

Electronic Books: Fad or Future?

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Abstract

Internet and computer technologies have greatly increased the diversity of many products available in the market. In recent years, these technologies have revolutionized our life trends in every way possible. The electronic book is one of these technologies that have affected the way people exchange information, read, and write. This paper discusses the advantages of electronic books over printed books such as availability, low cost, and authenticity. It also discusses how the emergence of e-books has threatened and affected the printed-book industry. It also proves that electronic books can be a suitable alternative or replacement for printed books especially in educational institutions. This paper analyzes the process of creating a book in the electronic format as well as in the printed format. In addition, the paper shows several examples of gigantic organizations moving from paper-based publishing to electronic-based publishing.

Keywords: Electronic books; E-book; Printed books; Electronic publishing.

1. Introduction

Since the advent of the Internet, life started to change to be more digitized. Science, commerce, education, medicine, to name a few, have all changed and developed for the better. The development in the electronic era covers almost every aspect of life. Many scientists ascribe the rapid development of the current era to the advantages of the Internet and computer. By default, the majority of the available materials online are texts. So, the publishing of any text can be done by anyone who is interested in disseminating his/her knowledge. The academicians have started to use this service to publish many articles and books by almost no cost.

The phenomenon of e-publishing started to rise after the invention of the electronic book (e-book) in the early 1970s (Ardito, 2000). Someone might ask what an e-book is. An e-book can be defined as the digitized copy of a printed book, or an electronic book that is available in a digital format or a text in a digital format (Rao, 2004; E-book, 2006). In all cases, an e-book is available in a computer format. For instance, Portable Document Format (PDF) is considered the de facto format of the electronic publishing. The PDF files can be easily downloaded from the Internet. Moreover, they have many facilities like searching for text, increasing or decreasing the font size, annotation, bookmark, and many more.

The emergence of e-books is the cause of the sinking of the sales of printed books dramatically. For instance, China sold more than 8 million electronic books in 2004 only (China sells, 2005). Further, in Japan the market of e-books increased twice in 2004 to record 4.5 billion yen (US\$40.9 million) (E-book market grew, 2005). Likewise, it was estimated that the revenue of e-books in the United States would increase from about \$1 billion in 2000 to about \$80 billion in 2005 (Rao, 2004). According to Ormes (2001);

In early 2000 Stephen King published a novella called Riding the Bullet in electronic format. Readers could access the book only via the Internet and had to read it using either their computer, handheld computer or

dedicated e-book reader. The novella was sold for \$2 and over 500,000 people tried to download it within the first week of its availability.
(Introduction)

Many organizations and prominent companies which are concerned with e-publishing such as Google, and Open Content Alliance started to convert printed books into electronic books. As a result, the sales of printed books are falling and will keep falling down more in the coming years. Moreover, many educational institutions and universities all over the world started to switch from using printed books to use e-books in their curricula. For example, *MIT OpenCourseWare* has all the materials used by the lecturers in MIT University, and it is available for the public. According to Villano (2005), "textbook sales continue to sag and their prices proceed to rise, colleges and universities increasingly are turning toward electronic publishing as an affordable alternative" (p. 1).

Many people believe that printed books will never die out, and the effects of e-books are trivial. Some consider the phenomenon of e-books as a temporary one since printed books proved to be the main medium of education and knowledge transfer. Moreover, they claim that the e-book has many disadvantages over its advantages and thus it cannot replace printed books. However, the advantages of e-books are inherited from the advantages of the Internet and computer technology. Thus, electronic books should replace printed books because e-books are available everywhere and every time, cheaper, and authenticated.

2. E-books are Available Every Time and Every Where

It is 2:30 A.M. and you are working on your final touches of your research that you must submit the next morning. Suddenly, you find out that you have to go to the library to check out some of your references. The library is closed and is two hours away from your house as well. What will you do in this case?

This is almost the case with most of the students who need the sources for their assignments, exams, projects and researches. The need for the library to be always opened as well as traveling the distance from your place to the library exacerbate the problem of availability.

The emergence of e-books has solved most – if not all – of the problem. An e-book *per se* is an electronic version of a book, article, journal, or any digitized publication. Therefore, it is in the worst case available on your computer.

The need for Internet connection is the minimum requirement for a person to get the sources. Undoubtedly, Internet is available 24 hours and is a crucial part of our current life. It is available at any time and it is not restricted to a certain place. Thus, e-materials are available whenever you wish and from wherever you are.

The existence of e-libraries such as NetLibrary.com helps the readers to find their materials online. Likewise, according to Internet (2007), "in 2004 Google began digitizing public-domain and out-of-print materials from several cooperating libraries in North America and Europe, such as the University of Michigan library, which made some seven million volumes available" (p. 1). Simply put, one has only to search for his/her demand by title, author, topic, or any sub-topic of the book. The reader no longer needs to go to the library and wander around the shelves to find his/her book.

Moreover, many companies have made devices that read electronic formats. For instance, Sony has introduced Sony reader (Appendix) which is made especially for storing and

reading e-books. In the same way, Personal Computers (PCs), Personal Digital Assistant (PDAs), or smart mobiles can read e-books. Sony reader is the size of the palm and it can hold a bunch of 100 books. Besides, it has the ability to connect to the Internet and get other e-books from libraries or online sellers. Therefore, What is an ebook? (2002) stated that "You can have your library with you wherever you go - on a plane, in bed, on holiday and at work - perfect reference and entertainment, always at your fingertips".

E-books have more interesting features than printed books. E-books can have more images, animation, audio, and video embedded in the book. This allows e-books to use all the multimedia resources available on the computer. This enhances the presentation of the book. In addition, the e-book readers have the ability to read the text aloud for you if you are lazy to read. This feature helps the handicapped people to listen to the material instead of reading it. Thus, e-book technology targets a broader domain of people.

Furthermore, many people like to read late at night a time at which they need light to allow them to read properly. The electronic devices eliminate the need for light. Thus, it can be read in the darkness with a backlit device (E-book, 2007). So, late night readers do not disturb their wives or husbands while they are sleeping.

The availability of e-books is not only restricted to the time or place of reading, but also extends to their physical availability. E-books are software by their nature. One of the most important characteristics of software as Pressman (2002) stated is that "Software does not wear out" (p. 37). This means that software does not get damaged, destroyed, or stolen. In other words, e-books do not die out or diminish by natural or human factors. In addition, people can store the same copy of e-books in different places around the globe. An interesting feature of e-books which should be mentioned is the potential for an unlimited number of copies of the e-book. In other words, if someone uses a copy of the e-book others can use it at the same time. So there is no limitation on the number of the available copies.

The availability does not stop here. Internet allows us to translate texts to different languages, for instance, translation from English to French or English to Arabic and vice versa. Thus, the reader can now read any book in his/her native language using the translation service. It is proven that the quality of the translation is high and it is accurate. As a normal reader, you can translate any book using those programs in a few minutes. By doing this, we make the book available in many languages and at the same time with less cost.

In fact, e-book technology has influenced education positively. Many realms in education are updated every day by their nature. Such as, Information Technology (IT), Biotechnology Engineering, Bioinformatics, Economics, to name a few. The need for new information is crucial for the people in those fields. They need a method that keeps them updated about all the new advancements and technologies in their respective fields. Consequently, the emergence of e-book helped them a lot. Because e-book technology allows us to make knowledge available for people in a few minutes if not seconds.

3. E-books are Cheaper and Resources Saver

E-book industry is one of the cheapest industries in terms of materials cost. The main costs of an e-book are mainly the cost of writing, typing, editing, and publishing it on the Internet. These are trivial costs compared to the costs of publishing printed books.

Figure 1 shows the e-book business model. The model portrays the processes involved in producing printed books as well as e-books. The shaded process i.e. pre-press, printing,

distribution, and delivery are not involved in producing e-books. Thus, a lot of money is saved by discarding the major four processes in publishing a book. Therefore, the labour forces required to do these jobs are eliminated. It is obvious from Figure 1 that the jump from editing process to consumption process does not only save money and natural resources, but also, it saves the time of producing books. Undoubtedly, time is a crucial factor for e-books industry. The competition between publishers is concerned about time, and who produces the book first.

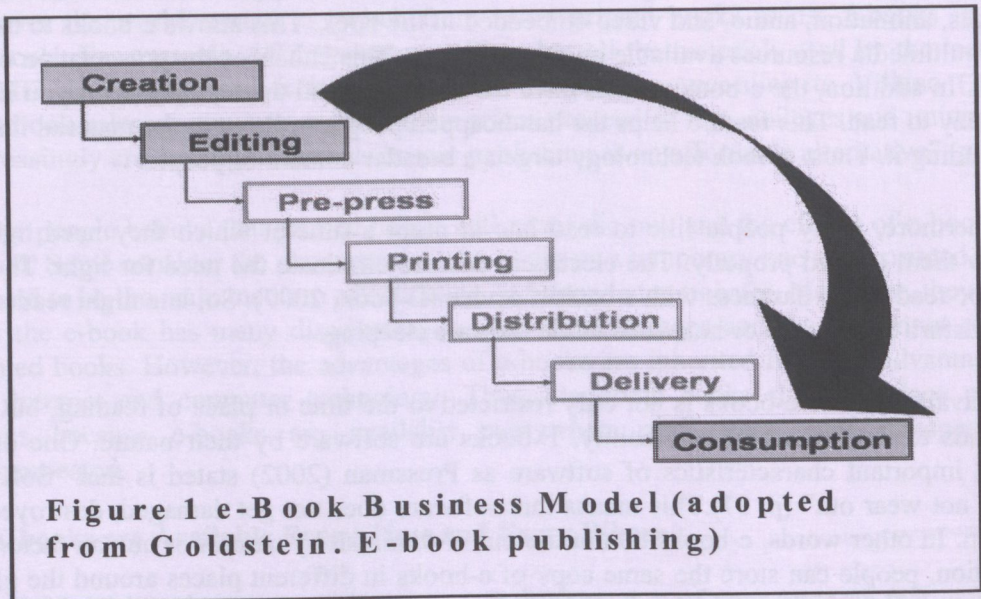


Figure 1: E-Book Business Model (Source: Goldstein, 2000)

In addition, an e-book does not need papers, ink, colorful and hard cover, and binding. So, we are no longer required to cut down the trees to make papers; or to produce ink. Therefore, e-books price is cheaper than printed books price. As a result, when someone purchases an e-book, he/she is in fact paying for the information and the contents of the book (What is an e-book?, 2002) and not for other costs like papers, ink, delivery, to name a few.

According to Oghojafor (2005), "E-book publishing helps to save a lot of money for both the author and the consumers". (p. 4). For the author, he/she is no longer limited by the number of pages to write and the high cost of publishing. The author also can write more books than before. In addition, he/she can correct the mistakes in few seconds and with approximately no cost.

While for the consumer, he/she can buy more e-books by the same amount of money he/she used to buy one book. Indeed, the cheapness of e-books allows more distribution of books. Thus, people can buy more books than before. Further, the consumer can receive any updates of the book quickly. So, the consumer is always updated about the new corrections and information.

Again, e-books save time in many dimensions. One dimension is saving the time of the reader. So, the reader is no longer required to go to the library and navigate through it to find a book which might not be there. Likewise, the searching in e-books is optimized; you can use the search service in the e-reader or the computer to look for titles, subtitles, authors, topics, or terms. Thus, you save a lot of time for other things to do.

Furthermore, the physical space taken by e-books is trivial compared to printed books. Nowadays, you can store hundreds of e-books on your thumb drive (flash drive). In the same way, Sony reader has the ability to store a bunch of 100 books. So, you can imagine the physical space that would be taken from your room to store 100 books. In general, we can say that your computer or book reader is your book shelf. Besides, the publishers do not have to transport containers of books around the countries and store them in warehouses and then distribute them to the book sellers.

In addition, more features can be added into the e-books. In printed books, publishers insert some images to the books in order to enrich the material of the book, as well as attach some other materials such as maps, CD-ROMs, cassettes and video tapes. Whereas, in e-books images, animation, audio, and video can be embedded, as well as hyperlinks that allow us to move from section to section in the book in milliseconds. We can enlarge the size of the font and minimize it too. Consequently, we are adding more services and features for lesser price.

4. Printed Books are more Traditional, Reliable and Authenticated.

The opponents of e-books claim that printed books are more traditional and convenient in terms of effectiveness in usage. Many people ascribe that to the long existence of printed books which have been used since dozen of centuries and they are still being used extensively now. Moreover, printed books proved to be the convenient and the traditional way of reading i.e. people find it more conventional to read from paper rather than reading from a screen. So, many bookworms cannot imagine themselves reading books without flipping their pages. It is kind of impossible for them to read books without touching their papers and turning the pages. Some also claim that the sound of the page when you flip it gives you a feeling about immersing in the books and the enjoyment of real reading (Ardito, 2000).

In addition, printed books cost a lot of money to be published.. Therefore, publishers take extra care in publishing them to make sure that the books are reliable and of high quality. In the same way, publishers usually choose the authors who are renowned in their fields and trusted by the community. Furthermore, proof reading and peer reviews are done several times by experts in the field before the books are published. These procedures are taken to ensure the reliability and authenticity of the book.

5. Tradition Changes and E-Publishing Companies do Authenticate the Contents of the Books.

However, tradition changes over time based on the emergence of new technologies and the development of societies. For example, people of the past used papyrus and parchment as their reading and writing media. But after the discovery of papers people switched to use papers. Even the old types of papers i.e. the thicker ones are no longer used, people prefer to use the thinner kinds of papers in order to reduce the thickness of the book. Likewise, in the near future people will change their trend and use e-books as their reading and writing medium. For instance, Encyclopedia Britannica has moved from paper-based to electronic-based due to the advantages of electronic publishing over the traditional one. It is now available on CD/DVD-ROM and can be accessed from the Internet. Such a change in publishing by a dominant publisher indicates the existence of a new trend in publishing i.e. electronic publishing.

Furthermore, electronic publishers take care of e-books too. They have proof reading and peer reviews. In fact, it is more efficient and practical to find more peer reviewers from various countries via the Internet who are not biased to the author. Those reviewers are

dominant figures in their fields. In addition, the word processing software such as Microsoft Word is supported by spelling and grammar checkers. Thus, language mistakes are much lesser in e-books than in printed books. So, the publishing procedures of an e-book are the same as a printed book subtracting the physical requirements of a printed book (Figure 1). Thus, e-books are authenticated and reliable.

Hence, do not be surprised if you are visiting the museum and you find printed books exhibited there. They might be shown next to the papyrus and parchment as the materials our ancestors used to read and write. Who knows what is coming after electronic books? So, you might find the Sony reader exhibited there too after the advent of new technologies.

6. Conclusion

In a nutshell, e-books are expected to be the new medium of knowledge transfer due to their plenty advantages that are inherited from the computer and Internet technologies. The availability of e-books on the Internet or on the e-books readers makes them portable. The portability of e-books can be in very large numbers of books which exceed a hundred books. Therefore, one can always have his/her own library in his/her pocket. Moreover, e-books can be made with multimedia elements which enrich the contents and presentation of the book.

In addition, e-books are inexpensive because they do not require physical materials such as papers, ink, and covers. Similarly, they do not require transportation as well as physical space to store them. Furthermore, e-books are authenticated and reliable because e-publishers are taking care of them, and they do all the required procedures to publish the book.

Many educational institutions and publishers such as MIT University and Encyclopedia Britannica respectively moved from paper-based to electronic-based. Thus, if the biggest publishers and universities are adopting electronic books, we as Muslims have to adopt them too because they have tremendous advantages and they speed up the development of the *Ummah*.

Moreover, e-books are the best way available for us to gain and disseminate knowledge. Muslim scholars can write and publish their books on the Internet freely so as to preach the religion of Islam to everybody. In the same way, all universities of the Islamic world can create Islamic portals for electronic books where they can publish their works and researches. The portal may contain various subjects and specialization. It can cater for the pure sciences as well as the human sciences.

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