

THE eBook SAGA



ALETTA EMKE

Senior Library Assistant
Stellenbosch Region

There is no object of more importance to the history of civilisation than the book. The book's latest evolutionary development is that of the eBook. According to Esposito (2003), the book must be the dead entombment of the printed page, isolated from its sibling text. Instead, a digital book will be wholly reshaped, shedding physical limitations to become the processed book. The book becomes reduced to merely its essential content which then becomes a computable data source, but thereby transforming the linear definition of book (title page, chapters, index, et cetera) to mean any form of authored text.

The essay sets out to define Electronic books (eBooks), its meaning to the general public (some advantages and drawbacks), the future of the eBook and the role of the library.

Definition

According to the **Harrod's librarians' glossary** eBooks is a generic term for products of electronic and multimedia publishing, particularly those optical disc products such as CD-Rom, CD-I and DVD. Also used by Sony as a name for the Data Discman player and for its software (in the form of 8cm discs).

The **International encyclopedia of information & library science** defines the eBook as a term used to describe a text analogous to a book, that is in digital form to be displayed on a computer screen. Books published in digital form are not limited by constraints of printing and bookbinding. CD-ROMs can store vast amounts of data in text form, as well as in digital images, animation, video sequences, the spoken word, music and other sounds to supplement this text. The cost of replicating an optical disc is only a fraction of that of printing and packaging a book. Special hardware is needed to view an electronic book. The added software features of hypermedia (its ability to perform text searches, provide hypertext links, expert

guides, online glossaries, marginal notes and so on) make it seem certain that there will be a growing demand for books in this form.

eBooks are textbooks, monographs, journals, magazines, newspapers and reference works in digital form. They could be web-based, CD-ROM or PC-based. It is available in pdf-format, meaning a printed page which is scanned and saved on an Acrobat file.

Types of eBooks

- ❑ Full text of out-of-copyright works. Many are available on university sites and are invaluable for research
- ❑ Mass-market new works for hand-held e-readers - simultaneously with (and sometimes now prior to) paperback publication
- ❑ CD-ROMs in text or multimedia form
- ❑ A taster of the full printed book - usually contents page, excerpts and some pictures displayed with links on web sites. The idea is that it whets the appetite for the full work to be ordered online
- ❑ Totally new writing concepts such as soap operas (cyber-soaps), collaborative fantasy novels and comics - interactive online production (Dorner; 2000:79). eBooks help to redefine the boundaries

Books published in digital form are not limited by constraints of printing and bookbinding

of the printed word. Writers and publishers are able to create works of fiction or non-fiction that their predecessors only dreamed of. eBooks enhance the standard text by adding elements such as images, sound and animation.

CONTENTS

The eBook saga

Another take on the eBook phenomenon
by Aletta Emke 22

Margaret Atwood prize-winning novelist
A look at the life of this famous author
compiled by Grizéll Azar-Luxton 23

Die ander Marta - 'n Boekspreking
Calitzdorp Leeskring onder leiding
van Elsa du Preez se ontleding van
Eleanor Baker se laaste roman 26

Books in which to lose yourself
An annotated booklist for those
fortunate enough to lose themselves in
books this holiday written by
Book Selector Sabrina Gosling 28

Booklist
A holiday reading booklist by Sabrina
Gosling 30

In 1991, the first 3-D multimedia novel, *Sinkha* was put into production (Samsel, 1998:24).

E-Readers

Everybook Inc, Franklin Bookman, Glass-book reader, Knowledge Station, Rocket eBook are but a few of the eBooks available.

According to Dorner (2000:80) e-readers are computers as well as book look-a-likes. They add value to eBooks by offering search facilities and hyper linking. Most will carry tens or hundreds of eBooks, allow you to change the font size and type, perhaps colour as well, make notes with a stylus pen and look up words in the included dictionary. Some double up as address books and diaries.

Dorner (2000:80) points out that the problem with the hand-held e-reader is that the market still hasn't settled. The now defunct Sony Discman was very limited and uncomfortable to the eye. It could be compared to the flicker stage of the early moving pictures. Remember how rapidly film and videos grew from that? And although we have not got all that far; we are advancing. The market flux leads one to ask if e-readers are really viable. The book paradigm seems backward for a forward-looking technology.

Electronic publishing

Is this the future of publishing? Yes and no. eBooks will not replace glossy coffee table books, but it will be used more to publish

information. Why? Firstly cost. Basically it puts publishing within reach of anyone who can write. There is very little cost involved in the creation of an eBook, it is deliverable anywhere in the world, it can be copy protected so that no one can steal the contents, and the cost to the end user is much less than a printed book. (Mousaion, 2001).

Electronic publishing can be an attractive alternative for new writers who are frustrated by the difficulty of breaking into the print market, or for established writers who want to write in a genre or on a subject that does not interest their print publishers or for writers with a blacklist of out-of-print works they would like to keep in circulation.

According to Bianca Thomas (1999), two types of electronic publishing is currently available. One involves selling and marketing traditional print publications online, for example, you can buy Ophra's latest book club selection or browse for a 'how to' on cross-stitch.

Rare and out of print books have also found a place in this medium. The second type is bypassing the print cycle entirely and distributing books solely in the online medium.

Traditional print versus e-publications

To the question of whether or not electronic publications will replace traditional print, Thomas (1999) says, 'While the online medium presents a new and exiting and ultimately more cost-effective option I don't believe that books in their more familiar form are in any real danger'. I agree with her because computer screens are notoriously taxing on the eyes and reading long novels like **Pride and prejudice** on computer is just not practical. Electronic books are also not as portable as their paper counterparts - readers are dependent on battery life, a connection to phone line, Internet access and the availability of a power source. Traditional books can be read anywhere. Power cuts cannot damage them, viruses cannot attack them and it cannot accidentally be erased.

Another factor is whether or not readers are willing to pay for a virtual copy of a book they can read in a library or buy at the bookstore. To some the old fashioned way is still the only way.

The truth is that electronic publishing must be making some money, otherwise it would not still be going. Those who have embraced the cyber culture and have ventured into the eBook realm are quite

willing to pay for the privilege. Socio-economic conditions also play a role.

Future of eBooks

There is no doubt that the printed book will - slowly - give way to electronic book publishing, which has the potential to make books more affordable and more available. Currently this development is slowed by high eBook prices, bad eBook-reader systems and a lack of eBook quality control. In short: if you buy a book at the bookstore, you can be sure that the provincial viability, the quality, its possibilities in the market place, et cetera, has been properly researched, as it is expensive to publish a book and bad sellers cost a fortune. (Schement & Curtis, 1995.)

eBooks and libraries

Libraries need to be at the forefront of breaking free of old traditions. They are supposed to place new technologies within historical context. eBooks are only another evolutionary stage in the history of books and libraries. The idea is to put libraries at the cutting edge of technological advancement. The realities are that we have a global economic rich and poor divide, information rich and poor divide. However, library funds

for printed books, are already limited so with the current cost of eBooks it has no immediate future in libraries.

Conclusion

As new technology makes eBooks easier to read, more portable and more affordable there may be a growing trend towards this medium. But, in my opinion, for now the good old paperback and its hardcover counterpart are safe and although the eBook has its place, people around the world will still curl up in front of the fire place with a good book made of real paper (for the time being at least).

References

- Dorner, J. **The Internet - a writer's guide.**- Black, 2000.
- Esposito, J. **The processed book.** First Monday, 2003. 8(3) (Online) Available www.firstmonday.dk/issues/issue8_3/esposito.
- Mousaion. Vol. 9, No 2. Unisa, 2001.
- Schement, J & Curtis, T. **Tendencies and tensions of the new Information Age.**- Transaction Publishers, 1995.
- Thomas, B. **Electronic publishing: blessing or curse?** 1999 (Online) Available www.icon.co.za/~bmt/epub.htm.