to redefine the librarians professional role, which standard will win the current battle, which loan model to use? These questions are still left unanswered and drive uncertainty in investments and policies.

### *2.3. Publishing*

Until 2014, 70% of publishers expect to publish over half its books digitally (ePub Direct) and in April 2011 Amazon stated that the number of sold eBooks surpassed the number of paper books. There is a hype around eBooks with Apple making it the selling point for iPad2 and selling apps for self-publishing. But rising numbers hide the growing concerns of the industry: What is the best business model? What companies are best equipped to deal with the digital revolution? Are these companies from inside the industry or are they outsiders such as Apple.

Concerns of publishers are centered on publishing standards, business models, and survival in a world where disintermediation can become a widespread practice. Publishers are developing a tense relationship with authors, libraries and bookshop chains that now have all become competitors instead of partners.

## **3. The Portuguese Digital Reading Landscape**

According to the survey of electronic books readers conducted in December 2011 by the Portuguese Consumer Society (DECO) the favorite device was the Kindle. Men between the age of 18 and 44 prefer eBooks because they are more practical, they weight less and they occupy less space. Nevertheless, Portugal is still very much behind countries like the United States in eBooks adoption, especially because reading books is not a central activity for Portuguese: 72.7% do not read books. According to the survey *Network Society* Portuguese tend to read the same or less than 5 years ago (80.5%). The same trend applies to newspapers and magazines. Reading books is an activity that Portuguese would find easy to drop. Only 1.3% of the population says that they would find it difficult to stop reading books.

With this as a starting point digital practices seem marginal. Access to devices is very limited. According to the same survey only 1.5% of the population has access to a tablet computer and 1% to an eReader. Nevertheless 21.7% already accesses the Internet in a mobile device which will leads us to draw some conclusion about the non-centrality of books and the growing centrality of digital reading. If reading practices are limited, digital reading is even more so with 95,1% of the population not using eBooks and 86.7% not downloading or reading books online. The few that do use them do it for academic work and use mainly technical books or school manuals (45.1%). But even in schools and the academia eBooks are undervalued. Librarians interviewed were unanimous in reporting low demand for eBooks. They are the ones that have to

promote digital reading in a context full of constraints, namely: heterogeneous users, especially in public libraries; lack of contents in Portuguese; lack of novelties; logistic difficulties such as the absence of a credit card to purchase eBooks; conflicts with publishing houses that accuse them of eroding the market. Librarians point out that the demand for eBooks is still centered on technical books and practical hand books. University libraries are not much ahead of public libraries. They also face negative response to eBook initiatives, lack of human resources and timetable constraints. Both public- and academic libraries share the concern for the cultivation of data and fear the end of the library as a public access center, free of charge for all.

Portuguese publishers sense that they are several steps behind the global industry. They are hesitant of being innovative and paying the price of innovation. Many are concerned with the survival of the traditional publisher role and they feel they are losing important sources of revenue such as translations and the market it offers. Publishers feel that business models are still very unclear but they agree that the iPad changed everything. Contrary to publishers, authors pinpointed some paths for the industry, namely the need to develop their presence in Portuguese speaking countries and to reach a new position similar to musicians. The authors will need to become performers and generate new sources of revenue. As for booksellers they are also concerned with loosing their role in the value chain. Although online selling is still marginal, none of the big chains want to be left behind. The independent booksellers, on the other hand, seem adapted to being restricted to a niche market.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The goal to encompass digital reading in a comprehensive analysis of Portugal is still in a first phase. The main challenge is that our object of study is a moving target thus these first insights can still change greatly until the end of the project. Another challenge is interviewing people about their reading practices. If the reading of books is very marginal, the same cannot be said of digital reading as a broad concept. Librarians are witnessing a surge in demand for access to the Internet. Portugal has one of the highest rates of portable computer ownership; there is a growing rate of Smartphone's adoption and there is a high penetration rate of social network sites such as *Facebook*. Digital reading is an invisible activity with librarians stating that readers do not recognize eBooks as book reading. Thus we will not find our answers in quantitative surveys containing questions that people do not relate to their activities.

Commercial players in the industry do not seem to have the answers; since they apparently are more concerned with delaying the future. They all acknowledge that digital reading will be the future of the industry and they sense that their current business model is outdated. But they still do not recognize a way to survive the digital revolution. As one of the last industries to feel the impact of digitalization they are finding it hard to learn from their predecessors, in the music and movie industries.

The next steps in the project will be to engage traditional- and digital readers and trace the affordances and gratifications drawn from reading and digital reading. We hope to shed more light on the concerns of the players in the industry and gain insights from lead users and critical segments of readers, namely children and the older generation. These are the ones that most value access and have the most time to explore alternatives. Furthermore we will track best practices developing in libraries and publishing houses.

## References

- [1] J.B. Thompson, *Merchants of Culture: The Publishing Business in the Twenty-First Century*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2010.
- [2] N. Kroes, Books in the 21st century (Opening address to representatives & members of Federation of European Publishers, Frankfurt Book Fair), retrieved, December 2011, from <http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=SPEECH/11/660&type=HTML>.
- [3] D.A. Bell, The Bookless Future: What the Internet is Doing to Scholarship. In Koerner, B. I. (Ed.). *The Best of Technology Writing 2006*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor (MI), 2006, 199-219.
- [4] W. Benjamin, *Reflections: essays, aphorisms, autobiographical writings*, Helen & Kurt Wolff, New York, 1978.
- [5] S. Birkerts, *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in a Electronic Age*, Faber & Faber, New York, 2006 [1994].
- [6] E. Carreiro, Electronic Books: How Digital Devices and Supplementary New Technologies are Changing the Face of the Publishing Industry, *Publishing Research Quarterly* **26** (2010), 219-235.
- [7] C. Lynch, The Battle to Define the Future of the Book in the Digital World, *First Monday* **6: 6** (2001), retrieved, December 2011, from <http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/rt/prINTERfriendly/864/773>.
- [8] G. Nunberg, *The Future of the Book*, University of California Press, Berkeley e Los Angeles, 1996.
- [9] C.L. Borgman, *From Gutenberg to the Global Information Infrastructure: Access to Information in the Networked World*, MIT Press, Cambridge (MA), 2000.
- [10] Association of American University Presses, Digital Book Publishing in the AAUP Community – Survey Report: Winter 2009-2010, retrieved, December 2011, from <http://www.aapnet.org/images/stories/data/0910digitalsurvey.pdf>.
- [11] Association of American University Presses, Digital Book Publishing in the AAUP Community – Survey Report: Spring 2011, retrieved, December 2011, from <http://www.aapnet.org/images/stories/data/2011digitalsurveyreport.pdf>.
- [12] M. Harrington, C. Meade, 'Read:Write: Digital Possibilities for Literature, A report for Arts Council England', 2008, retrieved, January 2012, from: [http://www.futureofthebook.org.uk/ifbook%20ACE%20report\\_final.pdf](http://www.futureofthebook.org.uk/ifbook%20ACE%20report_final.pdf).
- [13] X. Tian, B. Martin, Digital Technologies for Book Publishing, *Publishing Research Quarterly* **26** (2010), 151-167.