E-books, e-publishing, e-indexes, e-etc.

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A brief overview of the rapidly developing world of e-books and its implications for both readers and indexers.

We are hearing more and more about e-publishing ventures, particularly magazines and journals. In this brief article I do not distinguish between different areas of e-publishing but refer to all material that one might read either 'on-line' or on a dedicated stand-alone 'reader' as 'e-books'. The article aims to provide reasonably up-to-date information (as far as that is possible in this rapidly developing field) and to stimulate debate about where current developments might lead us, both as indexers and readers.

Asking the audience at any conference session to turn out their handbags (purses), backpacks, or pockets would probably produce an impressive haul of paperbacks, magazines and newspapers, and perhaps even the occasional journal or hardback book. But the probability of finding a single Palm-Pilot or Pocket-PC in the haul is low.[1]

A few years ago Annie Proulx (author of the highly acclaimed *Shipping News*), is quoted as saying 'Nobody is going to sit down and read a novel on a twitchy little screen – ever!' The current lament, however, is that e-books are unstoppable and will mean the death of literature. But then that was said about Gutenberg and his printing process: that printed books were the productions of an inartistic trade. And, in more recent times, the advent of the paperback book was seen to promote the inevitable spread of low taste. Perhaps the title of this article should really be 'Books: the final chapter?', with full emphasis on the question-mark.

Whatever one's taste in books (both in physical attributes and text content) we all have strong emotional ties to them. Reading under the bedcovers with a torch (flashlight), pressing a flower between the pages, reading aloud to a child snuggled beside you, reading in the bath until we, and hopefully not the book, are like wrinkled prunes – these are just a few of the possible scenarios with which we can all resonate. Books help us to recall memories (their feel, their heft, their visual appeal, their smell) that link us to them. We become 'fond' of them, even if they are tea-stained and torn, with raggedy bindings. They become just like a favourite comfortable armchair – a retreat, however short, from the rigours of the daily routine. And that's before we even open the pages.

But a book is, after all, just a container for its text. Perhaps we will not become as emotionally attached to our software packages, DVDs, CD-Roms, or Rocket e-Books, but there is no reason to suppose that our culture will be any the poorer when people absorb literature from screens rather than the printed page. Much current literary endeavour is already taking place at the computer rather than being hammered out on a typewriter or painstakingly scribed with pen and ink.

Both serious and casual readers have much to gain from the new technology, and it would seem that what has been considered appropriate technology for the past 500 years is now on the brink of improvement. E-books and their associated e-book readers have several distinct advantages over traditional print texts:

- Your favourite text need never be out of print.
- You can read in the dark, in a car at night, or on a plane, for example, without disturbing anyone else. This is made possible by a backlit screen.
- Turning the 'pages' is achieved with a single thumb press. At least one e-book reader is designed for the comfort of both right- and left-handed readers, and can be held with one hand or placed in a stand for table-top reading.
- You can carry many books at one time in one light package. The Rocket e-Book, for example, weighs just 22 oz (little more than 0.5 kg), and can hold 4000 pages of your favourites texts. This is a boon for those who like to have several books 'on the go' at once, to be opened according to one's mood or whim.
- You can still mark the place where you finish reading and you need not be worried about falling asleep while reading. If you do not turn the 'page' after some considerable length of time the e-book will electronically mark your place before putting itself to sleep as well. If you have a penchant for scribbling notes in the margin or highlighting passages, you can do that too..
- You can download a variety of material – books, web-pages, magazines, newspapers, etc. – to carry in one neat package.

Current e-book readers come in different sizes and prices[2] and are aimed at very different markets:

- The 'Rocket e-Book' currently costs $199–265 and is aimed at general readers. A recent buy-out of the original company has the new owner (Gemstar) hoping to reduce the cost to $65–100. 'Books' are downloaded via computer either at the bookstore or from a home-based computer. This product feels like a normal-sized paperback book with the cover folded back and sits comfortably in one hand, rather like a fairly full personal organizer of 5" × 7.5" (approx. 13 × 19 cm).
- The 'Softbook Reader' is an 8" × 11" (20 × 28 cm) half-inch- (1.5 cm) thick tablet with a soft leather flap that protects the screen. It costs $600 and is aimed at the student market. Currently it is being used in pilot projects in Maryland schools.
- The 'EveryBook Dedicated Reader' is similar in size to the 'Softbook' but contains two screens in a hinged format

(imagine opening a slimline Notebook computer) and opens just like a book. However, should you wish to view pages 3 and 26 at the same time, that is possible! Priced at $1600–2000, it is aimed at professionals such as lawyers, engineers and architects.

Those are the independent, stand-alone products. Also available for the PC are Microsoft's 'Reader', the integration of the new GlassBook Reader into the popular Adobe Acrobat Reader, and the imminent Glassbook Content Server Software.

Who supplies the content for the e-book readers? Companies such as Xlibris and Versaware in the USA are the on-line equivalents of 19th- and early-20th-century lending libraries. Although much play was given to the free downloads of Stephen King's *Riding the bullet* (some 500,000 readers have downloaded it to date), his current self-published on-line serial book, and Michael Crichton's *Timeline* released by Microsoft for use with its own 'Reader', many electronic texts are currently more expensive than their paperback equivalents. Pundits, however, foresee a future bright with low- or no-cost documents that will remain eternally available throughout the wired world.

The major problem with these products, however, will probably be that of compatibility. In September 1999, at the Electronic Book Workshop sponsored by, and held at, the National Institute of Standards and Technology in Gaithersburg, MD, the Open E-Book (OEB) standard was announced.[3] Its development over the preceding year was considered a remarkable achievement. Not only did competing vendors participate in discussions, but all signed the agreement. Adobe also announced, and was greeted with much applause, that it would continue to support PDF for the next 25 years. As with any fairy-tale romance, however, the honeymoon now appears to be over and the former partners are going in different directions. There will inevitably be problems with incompatibility until one product emerges the victor (as has happened in the past with videotape formats and players).

E-indexes?

But where are the indexes to the books being digitized for upload to e-book readers? During the conference exhibit session I posed the following questions to each vendor of e-book devices and on-line libraries, who will be providing the 'content':

> How is the index represented, and how does the reader navigate between index and text?

In reply, I received blank stares. After a little further thought one vendor did gamely demonstrate a word-search that produced 40 'in-context' hits. Another proudly showed me the contents list, and a third ignored my question completely. Suppliers of the downloadable texts passed the buck by saying it was the responsibility of the publisher to provide the index, but they could not recall having received any. This is a rather worrying situation, since Versaware has signed a contract to digitize all college-level textbooks published by McGraw-Hill, plus those of another 100 publishers. Obviously, the concept of an index and its bene-

fits over free-text searching has not yet permeated the e-book market. Nor does the OEB standard address the issue.

Major publishers who are rushing toward the electronic marketplace are doing so because they are worried about losing readership in the 45-year-old and younger group. These readers, they believe, will peruse screens, but will not willingly 'turn' the pages of a book. If they already eschew 'real' books, they are probably also agnostic with regard to indexes as a simple yet elegant retrievable tool.

Should we be worried? Can we, as indexers, rise to the challenge? Just as e-book technology is causing major rethinking in the traditional publishing industry, so too it is forcing us to rethink the very nature, purpose and presentation of an index. Not only do we need to continue educating publishers about the importance of indexes, we should also be introducing and promoting the use of indexes to the e-book readers of tomorrow.

As for the 'e-etc.' in the title of this article, we may soon be able to read our books in the manner with which we are familiar and to which we are devoted. MIT's Media Lab is developing a product termed 'E-Ink' and it may soon be possible to download text onto electrostatically charged 'paper' pages. When we have finished reading, we will simply plug the book into the computer to 'recharge' it with a different text!

Notes

1. An assumption borne out at the Society of Indexers conference in July 2000.
2. The information on prices, e-book companies, and publishers was culled from *New York Times, Publisher's Weekly,* and other trade publications immediately prior to the presentation of the talk. In the rapidly evolving world of these products, this information is probably now outdated.
3. The third annual Electronic Book Workshop, entitled 'Changing the Fundamentals of Reading', was held in Washington, DC, 25–27 September 2000.

This article is based on a short talk given to the Society of Indexers Conference, 16 July 2000, at Homerton College, Cambridge. Frances S. Lennie lives and indexes in New York City. She is the owner of Indexing Research, whose best-known product is CINDEX™ indexing software for the Windows and Macintosh platforms. Email: flennie@indexres.com

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The Indexer, *April 2001*

In addition to Tom McArthur's paper on pp. 86–90, further papers from SI's 2000 conference at Cambridge will appear in the next issue of *The Indexer*. They will include Douglas Matthews, former librarian of the London Library and now a full-time indexer, on the problems and rewards of 'Indexing published letters' (amongst others, he discusses those of Charles Dickens and Robert Louis Stevenson). The guest editors for this issue will be members of the Australian Society of Indexers.