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# But Can You Read It On The Bead? Ebooks and our Relation to the Written World

Helen Vaskevitch  
*University of Pennsylvania*

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## But Can You Read It On The Bead? Ebooks and our Relation to the Written World

## **BUT CAN YOU READ IT ON THE BEACH?**

### **EBOOKS AND OUR RELATION TO THE WRITTEN WORD**

Helen Vaskevitch

There have been digital books, or ebooks, in some form for almost ten years, but it is only in the past two or three years that the general public has become aware of them. Today, although ebooks still represent only a tiny portion of the market, they are the fastest growing segment of the publishing industry (Pastor, 2008). To the general population of readers, ebooks are still a nascent technology; as such, they are still very plastic. There are many paths their development could take, and many potential ways in which ebooks could change both the publishing industry and the way readers relate to the written word.

One of the first manifestations of ebooks was Microsoft Reader, a piece of software released in 2000, which formats books to be read on a home computer or on certain cell phones ([www.microsoft.com/Reader](http://www.microsoft.com/Reader)). David Vaskevitch, who works in a group at Microsoft scoping out promising new markets for Microsoft to enter, was one of the first at the company to consider digital books as a potential new market demand, comparable to MP3s in the music industry and their enormous success. As part of normal publishing practices, manuscripts to be published already exist in digital form for ease of sending and editing. It was a simple task for publishers to reformat their books for Microsoft Reader and for bookstores to offer the digital versions alongside the print. However, in this early stage, battery and screen technologies were not sophisticated enough for reading books on palm pilots or laptops to be a satisfactory experience and the ebook market floundered for several years (Vaskevitch, personal communication, April 30, 2009). Then three years ago Sony released the Sony Reader, a dedicated reading device on which you can read downloaded books bought at the Sony online store. The next year, Amazon followed suit with the Amazon Kindle. Though the market is still small, ebook reading devices are growing in popularity. The first version of the Kindle sold out within hours (Carnoy, 2009), and the latest version, Kindle 2, boosted Amazon's ebook sales by 18% (Albanesius, 2009).

Following the trend in digitization of entertainment media, many forward thinkers extol ebooks as the inevitable wave of the future -- the next stage of evolution for the traditional printed book. These predictions, however, are often somewhat one-sided, viewing printed books as a non-

technological relic of the past and ebooks as their digital improvement. I spoke with Dr. Nathan Ensmenger, professor of history of science at the University of Pennsylvania, whose research focuses on the cultural and social developments of information technologies in mainstream America. He explained that to give ebooks a thorough analysis you must recognize both ebooks and printed books as technologies—one that has arisen in the past few years with the digital wave and whose role in society is still being formed, and one that has been developed and refined over centuries to become the sophisticated reading technology it is today, superb in its capacities to store information reliably and to give a satisfying reading experience. Dr. Ensmenger pointed out that when viewed in this light it becomes clear that digitization of media is not “some inevitable trajectory towards some technology, but very specific choices being made in those certain industries, about those technologies.” This comparison is useful and necessary in developing an understanding of the significant differences between these two technologies and whether they will bring beneficial or detrimental changes to the practice of reading.

The most obvious difference between printed versus digital books is the new interface -- the device itself. When you pick up a normal, printed book, you scan the cover, turn it over and read the description on the back, and then maybe flip through the pages to read snippets here and there. It is a familiar act, it is entirely mundane. The interface of the book itself is barely present; you are primarily focused on the content of the book. With a device like the Amazon Kindle, picking up a book is a very different act. The first difference you encounter is that you have to turn it on. You cannot turn it over to read a synopsis, you first have to acquaint yourself with the new interface; there is more than just content, a physical technology has inserted itself between you and the story you intend to read.

The next difference you notice is the price tag. A paperback usually costs around \$10; the Kindle 2 costs \$395. It is not a disposable technology, which the reader can use and then throw or give away with little thought, as with a paperback book. By choosing the Kindle as the reading interface, the reader is plugging into a whole infrastructure of technology and legality, never before considered by the normal printed book owner. The monetary investment alone represents a shift in attention: the content now has to share the stage with the sleek device. As several ebook owners and commentators on the publishing business have pointed out, investing a sizeable chunk of money into an electronic technology to engage in an activity which does not inherently require any monetary investment signifies a greater commitment to... to what exactly? For Sara Nelson, former editor of *Publishers weekly*, the commitment is to literature (Kaufman, 2009). Conversely, the

commitment could be to the technology itself, as in the opinion of author David Boles; “‘I want it to work, here’s my money’ is much more powerful for you as a discerning reader than ‘maybe I’ll like it or not—impress me for free.’” (Boles, 2007) But... don’t books already “work”? What does this attitude, increasingly prevalent in our quick-to-update digital culture, say about how our relationship to literature is changing? From Nelson’s and Boles’ comments, it appears that we as readers might be developing new priorities for our entertainment experiences, as reading comes to be held up against other digital media. Our relationship to reading is not being judged solely on what we choose to read, but on how we choose to read—where the latest, most expensive technology takes center stage.

Buying a book, the purpose for buying the Kindle, has also changed. Darrell, who bought the Kindle when it first came out, says his favorite feature of the Kindle is the convenience of downloading and owning a book only seconds after you think to want it (Gold, email correspondence, May 3, 2009). But what else, besides increased convenience, does this new way of buying change about the experience of buying a book? I began to consider this question the other day, while walking to the grocery store. I happened upon a man with a folding table set up on the sidewalk, selling books for a dollar. One titled *The Devil’s Larder* caught my eye; it brought to mind my roommate, whose academic interest is religious studies, and whose passion is for food and upscale restaurants. The jacket-flap description of short stories on the topics of “food, sex, desire and its death” sealed the deal—I had to buy it for her. This chance encounter and spontaneity, a ten second relationship between the man who no longer wanted the book and my roommate soon to acquire it, could not have happened online. This is a truth not unique to ebooks, it is applicable to any kind of online shopping. If physical books lose their dominance over ebooks, the relationship between bookseller and reader, and between reader and reader, will be fundamentally changed because ebooks represent another channel through which the digital world obsolesces human interaction. This reveals one of the most heavily debated aspects of digital technology and our new interconnectedness through the internet: the internet creates new constellations of possible relationships with people around the globe who share common interests, while at the same time disconnecting us from those in our immediate vicinity and the chance encounters of walking around in the physical world.

Once you have browsed the online store and have bought a new book you are faced with the question, what is it exactly that I now own? For reasons of intellectual property protection, ebooks sold by trade publishers are encrypted with Digital Rights Management (DRM) technology. While a

physical object such as a printed book is relatively simple to keep track of and control—only one copy can be owned at a time, and it can be withheld until a satisfactory price is agreed upon—insubstantial digital books make things much more complicated. A digital book can be copied scores of times at almost no cost by pirates, putting both authors and publishers at risk of losing their investment when their expensively produced book is made available for free somewhere else. DRM is used to ensure that you will only ever have one copy of the ebook and only on your registered reader device. And so, in a sense, what you own is not an actual book, but rather a license to read that book (Buchanan, 2008). As explained in a study by the Columbia Law Science and Technology Review, what this subtle difference in ownership calls into question is something called the right of first sale. This right ensures that once you have bought a book from a bookseller, once they have made the first sale, you have the right to do whatever you want with that book; you can lend it to friends, you can give it away, you can even sell it at profit. How this translates into the world of DRM is that you can give away the physical manifestation of your book—in this case, your hard drive or reader—but you can't give someone the ebook by itself, because the only way to do that is by making a copy, which is illegal under the Kindle's use license. In this way, ebooks as manifested by the Kindle and similar ebook reader devices override the right of first sale (Buchanan, 2008). The legality of this override is heavily debated; those in the debate question if something is being subtly taken from us.

Even if you agree not to give away the book or try to sell it, this is not the last you have seen of DRM. Because of the practices of competitive companies, none of the various reader devices on the market use the same ebook format. Mr. Vaskevitch laid out a scenario to explain the issues this can cause. Say you buy a Sony Reader and buy 150 books, and then switch to an Amazon Kindle 2, (as is commonly done—people generally want the newest version of any given technology), those 150 books are lost to you. You either have to retain both reader devices or you have to buy again all 150 of those books in the Kindle format. What does this mean about what exactly it is you own when you buy an ebook? And if you know something about programming and are able to strip the DRM from your Sony Reader ebooks so that you can read them on your Kindle 2, is what you have done illegal? You did pay for the books, so legally you own them and can do whatever you want with them. But technically, under the user license of the Sony Reader, what you have done is illegal: you have committed piracy (Vaskevitch, personal communication, April 30, 2009). As laid out in a report by the Association of American Publishers, this is an issue of interoperability. As stated in the report, “why should a technology provider push for DRM interoperability when it could mean

that other technology providers might benefit?” (Mooney, 2001) It is the reason why iPods can only use their own proprietary USB cords, and why no two digital camera batteries are the same. And now, with books entering the fast-paced and competitive world of digital technology, readers will have to overcome both hardware and legal issues before they can read their books.

These questions have implications for the companies serving as the digital repository for purchased ebook content, (e.g. Amazon), as well. In the case of lost or destroyed ebooks, what obligation do they have to protect or preserve property that was legally bought from them? Similarly, as to the supposed piracy described above, what is Amazon’s right to pursue a user as a pirate—of content they legally bought? In Mr. Vaskevitch’s words, it forces companies to ask the question “but do we really want to sue [ebook owners] for something that probably shouldn’t be illegal?” This complex legality makes criminals of anybody who simply wants to retain their purchased content across a hardware upgrade, and causes some commentators to worry that the increasing digitization of our entertainment media is allowing a gradual transfer of private property into the hands of media conglomerates (Striphas, 2006).

Hopefully, most people will be fortunate enough to be preserved from any of these legal nightmares, and they will be able to just curl up with their new downloads and enjoy a good book. Or will they? Ebooks change the fundamental process of reading itself. First of all, there are the plain physical differences explored above. The weight of the book, the size—is it a paperback or a first edition hardcover? Knowing where you are in the book—have you just started and are rolling back the front cover to hold the book comfortably in one hand, or are you nearing the end, with only a slim remainder held down by your thumb? Did you buy this book new, with the sharp almost-citrus smell coming from between the pages, or is this a well-worn and dog-eared book, passed down by a parent or a friend?

Different readers feel differently about the Kindle and the act of reading. If the Kindle designers were successful, then the personal switch from paper to digital interface would be barely noticed. They were successful with Geoff, who took to the Kindle immediately and notices no differences in his reading habits. But to Arlene, the difference was much more palpable. She felt frustrated by the new interface, and she told me “I never got to the point of losing myself in the book, the technology was so in my face.” Arlene has hit upon one of the biggest differences between digital interfaces and paper ones. Linear stories presented in a medium that allows you to forget about the interface—forget about the entire world around you, even—enables an act called “deep reading”. Some critics of ebook technology worry that reading digitally, which lends itself to

hypertexting and networked, rather than linear, informational layout, will “atrophy the human capacity for deep reading.” (Striphas, 2006) Ebooks would have to displace print books by a much larger margin than they do today for full-scale atrophy to occur, but undoubtedly the new medium will change how we take in information as content comes to share the stage with the device it is delivered upon.

The physical identifiers presented by a book also provide a historical, emotional and intellectual context, which play a broader social role as well as a personal one. Books collected on a shelf behind a desk or over a bed, in an office or a living room, say something about the reader who collected them there. In the words of one publisher, they are an identifier of “what kind of intellectual you are,” whether you read sci-fi or poetry or philosophy or strictly Dostoevsky. The uniformity and singularity of a small Kindle stored in a bag or a drawer eliminates the social connection between readers, makes the possibility of recognizing the book of the person sitting next to you on the subway impossible. One author worries about “what will happen to the ineffable kinship among book lovers,” as the relationship shifts from reader-reader to reader-technology provider-cum-bookseller (Kaufman, 2009).

This author’s worries reveal how books are part of a complex and ages-old social practice of reading; as a society and as individuals we have emotional ties to printed books. Mr. Vaskevitch conferred to me that one of the biggest questions he ponders when he thinks about ebooks and their future role in our lives is why do we have this emotional connection? No other entertainment medium is quite like it, as is demonstrated by the relatively rapid transitions from VHS to DVD to blu-ray, and from Vinyl to CDs to MP3. So what is it about books? Perhaps it is because reading books is an innately more personal action than listening to music or watching a movie, if only for the practical reason that is most often done alone. When it is done with others, it is usually in very intimate settings: reading a story to a young son or daughter, or reading a poem to a lover. Writing is also very personal; submitting something you have set on paper can feel like revealing your innermost self, exposing the very way you think. Stories and memoirs on paper are passed down through generations, first editions sought out and treasured. So transforming this medium which is so personal and so comfortable, and formatting it into something impersonal and digital, something uniform and somewhat alien, is hard to accept for many readers.

All of these complications should make clear that ebooks are in no way an inevitable technology. There are many very long-standing structures that will have to go through enormous changes before ebooks become dominant over paper books. When considering any new



technology, to paraphrase Dr. Ensmenger, what it comes down to is what do you want out of the technology? What about the old way of doing things are you looking to fix or improve? To some, like Dr. Ensmenger, the opinion that “we already have books, it’s not entirely clear what an electronic book gets you” will make ebooks slow to be adopted. Others, like technologist and author David Boles, confidently claim that the “Kindle is the future of publishing because it makes reading fun again.” And there are those in the middle, like Mr. Vaskevitch, who are excited about the technology and what it could do for reading but are also aware of the huge technological and social changes that will have to come before ebooks are widely adopted, if they ever are. But the technology is here, and the companies with their foot in the door are going to fight to open the market ever wider until ebooks are a regular part of our lives. What changes will this bring? It will certainly change how we relate to the written word and how it is distributed and presented to us, and it will almost just as certainly change how we process information, how we relate to information, and how we relate to each other as well, as one of the longest standing forms of communication and inter-relation experiences a transformation from solid physicality to a new, ephemeral and digital existence.

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