

ELECTRONIC PUBLISHING

What is the current state of electronic publishing and what are its advantages and disadvantages?

Essay

by

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Electronic publishing, or e-publishing, emerged into the open from the depths of corporate and university archives as part of the late 1990s “dot com” hysteria. Reminiscent of fears that television would bring about the end of the newspaper business, or the Internet the end of television, some dreaded the advent of e-publishing as the new demon that could bring about the ruin of the traditional publishing industry. Others hailed it for its potential to transform the world for authors, who could now reach new markets with innovative books traditional publishers were reluctant to invest in.

The bursting of the new economy bubble inflicted a heavy blow on the infant e-publishing industry, a blow it is gradually healing from. Several publishers, small and large, are stepping up their electronic ventures once again, fuelled by steady growth rates and niche markets embracing the advantages of the digital word. But what is the current state of the e-publishing industry? What are its benefits and shortcomings compared to print publication? Is it doomed to fail once again, or are there indeed hidden treasures waiting to be uncovered by publishers and authors alike? What does the future hold in stock?

What is e-publishing?

E-publishing can be divided into two groups: electronic books (e-books) and print on demand (POD). E-books are digital files stored on computers and read primarily on electronic displays, although some publishers permit printing of their e-books. Print on demand combines the Internet with more traditional publishing methods, using modern giant Xerox machines to instantly print and bind a book whenever a copy is ordered online. Print on demand thereby eliminates the need for editions to be printed beforehand, greatly reducing up front publishing costs. Due to the scope of this

text, preference will be given to e-books, while print on demand will be discussed as and where appropriate. Some argue that a third group – audio books – constitutes electronic publishing as well. But they do not really, as recorded “performed books” have been around long before today's digital world and even before any means of analogue electronic sound recording was available. It is worth noting, however, that the increasing popularity of the Internet and digital music players (“MP3 players”) such as Apple's iPod have breathed new life into the audio book business, with specialised vendors such as audible.com emerging.

Advantages of e-publishing

One of the most obvious advantages of e-books versus traditional publishing are significantly lower production costs. There is no need for paper, and no typesetting needs to be done. As digital storage space and Internet bandwidth prices are decreasing more and more, distribution expenses for e-books are now virtually non-existent. No physical storage space, no production machinery, and no distribution network means significantly lower energy, structure, and employee costs. And e-books cannot only be easily updated (especially niche market products in technology or education sectors), but need never go “out of print”. All this can give a publisher solely producing e-books extreme competitive advantages over traditional houses.

Furthermore, with the help of software technology, production time from manuscript to finished product is substantially shorter than print publication. Where the latter requires several months to a year and more, an e-book manuscript can potentially be edited, outlined, packaged, and put into virtual stores within weeks, instantly making it available to the global market. And electronic files are not limited to text and static graphics. Rich media content – from hyperlinks to the World Wide Web to audio and video clips – can be added to enhance the appeal of e-books over printed books.

For authors, aspiring and published alike, e-books can indeed be the key to hitherto untapped markets. Not only are the chances for niche books to see the light of day in form of electronic publication greater (due to the reduced production costs), but authors can keep more control over the finished product. Many e-publishers grant authors the right to deliver their own cover design and

control the typeface and general appearance of their book. Even though financial advances for e-book manuscripts are virtually non-existent, royalties tend to be far higher than in print publication, with some publishers willing to pay up to 40 percent and more. And contracts, at least so far, are more author-friendly, as they tend to ask only for electronic rights, keeping open the option of future print publication.

Disadvantages of e-publishing

The clear advantages of electronic publication notwithstanding, the industry still faces major problems, many of them technology-related.

The fight over industry standards is fuelled afresh every time a new technology emerges and different corporate players develop different methods to make the technology accessible to consumers and profitable to themselves. One of the most famous wars was fought decades ago with the advent of Betamax and VHS video recorders. The same holds true for the battle over an industry-wide e-book standard. Currently, there exist several formats, among them Adobe's PDF, Microsoft's Reader, Franklin's eBookMan, eBook Technology Inc.'s ETI, Vitalsource's Bookshelf, and Sony's Librié. Each of these formats brings advantages and disadvantages for consumers and publishers, and the battle is far from over. While Franklin, Sony, and Vitalsource run their own publishing venues, independent e-publishers tend to offer their products in as many different formats as possible. The most commonly used today are Adobe's PDF and Microsoft's Reader. Although it is unlikely that one digital file format will triumph over all the others, the market needs to consolidate into two or three interchangeable standards so consumers can concentrate on the content they are buying rather than worry about the format in comes in.

Even more important than industry standards are consumer devices – portable e-book readers. Since customers do not want to be confined to their desktop (or even laptop) computer screens, but want to be able to enjoy a good book on the beach, the pool, or on the road, high quality, lightweight affordable gadgets need to be developed. With the advent of e-publishing, different high-priced proprietary devices were marketed as the new way of reading books. Unattractive design, low battery life, non-interchangeable file formats, and low-contrast screens sent those devices fast into

oblivion. What remains today are software applications running on personal digital assistants (PDAs) or third generation mobile phones, devices capable of far more than just displaying e-books. But these, too, are far from ideal for extensive reading.

The biggest challenge is the screens. As long as they are confined to the liquid crystal display (LCD) technology, they will never be able to meet the demands of readers, for they are self-illuminating and non-reflective, i.e. they use up a lot of energy displaying the image and emit light doing so. Being non-reflective, they cease to be easily readable under direct sunlight. The most promising remedy is electronic ink, developed by E Ink Corporation, which can be “printed” onto almost any surface, including paper. Using “millions of tiny microcapsules about the diameter of a human hair,” electronic ink is a high-contrast, reflective display ideal for e-book applications.¹ Since electric energy is only needed to update the screen but not to display an image, it has the added advantage of consuming very little power. Therefore, electronic ink is the most likely invention to bring the technological breakthrough the e-publishing industry so desperately needs. Sony's Librié e-book reader is the first gadget to use this new display type. However, due to a highly unpopular subscription-based and entirely proprietary service, it will not be e-book's saviour. But it is a step in the right direction.

Another difficulty that needs to be overcome are concerns about content security. Publishers, looking at the Internet piracy problems of the music industry and, increasingly, the motion picture industry, are justifiably concerned about copyright infringement. The remedy, so the industry hopes, lies in Digital Rights Management (DRM), where hardware devices and the software running on them rely on complex security systems that determine who is allowed to read and copy what content. The absence of these increasingly sophisticated systems is what kept big publishers out of e-publication for so long, as Emily A. Vander Veer, who held e-publishing workshops at the University of Texas at Austin, suggests.²

Stephen King wrote history when, on 14 March 2000, his Philtrum Press and Simon & Schuster co-published his sixty-six page novella *Riding the Bullet* exclusively online. The entire

1 E Ink Corporation, *Technology*, <http://eink.com/technology/index.html> (12 October 2005).

2 Emily A. Vander Veer, “The Revolution That Wasn't”, *The Writer*, January 2002, Vol. 115, Issue 1, p.18-22.

publishing industry watched in awe as 400,000 copies of the story were ordered in the first twenty-four hours (compared to the 30,000 to 75,000 copies a King novel sells on its first day). Although many of those were free promotional copies, it still was a financial success. King went on to publish *The Plant* as a serialised e-book, but soon stopped because of a lack of sales and rampant electronic theft. Many see the latter as the reason why only a handful of other published brand-name authors have risked publishing electronically.³

Aside from these technological shortcomings, e-books are still trapped in the throes of bad public relations. The view persists that only books not good enough to be picked up by traditional publishers come into existence as e-books, giving authors starting out in that medium a bad reputation. There is no glory yet in e-publication, and the lack of respected and well-established critics reviewing e-books is part of the problem. And it needs great success stories for this to change, as Chip McGrath, editor of *The New York Times Book Review*, contends: "We will review e-books when we get to the point when something is un-ignorable."⁴ Established writers like King may play a crucial role in gaining e-books more respect. And it could well be to their benefit. Digital rights management technology has improved considerably since King's *Plant*, and today authors may well increase their revenue by moving away from publishers. After all, as Jason Epstein, co-founder of *The New York Review of Books*, argues, "once you are a brand-name author, why do you need a house to take all your profits?"⁵

Current and promising future e-book domains

Although e-books already have dedicated "early-adopter" consumers, as long as the impediments outlined above are not overcome, e-books will remain popular and feasible only in specialised areas. University libraries, for example, increasingly grant students electronic access not only to pamphlets, magazines, and newspapers (through common access control systems such as Athens), but more and more to searchable digital versions of entire books. Being able to substantially reduce the weight of the average student's backpack by putting thousands of textbook pages onto a single digital device certainly does hold great appeal. Project Gutenberg, founded in 1971 by the self-

3 Tom and Marilyn Ross, *The Complete Guide to Self-Publishing* (Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books, 2002), p.25, 29-30 and Moira Allen, "The E-publishing Shakedown", *The Writer*, January 2004, Vol. 117, Issue 1, p.15-17.

4 Ross and Ross, p.27-28.

5 Ross and Ross, p.30.

proclaimed inventor of the e-book, Michael Hart, offers more than 16,000 free e-books.⁶ And Google, the Internet's most popular search engine, with its "Print Library Project" wants to (eventually) scan all the world's books to make them accessible via their website (but without offering entire texts for free), an endeavour which brought on the wrath of the American Author's Guild as well as the Association of American Publishers – along with class action lawsuits over copyright infringement.⁷

An outlook

Electronic publishing will have its day. Once the obstacles are overcome, especially with devices becoming more sophisticated and affordable, and more brand-name and quality authors participating, e-books will become increasingly popular. According to the International Digital Publishing Forum, an e-book trade and standards organisation, total e-book sales for 2004 amounted to nearly US\$ 10 million, a 31 percent increase over 2003, with unit sales up 27 percent.⁸ It is "the industry's single fastest growing area."⁹ As Tom and Marilyn Ross put it in their *Complete Guide to Self-Publishing*, "the treasure is there all right. We just are not yet poised to take full advantage of this hoard of riches."¹⁰ But we may soon be.

6 Project Gutenberg, "About Project Gutenberg", <http://www.gutenberg.org/about/> (22 October 2005).
7 Chris Nuttall, "Publishers try to halt Google library plan", *New York Times*, 20 October 2005, p.31.
8 Calvin Reid, "E-books Go to School", *Publishers Weekly*, 30 May 2005, Vol. 252, Issue 22, p.28-29.
9 Paul and Rebecca Brown, *Publishing Sector – Sector Briefings 2005* (Sheffield: AGCAS, 2005), p.5.
10 Ross and Ross, p. 24.

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