

Digital Technologies and Publishing: June 2011

1. Introduction

On 9-10th June 2011 the Scottish Universities Innovation Institute and Stirling University hosted an invitational workshop on digital technologies in publishing. It examined the changing culture of publishing in the light of new technologies – especially the emerging popularity of e-book readers. WK attended the first morning of this workshop, giving a presentation on digital preservation and giving a summary review progress over the last decade in answering key digital preservation questions. Other presentations touched on the nature and benefits of archiving for publishers and authors, the changing nature of readership and the impact of e-books on the book trade. It was particularly concerned with the impact on small and independent publishers. There were no other DPC members present, though certain members of the audience would most likely be members of the Publishers' Licensing Society.

These informal notes are intended to give DPC members an informal briefing. They are not intended as an official record.

2. Sara Sheridan – an author perspective in technology

Sara confessed that she was not a natural technologist, but her work had been transformed through a few new tools, in particular twitter which has put her in touch with readers directly. Twitter and also blogging has made it easy for her to connect with readers in ways that were never available to authors before. She has taken advantage of this technology not only to communicate with readers but to express views on regulation of technology, and is increasingly concerned about 'net neutrality' to ensure equal access to communications for all. In her view, technology regulation doesn't generally work very well and is uncomfortable about digital rights as a concept – more accurately digital regulation or digital control. Authors and readers benefit from exchange of books and ideas and gift exchange has been core to literary culture for many centuries. We need to safeguard this, and not lose it on account of regulation or profit or corporate goals.

3. Forbes Gibb – a perspective from an independent publisher and researcher in information science

Forbes briefly reviewed the state of the industry and noted that it was hard at times to understand the economics and keep up with the technology, especially for smaller publishers. In some sense the e-book makes the job of an independent publisher a lot easier and a lot cheaper. It's easier and faster to get things to market. But it's much more difficult to sell stuff. The book trade has changed almost beyond recognition: for example there's only one major high street chain left in the UK and sales of e-books are rapidly growing while 'p-books' sales have fallen by one third. E-readers manufacturers tend to be secretive about their sales – iPad, Kindle and so forth sell a lot but E-books are not unique or distinctive in the digital market place – books are now form one part of a complex series of multi-function and multi-utility tools and engagements. Publishers therefore need to do more than 'just' books. In his view, publishers ought not to simply design books and squeeze them into the online environment because this doesn't work very well. That means new design principles and new functionality on these complex devices. The *e-Book* is not a good metaphor. Publishers – even the largest ones - can barely expect to compete with the big three players – Amazon, Google and Apple – who have extraordinary new power in the digital domain. We need to do something new. Publishers might be able to compete but need to consider the forces between them more carefully. Independent publishers can most easily compete on niche against the mass market.

4. Adriaan van der Weel (Leiden University) – how readers engage with electronic text

There has been a dramatic and rapid change in how we read and there's a risk that we may lose the long form book which allows us to think and expand our thoughts in favour of the cultural snacks of the pick and mix of technology. (He has a new book coming out shortly called 'Changing our textual minds'). We don't want to be backwards: we know that humans adapt to new technology, we know that things will happen even if we tried to stop them! Plato was a cultural pessimist. But by any metric, the capacity for long term reading seems to be going down. This is a radical change and because reading is not in our evolution – we need to work hard to achieve this as children – the potential for this core skill to be lost is great.

We are at the end of the era for bookshops and reading in traditional ways. Turnover for the book trade in the Netherlands has dropped by 4% in the last year and 24% since 2008. Sales are online, and e-books are taking a

larger share, though adoption of e-book technologies vary tremendously between countries. We also read less, especially young people who don't read at length and are seldom encouraged to do so. Google, Amazon and Apple are dominant entrants into the book trade and there have been changes in mediation of content. The 'people infrastructure' of the book trade is being increasingly degraded and the industry has become less visible throughout. Reading itself is in crisis too. In all western countries the time spent reading books has dropped massively, even if the amount we read has risen massively. Schools and educators have moved to online resources and therefore children are growing into adults with a very different socialisation of reading and reading habits. Video and photography have changed meaning-making dramatically— communication and culture are changing and finding time to read is hard.

Technology changes us, so is it fair to ask if 'e-reading' is just 'reading'? There's insufficient evidence and more empirical study is needed on the fundamental psychology and social science of how reading habits have changed. It is clear that e-reading has all sorts of advantages over 'p-reading' – efficiencies of production and access, storage, search, annotation, social reading. E-books are available 24/7 and you can access (almost) anything from (almost) anywhere. But 'e-reading' also has disadvantages: meaning making is easily deflected into other media and shorter and shorter books are being published. Fluidity and lack of fixity is an issue, lack of physicality is likely to hamper memory and multi-modality is likely to hamper concentration (we need our hands to learn!). Cheaper production makes it harder to find high quality texts that have been carefully edited and improved through the publishing process and it's harder for publishers and editors to justify this expense. There is no symbolic value attached to e-books and almost no cultural capital and it's actually quite hard to own the contents of an e-book rather than simply rent them. We also increasingly depend on technology companies to support and provide access. Evidence shows that E-reading is more focussed and more developed in the English language than European languages. In fact it's not people who are clamouring for e-books, but the technology companies who are pushing it. E-books have existed for many years and are still only a small part of the market in comparison to how digital formats have transformed the music, film and broadcast industries. Slow reading is USP.

Discussion points from all three presentations:

- Are we promoting paper? Surely we should be promoting good ideas and clever engagement with creativity irrespective of format
- Amazon seem to want more and more. Sure there has been rapid growth in e-books but that's from a very (very) small base. Independent publishers risk rushing into this too early or too naively. There's a risk that independent publishers participate in bringing about their own prophecies of doom.
- There is an unnecessarily accented dialectic between e-books and regular books. Readers use a much more complicated mixture of media depending on what they want to achieve. Not an either/or but actually sophisticated behaviours which lead to the use of different types of publication.
- Publishers and bookshop chains used to be the large corporations and had a very cosy relationship which allowed large profits at the expense of independents. Perhaps shouldn't weep too much for the fall of the old order of corporate interests and their restrictive practices. Elites are changing, perhaps there's an opportunity for a new meritocracy.
- There's probably a class divide in the use of e-book readers. Is there any proper research on this? A new role for public libraries is needed perhaps, and lending e-book readers as well as e-books. E-books on a PC are more common which means actually a wider technology platform than the bespoke reading devices. You could therefore imagine aggregators supplanting the role of libraries in some sense.
- Socialisation of reading is really important. Reading a book is not considered 'cool'.

5. About this document

Version 1	Document initiated	09/06/2011	WK
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