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Demystifying the e-Book: What is it, where will it lead us, and who's in the game?

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While the idea of an e-book is no longer confined to the pages of a sci-fi space thriller, it is far from being another commonplace or indispensable tool, courtesy of the technology age. It does, however, retain an aura of mystique for anyone who hasn't dug into the wired trenches of its realities and possibilities. Then, depending on your interests and the publishing camp to which you belong, the adulation for this infant technology persists or ceases. Let's take a closer look at what an e-book is, explore its state-of-play in the industry, and consider some of the players who are defining the rules of the game.

Anatomy of an e-book

At its simplest level, an e-book consists of electronic content—originating from traditional books, reference material, or magazines—that is either on CD or downloaded and viewed through any number of hardware devices. These include PCs, laptops, PDA's (personal digital assistants), palm PC's or palmtops, or dedicated e-book readers.¹

File formats available include HTML, PDF, and RTF.² Some inherent advantages exist with the new e-book. These include a searching capability, dictionary access, reference information selection, and font type and size manipulation. Some of the digital tablets available offer e-bookmarks and a stylus to highlight, underline, or write margin notes. Pluses on the environmental side include zero paper or ink usage typically associated with any print publication,³ which also translates to cost savings for publishers.

The portability component, at least for the hand-held devices or even the laptop, is an attractive feature for some. Being able to carry numerous books in one small device without the weight or bulk associated with its paper counterparts has great appeal. And while the prospect of reading great literary works by the likes of **John Milton** or scanning the latest information in *Newsweek* can tempt even the technophobe, e-books have limitations that must be considered.

The amount of available storage on the e-book reader, for example, is one such limitation. Licensing concerns can present roadblocks for libraries that must ensure that each e-reader has its corresponding content license.⁴ With the exception of a couple of units, most hand-held readers have monochrome screens, making the desktop or laptop more attractive options for the display of content.

Online legibility has been a concern ex-

pressed by many who still prefer the printed page to the screen. **Microsoft** has announced plans to release early next year software that's designed to offer on-screen reading that is closest to reading paper in layout, clarity, and typography. **Microsoft Reader** with **ClearType™** promises to improve resolution, display, margins, and spacing. It's also packaged with applications for annotations, highlighting, and bookmarks. It features a dictionary, can manage and store large amounts of digital material, and offers flexibility in copy protection.⁵

Technical support must be an important consideration by any e-book vendor who's particularly interested in serving the library community. Currently, the availability of such support is limited or non-existent. For reading gadgets that range in the \$499-\$2000-plus category, and with content that can easily cost \$15-\$20 per e-book, it's not unreasonable to expect an adequate level of technical assistance.⁶⁻⁹ As the technology improves and standardization allows for more content to be readily available, service terms may be the deciding component in awarding a contract to one e-book supplier versus another.

There is also the issue of available titles in e-book format, which is still quite limited. While titles by well-known authors are increasing, a significant portion is currently devoted to lesser or relatively unknown authors. Many e-book vendor Websites actively promote their interest in obtaining submissions for possible e-book development.

The proliferation of e-book content sellers is easy to identify by the plethora of alternative presses that seem to debut almost daily into the digital content fiction and nonfiction bookwagon. A preliminary search can find the likes of **eBooks Online** (<http://www.ebooks-online.com>), **Peduncle Press** (<http://www.pedunclepress.com>), **ebookshoppe** (<http://www.ebookshoppe.com>), **Hard Shell Word Factory**, (<http://www.hardshell.com>), **Science e-books**, (<http://www.science-ebooks.com>), **Stone Garden Publishing**, (stonegarden.net), and **Muse Creations**, (<http://www.musecreations.com/home.html>). Book vendors such as **Barnesnoble.com**, **Amazon.com** and

Powell's Books (<http://www.powells.com>) are also selling competing hand-held devices and a selection of e-books.

Assessing the market

Perhaps one of the most significant moves toward defining a common ground in the industry has been the creation of a specification to speed up the availability of content for e-books. Thanks to the **Open eBook Authoring Group**, made up of publishers, software and hardware companies, and pioneers of e-books, the final version of the **Open eBook (OEB) Publication Structure Specification 1.0** was released in late September.¹⁰

This standard, based on HTML and XML, defines the file and format that content will take when it's prepared for digital distribution, or when it's converted from print to e-format. The publisher will only need to format publications one time, as per the non-proprietary specification, allowing the content to be compatible with a large number of reading tools and PCs. The specification is free and available at <http://www.openebook.org/specification.htm>. By formatting text in the OEB specification, publishers can ensure that the text re-flows legibly regardless of reading tool.

So far, more than 40 entities have conveyed support for this initiative. While it's early in the e-book life cycle, the prospect of having publishers adhere to a common standard for formatting e-books is likely to even the field for the players. In doing so, publisher resources that would have been otherwise devoted to conversion issues can now be spent instead on improving the technology or creating innovative ways—via technical support options, pricing incentives, etc.—to attract new users and retain existing customers.

Still, sentiment exists in the industry that the marketplace can accommodate specifications such as OEB and systems that offer fixed formats.¹¹

Leaders of the Pack

A number of brave, pioneering companies have launched, or will soon, a number of e-book readers and e-reading software.

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SoftBook Reader by **SoftBook Press**, (<http://www.softbook.com>) is currently the only e-book device that can obtain content without the use of a PC and is fully OEB compliant.¹² It weighs in at 2.9 lbs., and currently has about 100 digital books.

Rocket eBook by **NuvoMedia Inc.**, (<http://www.rocketbook.com>) has excellent ergonomic features but its downloading process is a bit cumbersome. It offers some 700 titles and weighs 22 oz. It also offers **eRocket** software that allows users to read unencrypted **RockEditions** on PCs.¹³⁻¹⁴ **Everybook Dedicated Reader** by **Everybook Inc.**, (<http://www.everybook.net>) is currently the only e-book in the market offering two color hinged screens (at 450 dpi) that look like hardcopy books. Its primary target is textbook and reference publishers because of its capacity to reproduce complete graphic material, such as simple video and animation. **Everybook's** three models are due to debut in late 1999, 2000, and 2001 respectively.¹⁵

Glassbook Reader software by **Glassbook, Inc.** (<http://www.glassbook.com>) and **Librius** (<http://www.librius.com>) have created secure systems to transfer copyright protected (EBX), encrypted content on a number of e-readers, desktops, and laptops.¹⁶⁻¹⁸ **Peanutpress.com** (<http://www.peanutpress.com>) showcases current popular fiction and nonfiction titles and out-of-print material from authors for handheld devices,¹⁹ and **NetBooks.com** (<http://www.netbooks.com>)

Alternative Presses from page 16

The Resurrection of Aristocracy, of which Loompanics says, "It is not just do-gooders, liberals, and wimps who have utopias."

They're all real books, all in stock and for sale. YBP sold 45 Loompanics titles last year (although not on approval). Here are two of them, personal favorites. This one, *How to Hide Things in Public Places* is from the "Privacy and Hiding Things" section. And this one, *How to Start Your Own Country*, is from the "Anarchism and Egoism" section of the catalog.

The point here is not that all of you should next week go out and stock your libraries from this catalog. The point, instead, is that "alternative" can truly mean "alternative." Making decisions on alternative books can be among the hardest you'll ever make as a librarian. The one certain thing is that no matter what decisions you make, no matter which books you buy, there will be somebody out there looking for an alternative to you.

com) offers a selection of out-of-print and hard to find e-books.²⁰ **MesaView, Inc.**, (<http://www.mesaview.com>) features hundreds of e-books for various hardware devices,²¹ and **netLibrary** (<http://www.netlibrary.com>) sells academic, professional, and reference e-books from 40+ university presses and publishers.²²⁻²³

In the End

At the end of the day, the decision to venture into the e-book frenzy will be a highly personal one for the consumer. Among the criteria will be gadget preference, assessment of improvements in online reading technology, cost, ease of use, and practical applicability to work or play.

In the academic field, some libraries will want to take advantage of the student population as formal or informal focus groups. In addition to product cost, service, and user-friendliness, assessing student interest and usage levels will become part of the equation in defining how, when, or if universities and colleges will embrace the e-book realm. Will e-books on campus become the next technological movement and become as popular as the now ho-hum Web?

Publishers will want to keep eyes and ears close to the ground, particularly in terms of standardization initiatives to en-

sure their intellectual property is viewed as the publisher intended regardless of hardware. Will the standardization of e-book file and format structure cause a temporary flurry of direct sales by academic and professional publishers instead of using digital booksellers?

What role will the serial and book vendor play in this new territory? Will they be able to strategically jockey into position between publisher and e-book content seller to service the needs of thousands of library customers?

If e-book content sellers such as alternative presses and device vendors intend to stay in the e-book game, they will want to pay special attention to the demands of the market and heed their preferences. Otherwise, they run the risk of finding themselves in the *print* pages of historical discussions.

NOTE: Independent reviewing sources for PDA's, Laptops, and Palm PC's: 20-20 Consumer, (<http://www.pdapage.com>)

Additional information on e-book related matters: *eBook Connections*, (<http://www.ebookconnections.com>).

Endnotes

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2. "How to read our books" available at <http://www.hardshell.com/howto.html>.
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21. "Mesaview ebook library," available at <http://www.mesaview.com>.
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