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## I Hear the Train A Comin' -- Five Things I Think I Think About the iPad

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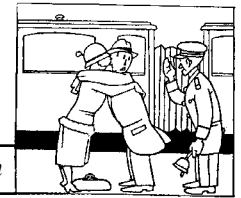
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# I Hear the Train A Comin' — Five Things I Think I Think About the iPad



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**A**s I write this in early May 2010, **Apple's iPad** has just surpassed one million units sold. That it took just 74 days to reach this milestone is undoubtedly impressive. But what exactly does it mean, particularly for the scholarly communication space? Honestly, I don't know. That won't stop me from offering five educated guesses.

**1.** I think the **iPad** may indeed be transformative, but as a means rather than an end. The **iPad** is undoubtedly cool. The first time I held one I had the vague but distinct sensation that we had finally caught up to **Star Trek**. Here is a piece of technology, thinner than a pad of paper, that brings me music, video, the Internet, and a host of slick apps for everything from abacus-counting to zip code locating. The **iPad's** status as the "Next Big Thing" will surely bring a big audience into the mobile device space. But in many ways, the **iPod** is an evolutionary rather than a revolutionary product. The **iPhone** made smart phones true mobile *devices* — less phone and more Swiss army knife communication utility. The **iTouch** enhanced specific aspects of the mobile experience. Now, the **iPad** is a tricked-out version of the **iTouch**, bigger, more powerful, and with cooler toys. Each of these products draw more new users into the mobile device universe. I suspect that a very small percentage of this audience, once they have joined this universe, will ever leave it. So to the extent that the **iPad** is transformative, its impact will be largely tied to the sheer number of people who get comfortable with this type of hybrid/crossover device.

**2.** I think that the real "killer device" is yet to come. The **iPad** extends a user's connectivity and renders a variety of rich content types (music, movies, and even eBooks) portable and nearly always accessible. It also offers a host of native apps, from games to productivity tools, to make life more fun and efficient. However, the true holy grail is a comprehensive device that offers all of this plus what we now get from our laptops. Much as the **iPad** represents the evolution of the smart phone, it is easy to observe convergence from the other end, with desktops begetting laptops and laptops begetting netbooks. As smart phones become more powerful and laptops become more portable, a tablet device that serves as media player, Internet terminal, and gaming console (i.e., the things the **iPad** does well) while also delivering the productivity and business tools such as word processing and office computing utilities (i.e., the things laptops do well) will be the true game-changer. With nearly a dozen different tablets previewing at this year's **Consumer Electronics Show**, including entries from heavy hitters like **Hewlett-Packard** and **Dell**, it seems clear that this is where we are headed. To be clear, I do not believe that this pending generation of tablets will be the killer device. Rather, like the **iPad**, they will bring us closer to convergence.

**3.** I think that the scholarly communication industry has an outdated mentality when it comes to developing applications for mobile platforms. With a few notable exceptions, including the **American Institute of Physics' iResearch** and the **Institute of Physics' IOP** science applications, there are very few innovative apps in our space. I suspect this is due in large part to what I might call the "errata mentality." As the guardians of the historical scientific record, we are perhaps overly concerned with making a mistake that we will have to live with in perpetuity. While **Google** can roll out a multitude of products in prolonged "beta" and simply disappear the ones that fail to catch on (SearchMash, anyone?) our industry tends to take the view that mistakes can be corrected but never erased. Therefore, the thought of introducing a new application without a clear-headed confidence that it will be embraced by the community makes some queasy. It is simply not in our industry's DNA to experiment. Throw in uncertainty or misunderstanding about the time and expense associated with app development, and there is not a huge crush to get through the mobile app door. The **iPhone** did not result in a sudden influx of experimentation. Nor did the **Kindle**, for that matter. I don't believe the **iPad** will change this mindset much.

**4.** I think that forward-leaning publishers will benefit by optimizing their content for the **iPad**. The presentation capabilities of the device render it a great medium for scholarly content. Moreover, its combination of easy connectivity and offline storage mean it is a great utility for "triage reading," i.e., skimming content at odd moments of the day to determine whether deeper contemplation is warranted. As a society, we increasingly frown upon downtime. If you doubt this is true, stand at a bus stop or hang out in a doctor's waiting room for five minutes. We text, browse, and fiddle with whatever gadget we happen to have on hand. Some of this is just killing time, but there is little doubt that many professionals use these odd moments to catch up on their work. This presents an opportunity for publishers, particularly those that can capitalize on the increased readability and accessibility the **iPad** provides.

**5.** Within the context of scholarly communication, I think that the **iPad** advances the mobile world from 1995 to 1997. In 1995, driven by **Mosaic** and the launch of **Netscape**, Web usage went mainstream, hitting 16 million worldwide. Academic publishers were just beginning to understand that this was neither a fad nor a transitional technology. This is the time period in which many publishers began contemplating online versions of their content in earnest. By 1997, there were nearly 70 million Web users. The comparison I make here is not a statistical so much as a psychological one. Most publishers by 1997 knew that their immediate future was one in which content would need to be delivered using multiple media. Print alone would no longer cut it. Customers were using their computers in a variety of new and exciting ways, including to access information. There was no denying that ongoing viability depended on platform diversification. We are in the same spot now, with mobile devices the new *sine qua non*. The **iPad** has accelerated this coming reality by demonstrating the diversity of the mobile hardware. Some people will have smart phones, some will have tablets, some will have something in between. Mobile isn't just a phone thing, and it isn't just a niche thing. It's a future thing, and the **iPad** is helping to demonstrate that the future is here. Even if I did just compare it to 1997. 🍷



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