

# Cites & Insights

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## Words

### The Ebook Marketplace Part 2

This time, we'll look at some of the topics omitted in November because of length: pricing, sales and software—but also history and futurism, general commentary and one or two other things. What *won't* be here: ebooks and print books, ebooks and libraries (directly) or ebooks as textbooks—there's still way too much to cover. It's fair to note that some of this material is fairly old. Quite a bit happened in 2010 and 2011 that I think may be worth remembering in 2013-14.

In editing this piece (yes, I do edit them, even if not up to some standards), I find that I'm omitting discussion of comment streams in quite a few cases. That's not necessarily because there are no comments; it's because I didn't find them to add much.

## Pricing

You could sum up much of this section in the titles of two pieces: “Why does this ebook cost [X]?” It's about pricing, mostly of ebooks themselves, and how it's perceived and controlled.

A long, long time ago I asserted that the portion of the *price* of most print books that could be attributed to it being a physical object—paper, printing, storage, shipping, binding—typically didn't amount to more than one-seventh (14%). I've never seen any suggestion that it's more than that, and that's for relatively short runs (but not print on demand). So the first answer for “why does this ebook cost so much when there's no manufacturing involved?” is that most of what you pay for when you buy a print book isn't manufacturing: it's writing, editing, copyediting, proofreading, layout, cover design, marketing, overhead and profit (for wholesalers and distributors as well as publishers and retailers).

But people don't want to hear that.

*Why does this e-book cost \$14?!*

Too bad c|net couldn't locate the interrobang (?!—yes, it's a standard Unicode character) instead of that awkward double double punctuation for [this August 13, 2009 story](#) by Rick Broida. The lede:

Dear e-book publishers: stop gouging us.

Look, I'm your biggest fan. I've been reading digitally distributed fiction and non-fiction since the early days of the PalmPilot.

Of *course* Broida refers to print books as “dead-tree”; that's a necessary part of the meme. He gives an example—a new book he wants where Amazon charged \$15.57 for the hardcover and \$14.01 for the Kindle edition.

Now, I understand books cost money. There's editing, publishing, and distribution. Paper, ink, trucks, gasoline. Storage, shipping, shelf space, sales staff. And the countless people involved in all those transactions.

E-books, on the other hand, consume zero trees. They weigh nothing, occupy no physical space, and don't get shipped in the traditional sense. Middlemen are few and far between. So you're left with, what, editing costs and the pittance you pay the authors?

“Middlemen are few and far between”—because ebooks distribute themselves? Authors are paid a “pittance”? There aren't any non-physical publishing costs except editing? *Really?*

This rant continues, and it's fairly typical of the genre. He wants backlist items to be sold for \$0.99 and bestsellers for \$2.99. I need to quote that paragraph because Broida also reveals his deep knowledge of public libraries:

Why aren't best sellers priced at, say, \$2.99? That's an impulse-buy price, one that would encourage readers to pony up instead of waiting weeks or months to check out the one print copy the library bought.

That's right! Public libraries never buy more than one print copy of bestsellers! The multiple copies (after the first year) I see on my library's shelves are optical illusions.

Meanwhile, in the real world, if a hardcover book retails for \$15, there's a reasonably good chance that a best-selling author is getting at least \$3 of that \$15, which with Broida's optimal pricing would leave *nothing* for the publisher or the bookseller.

Broida's decided that the *fair price* for a brand-new book is \$2.99, and at that price publishers will be “raking in newfound profits” and “creating a more literate, well-read society.” He admits it's a diatribe. He doesn't admit that it's a deeply ignorant diatribe. (Broida's the “author” of more than a dozen books. Maybe he *does* get a pittance from each one. Who knows?)

## *Still Debating The Cost Of Ebooks*

Mike Masnick wrote this [on October 8, 2009](#) at *techdirt*. This is another case where because “marginal cost” of ebooks are “much, much lower” than physical books, it’s argued that they should be cheap to buy.

While Masnick quotes a rebuttal, explaining that, at least in 2009, there were significant *additional* costs in producing ebooks—he slaps it down as irrelevant:

Now, the issue here, of course, is a fundamental misunderstanding the difference between total cost (or average cost) and marginal cost. This happens a lot—especially among non-economists. But it misses the point. Total cost is important in figuring out an overall *business model*, because obviously you want to be able to make more than it cost overall, but it’s a terrible way of picking a price. That’s because the driving force in pricing is the *marginal* cost.

To which my response is: Bullshit. If the average price is less than the average cost, you’re in trouble—and unless you assume that the sales of hardcover copies will always cover the fixed costs of a book, saying “the extra cost per copy is tiny” is irrelevant. He also quotes another pundit saying that ebooks *shouldn’t* cost much to make—or at least shouldn’t have major additional costs—and, while that may be true, it’s also irrelevant.

Then Masnick goes off into never-never land, dealing with an entirely different set of issues: two overpriced ebooks (\$180 for two!) with DRM such that they expire after 180 days. Which has *what* to do with pricing for ordinary ebooks?

## *Publishers don’t understand e-books*

Much as I hate to argue with a librarian, I’m going to take issue with some of what Chad Haefele says in [this December 11, 2009 post](#) at *Hidden Peanuts*—or, rather, there’s going to be some “you may *both* be wrong” comments.

As to the title: I think that’s probably right. Most of them didn’t and maybe still don’t. But the example—publishers delaying ebook versions until somewhere between the hardcover and the paperback—well, maybe that makes good sense. Haefele says “A much better (and more profitable) course of action would be to simply embrace the e-book world...” *More profitable?* There, I think Haefele assumes knowledge he does not possess.

He describes a scenario (new book comes out, ebook isn’t available, “Consumer Bob” invested “a lot of money in a Kindle” and wants books for it). In his scenario, the ereader owner not only *won’t* buy print books, he’ll either pirate them or be offended.

Sure, except that studies seem to show that many, perhaps most ereader owners buy *more* print books than people who don’t own ereaders.

These people don't say, "I spent all that money on a Kindle, you can be damn sure I'll only buy Kindle books."

Then we get to price, where a publisher is quoted as fearing that Amazon's discounting will mean they'll only be able to charge \$10 or less for new books. Haefele says that's right, throwing DRM into the equation. Which assumes that publishers will never sell DRM-free ebooks (as some already do).

There's more here, and it's vigorously stated. There's something close to advocacy of "piracy." There's "moral outrage" over pricing and an odd parenthetical clause: "(there's no way they'll ever convince me that it costs the same to print and ship an e-book as a print book)." I honestly haven't heard anyone make that claim. What some will claim—including me—is that the costs of printing and shipping represent a relatively small portion of the price of a print book.

*Publisher: "If You Can Afford An Ebook Device, You Can Pay More For Ebooks"*

This item appeared [on February 19, 2010](#) at *Consumerist*, written by "cwalters." It's a little nostalgic at this point: Given current prices for e-ink devices it would be hard to take a publisher with this message seriously. (It's also a little nostalgic because it's *much* longer than *Consumerist* pieces these days!)

What's here is third-hand: It's based on a report (on a blog I no longer cite) of a report that's behind a paywall—of a "publishing industry expert" speaking to other publishers. If we're to believe the third-hand reporting, one piece of advice was indeed: "People who can afford an ereading device can afford all proposed ebook prices."

*Consumerist* takes this to mean that the "expert" is proposing *higher* prices for ebooks than for hardcovers. Whereas *Consumerist* makes the equally arbitrary assertion that people purchased Kindles "to save money over the long term." That may be true in some cases, but probably not in all. Then there's this:

Maybe a customer can pay more for a digital book, but why should he? Currently, nearly all the value of the ebook format comes from the device, not the publisher. Portability, frictionless purchasing experience, syncing across multiple registered devices—all of that is provided by the device and the retailer's back-end.

By contrast, here's what the publisher currently provides in an ebook edition: typos, no additional content over the print version, no cover art, perhaps no photographs or illustrations, and no custom formatting. Saddle that with DRM that deliberately interferes with the consumer's ability to preserve or make full use of his library, and you've got one pretty low-value digital offering from a publisher.

Here's the thing: I read the summary report cited (obviously not the paywalled full report), and there is *absolutely no suggestion* that the expert is calling for ebook prices to be higher than hardcover prices. He is saying they can reasonably be higher than \$9.99. That's an entirely different thing. So, to a great extent, *Consumerist* is trying to set fire to a strawman.

There's more to the piece, but it seems so fundamentally misguided that I won't bother discussing it.

### *Math of Publishing Meets the E-Book*

I find it amusing that the would-be “newspaper of record” (the *New York Times*) has the widespread habit of having *two* article titles: one on the article itself and a different one (in this case “Making the Case for iPad E-Book Prices”) on the webpage, at least as Diigo sees it. In either case, it's by Motoko Rich [and appeared February 28, 2010](#).

Rich says many consumers assume that publishers save “vast amounts” by producing ebooks rather than print books and that “publishers largely agree.”

But publishers also say consumers exaggerate the savings and have developed unrealistic expectations about how low the prices of e-books can go. Yes, they say, printing costs may vanish, but a raft of expenses that apply to all books, like overhead, marketing and royalties, are still in effect.

I rarely find myself in agreement with publishers, especially where “publishers” probably means the Big Five, but that seems correct to me.

Rich tries to offer a “composite picture” of actual costs for a printed hardcover book vs. an ebook, based on interviews with several publishing executives. A summary:

A typical hardcover is priced at \$26—of which the publisher gets \$13 (50% retail discount). About \$3.25 goes to print, store, ship the book and account for returned unsold copies. Hmm: \$3.25 of \$26 is 12.5% or one-eighth, a little *less* than the one-seventh figure I've usually used.

What else? Eighty cents for cover design, typesetting and copyediting (this must be spread across a fairly large number of copies—these are *major* publishers, so probably 10,000 minimum?). \$1 for marketing on average. \$3.90 for the author: 15% of the hardcover *retail* price. That's a pretty good royalty rate, but this is presumably for fairly successful authors.

That leaves \$4.05 to cover editors, full-time cover art designers, typographic designers (not mentioned in the article—I sometimes wonder whether the big houses actually bother with typographic design for most books or just toss 'em into a template), office space, electricity and profit.

The ebook version? The Apple strategy—at least prior to the collusion lawsuit—is that the publishers set the *actual* retail price and get 70% of that. So let's say the publisher sets a \$12.99 price; it gets \$9.09.

Of that, the publisher pays “about 50 cents to convert the text to a digital file, typeset it in digital form and copy-edit it. Marketing is about 78 cents.” Ahem. If the ebook *accompanies* a print version, it shouldn’t require new copyediting—or typesetting, for that matter: that’s the conversion step. But never mind.

Royalty for ebooks is “a subject of fierce debate between literary agents and publishing executives,” but a typical rate is 25% of gross (or net, if the publisher can get away with it), thus \$2.27 to \$3.25. That leaves \$4.56 to \$5.54 per copy for overhead and profit.

Here’s where I become less sympathetic to the publisher perspective:

At a glance, it appears the e-book is more profitable. But publishers point out that e-books still represent a small sliver of total sales, from 3 to 5 percent. If e-book sales start to replace some hardcover sales, the publishers say, they will still have many of the fixed costs associated with print editions, like warehouse space, but they will be spread among fewer print copies.

Moreover, in the current print model, publishers can recoup many of their costs, and start to make higher profits, on paperback editions. If publishers start a new e-book’s life at a price similar to that of a paperback book, and reduce the price later, it may be more difficult to cover costs and support new authors.

Um...these arguments sound like “our existing business plan works this way, so that’s the way it has to be” arguments. For that matter, if there are fewer print copies, one would think those copies would consume less warehouse space—wouldn’t one? Oh, and to *save bookstores* you need to slow down ebooks... *Of course* we get the argument that squeezed profits would hurt publishers’ ability to “nurture new authors” whose advances never earn out. Which would be more believable if publishers really *were* nurturing lots of new authors. Are they?

### *Ebooks, Free, The Value Thereof*

In this [March 5, 2010 essay](#) at *Whatever*, John Scalzi considers a BYU study that appeared in the Winter 2010 *Journal of Electronic Publishing*, “[The Short-Term Influence of Free Digital Versions of Books on Print Sales.](#)” (Scalzi links to [a boingboing story](#) about the study.) The study—of 41 print titles—found that three of four groups of books had *more* print sales after they were available as free ebooks. The exception was Tor’s one-week free trials (a one-time promotion).

Scalzi is surprised by that exception, because he saw sales of *Old Man’s War* increase significantly after Tor released the ebook. So he looked at the methodology. The authors looked at Bookscan numbers for the eight weeks before the free ebook appeared and the eight weeks after it appeared. Turns out that the eight-week-prior period for his book included the holiday season and the eight-week-after period didn’t.

He looked at his data differently: throwing out the holiday period and taking seven weeks before the free ebook (and the holidays) and seven weeks after. Average sales were *up* 2% after the free ebook came out.

There's more to the post. He notes that the authors explicitly say there's need for more (and more rigorous) analysis.

Why is this in pricing rather than sales? Because the price of the ebooks was \$0.

Sixty-four comments, worth reading as usual for this blog. Based on the comments, the free ebooks *definitely* resulted in new print book sales, specifically to readers who'd never heard of Scalzi (or other Tor authors).

### *Why Do eBooks Cost So Much? (A Publisher's Perspective)*

Another version of a story that's already been told here, but [this one](#)—by Michael Hyatt at his eponymous blog on November 2, 2010—is direct from a (former) publisher's mouth.

First, some comments about the blog, given that this guy was CEO of Thomas Nelson and should appreciate simplicity and clean design. Even if his motto is “Helping Leaders Leverage Influence,” which sounds like something from MottoGenerator 2.0. Let's see: we have his smiling face, a whole bunch of logos for places he's been “featured” in, an advertorial (or a personal recommendation that you Buy a Product, if you want to be kind about it) right after the lede, another advertorial of sorts at the foot of the post, *eleven* ads as part of an interminable sidebar...and this guy has *seven people* as “community leaders” who “help moderate my comments.” Really?

Back to the post. He's asserting that Amazon will change to the agency model where the publisher sets the price—which he assumes will still be \$9.99—and gets 70% of that. And, ahem, here's a key paragraph:

Second, physical manufacturing and distribution expenses cost less than you think. Some people assume that these two items represent the bulk of a book's costs. They don't. Together, they account for about 12% of a physical book's retail price. So eliminating these costs doesn't do much to reduce the overall cost structure.

Maybe I should repeat that I was using 14% for relatively *short run* books (hundreds or low thousands of copies). Around 12% seems to be the common figure for typical big-publisher runs.

Publishers still have to pay for acquisitions, royalties, editorial development, copyediting, cover and interior design, page composition, cataloging, sales, marketing, publicity, merchandising (yes, even in a digital world), credit, collections, accounting, legal, tax, and the all the usual costs associated with running a publishing house.

He discusses “at least three new costs” for ebooks: Digital preparation, quality assurance and digital distribution. Apparently QA is a *very big*

*deal*, which makes me wonder about the digital preparation processes. Nelson isn't a huge publisher (it's the world's largest Christian publisher, but before it became just another imprint of NewsCorp, it was doing around \$250 million a year in business), but it's not tiny either. He says they have *seven full-time people* devoted entirely to QA for ebooks—and were looking for three more.

An interesting discussion, and worth noting that he sees \$9.99 as an appropriate price point rather than claiming an ebook should cost as much as a hardcover.

More than two hundred comments—which, given the claim that the blog has more than 340,000 subscribers, really isn't many. Hyatt's an active participant in the stream; at one point, he does say "I definitely would not spend more for a digital book than a paperback, except in very rare cases." Another commenter says he doesn't *believe* paper costs are only 12%, so... I always think a great way to answer an argument based on facts is "I don't believe your facts." It saves lots of trouble. Heck, it could get you elected to Congress.

### *Why Selling E-books at 99 Cents Destroys Minds*

Whah? Yep, that's the title on Chad Post's [June 13, 2011 piece](#) at *Publishing Perspectives*—and he seems to mean it. Post is publisher of [Open Letter Books](#), a nonprofit publisher at University of Rochester that's devoted to literary translations. As of now, it offers around 60 books and aims for 10 new books a year. (You can subscribe to the new books for \$100/year!) 26 of the books are available as ebooks at \$9.99 each; print books vary in price, but all are reasonably priced.

When this piece appeared, Open Letter Books had finally decided to do some ebooks—and priced the first nine at \$4.99 each for one month.

As much as one might hate e-books (and trust me, I've in no way incorporated this part of the digital "revolution" into my reading habits), it's become impossible to ignore. It may be overstating things a bit, but if your book isn't available as an e-book, it basically doesn't exist. This is sad; this is true. For many, publishing e-books is simply a foregone conclusion.

That middle sentence *might* be hyperbole, but never mind. Post found that, while some parties responded to the press release about the ebooks with congratulations, others said Open Letter Books was damaging its own sales and "helping depress the e-book price for literary fiction" by offering such low prices. So he looks at the *recent* history of ebook prices (that is, since the Kindle appeared) and how big publishers have dealt with it. It's an interesting discussion and not friendly to the Big Six (now Big Five).

He looks at actual ebook bestsellers—and gets to one John Locke, "(probably not the one you're thinking of)," who claims to have made six-digit royalties in 2010 from Kindle books that all sell for \$0.99.

Having read the opening of one of his “Donovan Creed” novels, I can assure you that he’s not selling all these books due to his talent.

What follows:

Two of my longstanding issues with e-books are: a) how your brain processes texts read on a screen, and b) e-books make books feel like disposable entertainment. I’m going to leave the first for a separate article and/or book, but I think the second objection is valuable here.

I’m inclined to argue that b) is only true for cheap ebooks, but maybe he has a point. But he overstates it: He seems to think that cheap thrillers as entertainment endanger literary culture. Then he makes one step too far:

But to pull back from the misanthropy, the point is this: self-published authors game the system. You set your e-book price at \$0.99, get a hundred friends to buy it in a short window of time, and shoot into the best-seller list where sales breed sales, and Terry Gross has only a momentary impact.

Suddenly, *self-published authors* are, at least in general, John Locke wannabes. He says this process of gaming the system is “BS” and “cheapens the art of writing.” I say lumping all self-publishing into one pot cheapens the art of thinking and is, indeed, BS. But then, it becomes increasingly clear that Post also lumps all ebooks into the disposable-entertainment category; his nose is stuck very high in the air.

The rest of the piece, once he’s finished attacking self-publishing, says some worthwhile things. But damn if it wasn’t hard for me to read any of it after being slapped in the face.

I checked John Locke on Amazon. Most of the Kindle editions now go for \$2.99; the books also seem to be available in \$8.99 paperback versions. I have not read any of them...

### *Why Some E-Books Cost More Than the Hardcover*

Nathan Bransford offered this discussion on [March 10, 2011](#) on his eponymous site. He’s a (traditionally) published author (children’s SF). It’s a particularly interesting quandary, since even if print only accounts for one-seventh (or one-eighth) of a book’s price, *almost* nobody claims that digital overhead is anywhere near that much. Bransford says:

Believe it or not, this isn’t a glitch. And it’s not happening because publishers are asleep at the wheel either.

Come down the rabbit hole with me into the wholesale/agency tunnel, and I’ll tell you why this is happening.

He offers a brief and well-stated discussion of the wholesale model, Amazon’s willingness to take a loss on some ebooks (and even, during a price war, some hardcovers)—and publishers’ claims that Amazon pricing was “devaluing” books.

Publishers badly wanted to level the playing field to make sure there was competition in the marketplace. They didn't want Amazon creating a monopoly and turning up the screws on their terms.

Would you be surprised if I took the first half of that sentence with several bushels of salt? The second half, though, I have no quarrel with. Publishers don't want a monopoly *that they don't control*.

Thus the agency model, and here Bransford offers quick math showing that publishers are giving up profit in order to hurt Amazon. Since hardcovers are still sold on the wholesale model, we get an answer to the piece's title. He uses an example from a Reddit discussion, a novel that sold for \$11.99 as an ebook and \$11.89 as a hardcover. Why? Because Amazon chose to take a loss on the hardcover, but *couldn't do that* on the ebook because of the agency model.

It's a well-written explanation, one of the clearest I've seen, and includes the probability that big publishers wanted to slow down ebook adoption as much as possible.

More than 100 comments. As you'd expect, some of them simply ignore his accounting for print costs and say "but print costs LOTS OF MONEY and ebooks cost nothing to produce" in various tired versions. These commenters apparently don't read carefully anyway... One of them simply asserts "at least \$5 per copy" for paper, ink and distribution, citing—of course—no sources whatsoever. What I found interesting in a couple of these comments is something I've found in comments on quite a few other posts: Some of the "I only buy ebooks these days" commenters have a specific reason for that: They don't have any more *room* for print books, thanks to the thousands they already own. (I hear a little voice saying "public libraries...and by the way, many of them have Friends groups that would be only too happy to accept some of those books filling up your house and resell them to others.")

### *A Note Regarding Future Big Idea Comments*

You need some background for [this December 20, 2011 post](#) by John Scalzi at *Whatever*. Scalzi runs "Big Idea" posts that promote *other authors*—"authors explaining the big ideas behind their latest works, in their own words." Since Scalzi has an enormous audience, this is a Very Good Thing for other authors. And here's his note:

It is: From this point forward, if you post a comment on a Big Idea post in which the focus of the comment is how you don't like the price of the e-book, I'm just going to delete it.

That might be enough, but he adds five paragraphs of explanation. Here are the first and last; you can (and probably should) read the rest yourself:

Why? Primarily because here at the tail end of 2011, I find the subject boring and I find the people who get huffy about an electronic book

not being [insert price you believe for whatever reason an eBook should be] are exhibiting a particularly tiresome sort of entitlement, to wit, that owning an electronic book reader means that you are possibly obliged to announce your opinion on book pricing at every turn. See, the thing is: You're not. You don't have to. At this point, I wish you wouldn't....

The shorter version of this: Complaining about eBook prices on Big Idea threads is a) usually off-topic, b) kind of mean to the author, c) something I'm bored with at this point in any event. So from now on, when I see a comment like it, it'll likely get the Mallet. Just thought I'd make that clear for everyone moving forward.

There's [a followup post](#) that swims into different waters entirely. Also more than 170 comments, some thoughtful, some funny and a few damn silly. High fives to "Linkmeister" and his puzzlement as to why people assume authors have any control over pricing... After getting a 1-star review for an ALA Editions book from somebody *who clearly had no interest in reading it* but felt free to slam it in a review because it was pricey, I'm sensitive on this issue. No, of course I didn't read all 170.

### *Will publishers turn ebook readers into shiny paper weights*

That's the focus of [a December 25, 2011 post](#) at *Terry's Worklog*—most of the post one long paragraph. It's a case where the fullness of time permits an easy answer: No.

The basis for the possibility is the rise in ebook pricing, which is why it's in this section. That's coupled to the certainty that millions of people were *given* ebook readers for the holidays in December 2011.

Once you have one of those little buggers, you are going to want to put something on it – and while there is a lot of free content available, you are going to want to be able to purchase books for reading as well. And this is where it gets tricky. When ebook readers were first starting to show up, the big selling point was that the device was convenient (reduced the physical footprint of having a text) and the content had a very low price point. This year, the ebook readers themselves have literally become disposable technology – but the content is becoming more and more cost prohibitive due to the cost of content. The question now for ebook owners is when does the convenience of owning digital copies become less attractive than the price point for the books.

I guess I never thought the *primary* selling point for ebook readers was cheap books. I could be wrong. Terry follows with an example—he could buy an ebook for \$9.99 or a sale-bin mass-market paperback copy of the same book for less than half that much.

The question is interesting, and I'm certain some ereader owners have stopped using them for various reasons (newer models, a preference

for tablets or smartphones or even a preference for print books). I suspect those who received ereaders as gifts may be more likely to give up on them than those who spent their own money for them. But I also suspect that many if not most ereader buyers see much more to ebooks than just cheap books. The ebook market has slowed down its *growth* of late (another section) but it hasn't collapsed.

*Why I don't read self-published books: They don't cost enough*

This curiosity by Richard Cosgrove [appeared February 15, 2012](#) on Google+; I'm not sure whether the link will get you there.

That is indeed what Cosgrove seems to be saying: he only has self-pubs from authors he knows through social media.

The reason I don't have more is because I'm put off by the prices self-published authors charge. Because they're so low.

If somebody charges less than \$6 to \$10, he thinks the author doesn't value their work.

Logically I know the reasons: the majority of the money I pay for a self-published book goes directly to the author; there are no on-going production costs; and the cost of distribution is negligible, compared to a printed book.

But at the same time I'm feeling that the author does not consider their book to be worth as much as Penguin and Harper Collins thinks their authors are worth. And if the author has a low perception of their work, why should I spend time and money on it?

Tie biggest factor here is the first: the publisher doesn't take a share. Turns out Cosgrove works or worked in magazine production, so he knows there's lots of work involved in preparing a book for publication.

When I spot a typo in a £5 book I think: "Huh. Copy editor missed another one. Sloppy."

If I spot typos in a 99p book, I know I would be thinking: "Didn't the writer get this copy edited? How unprofessional," and I'll stop reading. If the author didn't invest time and effort in their work, why should I?

This is the difference: I will gladly pay more for a book that has had more effort invested into it. I won't pay for a book, that hasn't.

Except that what he seems to be saying is that self-pubs are held to *higher* standards, especially if they're inexpensive.

It's an odd argument, especially since Cosgrove will happily download *free* ebooks and give them a try.

It gets strange in the comments. Richard Moon makes a clever comment related to a typo in the post as it first appeared:

I was going to read the whole post, but I got stopped at “they’re don’t”, and since I wasn’t paying anything to read this couldn’t see any reason to continue.

Cosgrove responds by thanking him for spotting the typo and fixing it, but then says this:

Also, I have a zero tolerance rule when it comes to trolls. Troll once and I block you. You trolled. You’re blocked.

Really? That comment was trolling? I thought it was fairly clever.

### *Who Controls Your Amazon E-book Price?*

Jim C. Hines discusses this question in a February 20, 2012 post on his eponymous site. Hines is a fantasy writer who has self-published some ebooks and also been published traditionally.

He discusses the extent to which Amazon can and will adjust prices for Kindle Direct Publishing items if it finds the same items being sold elsewhere for less—even if that sale price has gone away.

A certain champion of self-publishing recently decried all of the “whiny bitches” complaining about Amazon, and argued how Amazon treats authors so much better than commercial publishers.

While there are certainly advantages to Amazon’s program, anyone who thinks Amazon is in this to help authors is a fool. Amazon, like pretty much any other business, is in this to make money. As for how they treat authors, let me share what I’ve experienced over the past week and a half.

I won’t take you through the discussion; you may find it interesting. I was interested to learn that, for Hines at least, a traditional publisher pays him royalties based on the cover price regardless of the actual selling price. I get royalties based on actual net receipts, but that’s for professional books.

### *What Making an E-Book Costs, Publisher Responds*

Here’s a curious one by Jeremy Greenfield [on April 23, 2012](#) at *digitalbookworld*. It refers back to [an earlier article](#) (which I didn’t discuss) on consumer confusion over ebook pricing. That article quotes a Big 6 publisher saying ebook production costs 10% less than print book production—which I take to mean that the added costs of print only account for 10% of the retail price. Some of the cited digital-publishing costs in that earlier article seem a bit extreme (\$100,000 to create a book app? \$200,000 a year for a *small* publisher to maintain a team to manage e-book production?)

One response was from the executive director of a small bible-study publisher. Part of the email:

We are a small publisher, and our printing company (print and virtual) charges us for storage and/or bandwidth, and for the handling involved in the distribution of even the virtual books. Someone still has to process the order and payment for every piece sold. When we add up the cost of production, plus the conversion fee, plus the virtual storage/bandwidth, plus handling of orders... our costs are almost the same as our print version. In the end, we simply cannot afford to deeply discount an e pub version of our books to the level the consumer expects. [Emphasis added.]

Yes, order processing is going to cost the same. But...I have trouble believing that, especially for what I assume to be fairly small print runs (perhaps wrong), the costs for ebooks are “almost the same” as for print books.

The message Greenfield gets is that costs are different from publisher to publisher, which I'm sure is true. You may find the comments interesting. If the publisher's saying that ebooks can only plausibly be discounted by 12-14%, I can see that...but “costs almost the same as for print” still doesn't seem plausible.

### *It doesn't matter what e-books cost to make*

This May 3, 2012 piece by Mathew Ingram at *gigaom* is at least partially a response to the Greenfield article, and right from the summary, it's a one-finger salute. That comes in part from another link, to Chuck Wendig's "[Thinking the wrong things about e-book pricing](#)." Wendig is, in essence, saying that costs *don't matter*—that only the price the audience wants to pay matters.

Which is an interesting perspective. I think a new Honda Civic *should* cost \$1,200. I'm guessing no Honda dealer will respect my wishes.

Wendig has some good points in his mildly profane discussion—and much (most?) of Ingram's piece is just excerpts from and comment on Wendig's article, fleshed out with additional links.

Ingram's proposal? “Why not allow e-book prices to float and then see where they end up?” How do you do that? “Pay what you wish”? (If you're wondering, since I've been using that model most of this year for *Cites & Insights*, total contributions have reached three digits but are still in the very low three digits.) Lots of comments, some intelligent, some not, as you'd expect. I didn't read them all. One is so good that I'm going to quote part of it:

You say “this value is ultimately determined by the market for that work, not by the artist.”

This is a fundamental misunderstanding of economics. The value (or price) is set by the interaction between seller and buyer. The seller sets their price, the buyer decides what they will pay, if the two coincide then a deal can be done, if not then a deal can't be done.

That begins an interesting exchange.

What happened? The big publishers settled the collusion suit. By some analysts' projections, that could have meant ebook prices going into freefall. That didn't happen. By ebook *enthusiasts'* projections, ebook prices should have dropped sharply but sales gone up by “orders of magnitude” (yes, I've seen *exactly* those words), thus yielding huge ebook sales. That also didn't happen. Which brings us to...

## Sales

The Very Big Deal in mid-2010 was an Amazon announcement: for every 100 hardcover books they sold, they were selling 143 ebooks. That announcement set off some of these early items. For example:

### *30 Posts in 30 Days #19: re: eBooks outselling hard covers*

That's Michael Sauers [on July 20, 2010](#) at *The Travelin' Librarian*. He links to [an Amazon press release](#)—written as a news story and which doubtless ran as a straight news story in any number of outlets—with that claim and a number of other related claims. (Including “James Patterson” having sold 1.14 million ebooks—three-quarters of them Kindle books. The PR is as much about Amazon's dominance of the ebook field as anything else.)

Sauers says “bully for them” and adds six thoughts and questions. Sauers isn't anti-ebook by any means; he owns a Kindle (or at least uses the Kindle app). He's distilled quite a bit into this short set of bullet points; I'm quoting the whole set of bullet points (assuming Sauers will forgive the slight violation of the blog's CC BY-NC-SA license, since *Cites & Insights* doesn't have the SA clause):

- Amazon.com will still not release any actual numbers regarding books sold (of any type) or Kindles sold.
- Paperbacks still outsell hard covers and eBooks.
- So it sounds like people will buy whatever's cheapest. When eBooks cost the same as a paperback and then outsell the paperback let's talk.
- Ignoring the price issue, there's a convenience to instantly purchasing and then having (though not owning) the content of the book. A couple of clicks and you've got the book. No waiting for something to be shipped. But, when it's that easy, what's the level of impulse purchasing of eBooks that then actually read?
- Lastly, does the number of eBooks “sold” include the ones that are downloaded for free? I've got a few dozen Kindle books but I didn't pay for a single one of them. I've just been downloading many of the free books they've offered. (Now ask me how many of them I've read.)
- Oh, and one more thought: *They're not “selling” any of those eBooks. They're licensing them to you!* Wouldn't it be more honest if the press

release read “Over the past three months, for every 100 hardcover books Amazon.com has sold, it has sold 143 Kindle book licenses.”?

Those are all good points, a good way to start this section. Two of them suggest that it's possible people aren't *reading* all of those ebooks. Given how long I left a free-for-the-day novella sitting on my Kindle before finally opening it up (and wishing I hadn't, to be honest), I can see what he's saying. Not that people don't buy print books they'll never read—that undoubtedly happens—but that ultracheap and free ebooks delivered instantaneously seem likely to increase the volume. (I've noted with regard to open access that some librarians seem to undervalue things they don't pay for; I'm sure that's true for others as well.)

### *Hardcovers fall behind Kindle book sales at Amazon*

Jacqui Cheng's [July 19, 2010 commentary](#) on the Amazon press release at *ars technica* is interesting for the straw man Cheng attacks. She doesn't care that Amazon never mentions actual figures. Here's what she has to say in the only paragraph that's not essentially a rehash of Amazon's PR (after saying it's clear that most ebook customers want the small, cheap Kindle):

What else is clear is the fact that users apparently aren't as attached to dead tree books as some e-book critics thought. Paperbacks are surely still selling at sky-high rates, but the appeal of having a “stack” of books crammed into one, slim device is certainly winning over customers.

I don't remember ebook critics saying ebooks wouldn't sell at all. Maybe some did. Amazon's release certainly didn't mean *all* readers had given up on “dead tree books.”

Quite a few comments focused on the awful editing in the original article (it had 180 *Kindles* being sold for each 100 hardcover books in the most recent month). One person felt it necessary to talk about “Kindle haters,” although I missed comments expressing *hatred* for Kindles. Some folks weren't real happy with DRM, but that's a different issue. (Oh, and one person took several others to task for complaining about the *clearly wrong facts* in the original article—they should “shut up” and enjoy it. Sigh.)

### *eBook vs. Hardcover: Beyond the Headlines*

Guy LeCharles Gonzalez, “chief executive optimist” at *Digital Book World*, offered this useful commentary [on July 20, 2010](#). After quoting a Bezos quote from the PR, his lede:

Depending on where you get your news, and how far beyond the tweets and catchy headlines you tend to read, yesterday's well-timed press release from Amazon (they release their 2Q report on Thursday) either came as a shocker (TIPPING POINT!) or an interesting soft data point in need of further clarification.

He quotes more of the PR, then links to and excerpts several other commentaries. It's an interesting range of perspectives; I won't link to them (that would be redundant) but you might find them useful recent history. Gonzalez looks at takeaways:

Beyond the obvious—"eBooks are an increasingly popular format for reading books!"—three interesting takeaways stand out for me.

Briefly, his three things are that it's all about Amazon dominating ebook sales, not Kindle sales; Amazon stands to be the path of least resistance "as" (if?) "many readers re-purchase their favorites in e-Book format"; some of those Amazon ebooks were never available in hardcover format.

I wonder about that second one—are millions of readers *actually* repurchasing in ebook form print books they already own? Maybe for travel, but it's really *not* equivalent to LP or cassette owners repurchasing music in CD form or VHS owners repurchasing movies as DVDs or Blu-ray. Gonzalez concludes that ebooks "undoubtedly offer the opportunity to *expand* overall book sales." I agree.

### *You Aren't J.A. Konrath*

This item—which is about ebook sales in general, and specifically the possibility of self-published authors doing well—appeared [on October 3, 2010](#) at *A Newbie's Guide to Publishing*. It's by, um, J.A. Konrath and begins:

"Sure, J.A. Konrath is selling a lot of ebooks. But you aren't J.A. Konrath."

I hear that a lot. Not directed toward me, since I am, in fact, J.A. Konrath. But I hear other authors being told this. And to my face I hear that I'm an anomaly and no other self-pubbed author will ever do as well.

Konrath believes a lot of self-published authors are doing well with Kindle ebooks. He named around 100 of them in [an earlier post](#)—as part of a long and interesting post—but still hears that it doesn't mean anything, that most self-publishing ebook authors won't sell a significant number of books.

He tries to make his case that "a lot of self-published folks are doing well on Kindle" by going through Kindle Bestseller lists to see how many of the 100 best-sellers are self-published books. Twenty-nine of the top 100 (when he looked at them) were self-pubs. He looked at certain genres: 50 of 100 occult, 15 of 100 procedurals, 36 of 100 "technothrillers."

I could spend the next two hours counting more books on more bestseller lists to prove my point, but I'm not going to. You're more that welcome to do that on your own. I encourage those jumping on the "You Aren't J.A. Konrath" bandwagon to do so. You'll find, as I have, that indies make up a good percentage of most bestseller lists.

In fact, I urge all folks with opinions to do a bit of research before spouting those opinions, lest you look foolish.

He dismisses those who say “we need gatekeepers” by saying Amazon’s own bestseller lists and genre categories and user reviews provide all the gatekeeping we need.

I’m all in favor of “independent” publishers (that is, everybody smaller than the Big Five) and self-publishing. I hope both will become bigger chunks of the future book market (print or e) and expect this will be the case. None of which negates the simple truth: Konrath can be simultaneously right and wrong, and I suspect he is.

Right: A fair number of self-published authors are doing pretty well.

Wrong: (Except he never actually says this) Self-publishing Kindle ebooks is the road to fame and riches.

Silliness about the long tail aside, the truth of the long tail—especially for books, and I’d guess nearly as much so for ebooks—is that it’s a *very low tail*. An extremely high percentage of self-published authors will never make anything like serious money from their books.

I can point to the largest marketplace for independent titles, Lulu, which has published a couple million titles. Without naming names, I’ll mention that one of my titles ranked as #17,552 among all Lulu titles in mid-September 2013. That title (an ebook) had sold all of 42 copies. (The paperback, with 17 sales, ranked #29,790). In other words, only some 17,550 titles on Lulu have sold even 43 copies—not exactly untold wealth.

### *The Importance of Context (Part 1)*

By Victoria Strauss [on January 7, 2011](#) at *Writer Beware® Blogs!*, this is a level-headed consideration of a number of ebook-sales claims, from a writer who’s writing for writers.

It covers lots of ground, including some of Joe Konrath’s posts and Seth Godin’s publishing plans, along with an odd news item about one-week ebook and print book sales.

Everyone loves a juicy news bite. But before you decide that ebooks rule and print is dead and it’s time to self-publish your magnum opus online, there’s a bit more to be said about all these stories.

The rest of the post considers what else needs to be said—the *context* of those stories. She’s not trying to say “don’t self-publish” or “don’t bother with ebooks” and is quite clear about not saying either of those things. She is saying that self-publishing an ebook does not assure you’ll sell a bunch of books.

### *Charting the global e-book market—exclusive data*

Here’s an unusual one, by Philip Jones [on March 14, 2011](#) at *Futurebook*, “a digital blog from *the Bookseller*.” It stems from an effort by the International Publishers Association to determine ebook sales in various

nations. You need to include the usual caveats—does the national publishing group *know* the overall size of the book publishing and ebook markets?—but it’s at least modestly indicative of the situation in 2010.

Some countries had essentially no ebook penetration at that point—0.5% in France, less than 1% in Germany, 0.3% in the Netherlands, between 0.1% and 0.2% in Italy.

A few had modest penetration: 1.1% in Japan (projected to rise to 10% in 2015), £110 million in South Korea (with no percentage given), 1.5% in South Africa, 1.6% in Spain, and 1% to 9% for specific publishers in the UK.

Then there’s the US, with ebook sales in 2010 estimated at \$440 million or 8% (of the *trade book* market, not the entire book market).

### *Ebooks Outsell Print! Putting Headlines in Context*

Victoria Strauss again at *Writer Beware® Blogs!* [on August 8, 2012](#), after yet another Amazon thrilling PR piece came out—an Amazon UK report that for the first half of 2012 it was selling 114 ebooks for every 100 hardcover *and* paperback books. Note that this was still units sold, not spending, but it was a Big Number—and, again as usual, Amazon would not release audited figures for ebooks.

The account also said British Kindle users were buying four times as many books as they had before owning a Kindle, which is great any way you look at it. [The Guardian story](#), which Strauss linked to, makes an important point:

Ebook sales have been given a boost by the publication of *Fifty Shades of Grey* by EL James, which has sold two million copies in the past four months.

That’s two million copies *in the UK*, I assume. Later in the story, a Kindle VP notes that Amazon’s print book business continues to grow.

Back to Strauss:

This generated many headlines announcing that *Ebooks Beat Print!*, along with the usual “Print is dead!” commentary (regretful or jubilant, according to bias). However, Amazon is famous for reporting statistics without providing the details necessary to fully evaluate them—just as the media is famous for disseminating a juicy sound bite even if it doesn’t really represent the actual news story. Herewith, a bit of context.

Her contextual points, in brief: It’s Amazon UK, not Amazon overall; she wonders how much of that was accounted for by “the tiresomely over-hyped *50 Shades* trilogy”; she wonders how many of those ebooks were Kindle exclusives; Amazon had 40% of the ereader market and 60% of the ebook market at that point, but was certainly not the only major print-book seller; and the last and most interesting one:

Last but not least, for those who fear that print is dead, or wish it had died some time ago, I came across an interesting article this week about the Book Industry Study Group's ongoing survey of consumers' attitudes toward ebooks. The latest figures from this survey reveal that print is seeing gains as ebook consumers diversify their buying habits...

[The study] suggests that, for the moment, we're heading toward a hybrid market in which ebooks are just one more book format for consumers to choose from--not the doom of print, nor a cause célèbre, but simply another container for text. Of course, we're still on the cusp of a paradigm shift, so no one can say what may happen in the far future. But with that caveat, I think print books and ebooks will co-exist relatively peaceably for some time to come...Amazon statistics notwithstanding.

Hard to argue with that. Peculiar that the first comment was from someone who either buys ebooks or used books; I'm not sure how that's apropos unless the idea is "as I am, so will everybody be." The second comment is, I suspect, far more meaningful:

I'm one of those people who buys both. I love my nook tablet, but I've also purchased a number of print books. The thing the tablet has done for me is encourage me to buy books I'm not going to read right away, since they won't be sitting in a dusty pile on my nightstand or taking up space in my already full shelves. I am also more inclined to be reading 2-3 books at a time than I was before I bought the nook.

If other people are the same way, e-readers may be increasing overall book sales and not simply eating away at print.

### *The State of a Genre Title, 2013*

Jumping ahead half a year, here's John Scalzi [on January 16, 2013](#) at *Whatever* offering one example—and it's clearly *only one example*—of how hardcover-vs.-audiobook-vs.-ebook was playing out in late 2012. Namely, the day before the post, *Redshirts* came out in trade paperback, which also meant it was no longer being produced in hardcover.

The book was available from June 5, 2012 through January 14, 2013. During that time, *no* format ruled—but ebooks outsold hardcover (35,667 to 26,604) which in turn outsold audiobooks (17,008). As Scalzi notes, those are healthy sales in *every* format for a genre title:

This is an important thing because while people like to talk about eBooks being the future, or audiobooks increasing in popularity, the fact of the matter is that print sales continue to be important, and a solid author presence in physical book stores also continues to be important.

He expects to see all three formats continue to be important for some time to come. To Scalzi, the profile also says that *for him* it makes sense

to work with established publishers (Tor for print, Audible for audiobooks), especially because it's tough to get self-published books into bookstores.

Lots more here: he discusses ten points, of which I've only mentioned three so far. For example, his audiobook sales may be partly due to having Wil Wheaton as a narrator; he doesn't believe that the three formats inherently cannibalize each other's sales; to the extent that Bookscan matters as a point of reference for sales, it's defective because it doesn't include ebooks *or* audiobooks.

One point has nothing to do with formats and a lot to do with Scalzi: sales of *Redshirts* may help undermine the claim that humorous science fiction doesn't sell well. (The novel going on to win the Hugo later in 2013 probably didn't hurt either.)

And I have to repeat #10 in full:

10. Science fiction books often sell more in paperback. I won't mind if that's true here, too.

More than 120 comments. The second one is interesting and significant:

The deciding factor for me when picking between ebook and hardcover was Tor's decision to drop DRM.

In fact, *Redshirts* was Tor's first official DRM-free title. Tor is a Macmillan imprint. A number of people added to "don't necessarily cannibalize" by mentioning that they double-dip or triple-dip, buying a book in more than one format. I'll admit to surprise at folks who *prefer* mass-market paperbacks to trade paperbacks for reasons other than price, but that's me... At least one bonehead completely missed what Scalzi actually said about what a traditional publisher brings to the table, saying Scalzi would have made *ever so much more money* if he'd self-published. Because, you know, 70% of 100 sales is *so much better* than 15% of 1,000 sales.

### *New Smashwords Survey Helps Authors Sell More eBooks*

This longish discussion by Mark Coker [appeared May 8, 2013](#) on the *Smashwords Blog*. Smashwords analyzed sales of its own ebooks (through several distribution networks) for the period from May 1, 2012 through March 31, 2013—11 months, in other words. The post discusses some results of that analysis.

One interesting item isn't part of the analysis but is fairly revealing: the analysis covered \$12 million in sales for 120,000 Smashwords ebooks. After extensive number-crunching, I conclude that the average Smashword ebook sold around \$100 worth during the 11-month period. That's *gross* sales, mind you.

They asked a lot of questions. Without providing much of the analysis—this is a long post, one you might want to peruse directly—here are a few of the interesting answers:

- Even Smashwords “bestsellers” follow a dramatic power curve: the best-selling sold 37 times as many as the 500<sup>th</sup> best and the 50<sup>th</sup> best-selling sold 7 times as many as the 500<sup>th</sup> best (or less than one-fifth as many as the best). It’s fair to assume that the *median* Smashwords sales for that 11 months is a whole lot less than the \$100 *average*! Coker draws from this the lesson that authors need to make decisions to move their books up in sales rank—but the first part of the first sentence is also important: “Most books don’t sell well.” Where “most” for ebooks appears to be, what, 98%?
- Longer books sell better. Smashwords sells a lot of short ebooks, but the average length of the top hundred sellers was 115,000 words.
- \$2.99 is the most common price point, but looking at the table (sampling 105,000 titles), nearly half were priced at \$1.99 or less (including a healthy number “priced” at free), while it looks like less than one-third were priced \$3 or higher.
- Cheap ebooks sell better than less-cheap ones, by and large, and free ebooks “sell” the best of all. The average freebie Smashwords title on the iBookstore was downloaded 92 times as often as books with a price.
- The sweet spot for net earnings, balancing price and sales, appears to be \$3.99.

I’m omitting Coker’s lengthy evangelizing for self-publishing through Smashwords as opposed to using a traditional publisher; “self-serving” only begins to describe it. I’m guessing John Scalzi, for example, would not find Coker’s analysis convincing—and Scalzi has a *lot* more personal fans than most writers.

### *Why Don’t People Want to Read E-books on Tablets?*

That’s one title for this piece by Robert Rosenberger [on August 15, 2013](#) at *Slate*; the other is “Ebook sales decline: Do people not want to read books on tablets?”

It appears Rosenberger doesn’t want to believe ebooks might be plateauing. He links to an AAP report—or, rather, [a Nate Hoffelder item](#) at *the digital reader* that reports on an AAP report—but uses the word “claims” rather than “reports” regarding the 5% increase in ebook sales in 2013 Q1 compared to 2012 Q1.

Let’s stop right here. If ebook sales increased 5%, that’s still an increase—and that it’s a *lower* percentage increase is both predictable and reasonable. As the size of the ebook market grows, its ability to grow at high *percentages* decreases fairly rapidly—especially if you’re not one of those who assume that ebooks are destined to be 100% of the book market Real Soon Now. You know that, right? Growing 50% from \$100 is easy; growing 50% from \$100 *million* is a lot tougher. (Five percent growth from a \$1 billion base is a lot more *actual* growth than, say, 140% growth from a \$10 million base.)

Going off into linkland, things get even stranger. The Hoffelder item says he can *prove* ebook sales are flattening—which, of course, he can't. He *can* demonstrate that quarter-by-quarter sales reports, especially in the book trade, are affected by various anomalies. That “proof” piece ends with “Clearly there is no evidence to support the claim that ebooks are over.” But *who said ebooks were over?* Saying “maybe ebooks are only going to be [a certain percentage] of the total book market” is quite different than saying they're over.

Once you get past that burning strawman, Hoffelder's sensible:

In spite of the spectacular growth of ebooks in 2008 to 2011, we all know that eventually the ride would come to a stop as the growth of ebook market share slowed. TBH I didn't expect it to happen so quickly.

What seems to have happened, comparing the two first quarters, is that children's books—both print and ebook—fell *considerably* because there was an enormous hit (*The Hunger Games* trilogy sold a lot more when the first movie came out) in 2012 and no similar hit in 2013. Adult fiction and non-fiction grew modestly, about 3%, with a 14% growth in ebooks and roughly flat sales for hardcover and paperback. “Roughly flat sales” is important: there's no indication that ebooks are cannibalizing print sales.

Getting back to Rosenberger's story, he notes a Nielsen month-to-month report indicating an actual *fall* in ebook sales, but (*not* explained in the *Salon* story) that was almost certainly the result of the *Hunger Games* situation. On the other hand, the way *Publishing Technology* puts it [in reporting](#) on the Nielsen report is probably right: the report “suggests that we could be at the end of the period of explosive growth for digital reading.”

The end of *explosive growth* does not mean “ebooks are over.” It does not mean “ebooks will have flat sales from now on.” It does mean you can't keep growing explosively forever.

One other link is to a Matthew Yglesias article from December 14, 2012 at *Slate*, “Who Killed the Ebook Reader?” It includes a chart with huge sales for dedicated ebook readers in 2011, much lower sales in 2012 (but still *much* higher than in 2010) and *projected* declines for the next several years. Yglesias takes issue with the interpretation that cheap color tablets are “killing off the market for e-book readers.” He thinks it's something else, and so do I: market saturation—because ebook readers aren't like smartphones (or, perhaps, because people who read ebooks are smarter than people who lust after smartphones?). Namely: Once you own one that's satisfactory, you probably won't buy a new one for quite a while.

I love my toaster oven, but I've had it for five years and it still works great and I have no intention of getting a new one at any point in the foreseeable future. That doesn't mean the toaster industry is in trouble

or people hate toasters it just means that people don't feel the need to be constantly upgrading their toasters and do a good job of not dropping them.

Ya' think?

There's another issue in this story—whether people don't find reading as immersive when it's on a multipurpose device. I suspect that's true for OH LOOK A SQUIRREL readers, for whom distractions are ever present. Certainly, in that case, a dedicated device makes more sense.

The problem with much of this article is that it's discussing “a decline in e-book buying,” and there's no good indication that such a decline has happened, once separated from best-seller phenomena.

### *Is Publishing Still Broken? The Surprising Year In Books*

This one's by David Vinjamuri [on October 4, 2013](#) at *Forbes*. He begins:

A flood of self-published books washes ashore. Bestseller prices are down significantly. Bad grammar speeds through the ether at a faster pace than ever before. This should be a dreadful year for publishers. Only it's not.

Instead, he notes fat bonuses to Random House employees and the apparent fact that revenue from traditional publishing has held up just fine. Then there's this:

Self-publishing is a huge and disruptive force in the publishing industry, but contrary to popular belief, it's largely benefiting publishers.

Really? Well...let's look at the rest. First, there's the issue of citing Bowker ISBN statistics for a count of self-published books, which makes the critical error of assuming that all self-published books *have* ISBNs. It's certainly true that what Bowker counts as self-publishing is growing rapidly—from 246,912 titles in 2011 to 391,768 in 2012 (U.S. titles only). Vinjamuri is claiming that “robust competition” (from self-publishers) is improving market efficiency. The four trends he claims to see:

1. Publishers signed indie authors in larger numbers. He cites all of 18 (count 'em, *eighteen!*) such cases in 2012—all but two of them women and mostly either romance or YA paranormal. “This boom in signings suggests that publishers will sweep up the successful indie authors in a hot genre.”

2. Indie Authors Settled On Bestseller Lists.

Not sure how this means that traditional publishers are winning, if it's true that 20 to 30% of bestsellers are self-published. (Actually, “indie” should probably mean everything except the Big 5, shouldn't it?)

3. Indie Sales Did Not Cannibalize Traditional Book Sales. Summing up “traditional” sales numbers, *unit* sales of print books were essentially

unchanged from 2011 to 2012 but *dollar* amounts declined—by almost exactly the same amount that ebook dollar sales increased (while ebook unit sales increased considerably). Thus, overall “traditional” revenue is essentially flat while unit sales are growing.

4. Big 5 Publishers Discover Pricing. Which is to say: big publishers are discounting backlist and some series title prices to compete better with low-priced self-pubbed ebooks.

In comments, the writer clarifies that he really *does* use “indie” as a synonym for self-published, which strikes me as misleading and pointless: Why not just say “self-pubbed” or “self-published”?

The piece is an excerpt from a longer article, “Understanding Self-Publishing 2013”—which is only free if you’re a Kindle owner with Amazon Prime. It’s a 46-page \$0.99 Kindle edition—and those aren’t *long* pages, as it’s about 7,000 words. (By comparison, this essay is about four times that long.)

## Software

A few items on aspects of ebook and e-publishing software.

*Ray Kurzweil’s Blio E-Book Launch Met With Confusion, Controversy* I generally shy away from *Wired*, but this Tim Carmody piece [on September 30, 2010](#) at *Wired’s* Gadget Lab seems to be pretty straightforward journalism. Interesting: The URL suggests that the original title was “Ray Kurzweil’s Blio E-Book Launch Widely Panned,” but that was apparently softened before publication.

The lede is still strongly negative:

This week, K-NFB, an e-reading company founded by Ray Kurzweil and the National Federation for the Blind, launched its much-anticipated Blio reading app and e-book store. Blio was immediately and widely panned by publishers, developers and readers.

The software didn’t appear to provide the level of accessibility it promised—to which Kurzweil and NFB basically said “oh, we released it too soon.” The initial version relied on Windows’ built-in text-to-speech (and only worked on Windows—if you could install it, that is).

Blio was apparently also adding ebook suppliers to its offerings without their permission. (Kurzweil responded as you’d expect: it was just miscommunication.) At launch, Blio supported 11,000 ebooks (or 6,000 if you got the Toshiba version), a little shy of the 700,000 available at Amazon or the million available at B&N.

If Wikipedia’s article is any indication, Blio *still* doesn’t support the Mac, and the primary sales pitch seems to be support for color illustrations and typography.

Going to the Blio bookstore in September 2013 suggests that it really is all about going “beyond the written word” with “crystal clear sound and images that come alive in brilliant color.” Digging deeper, we’re told that sound comes courtesy of professional narration. Oddly, the bookstore clearly includes paperbacks as well as Blio ebooks, making it difficult to determine just how many of the latter there are. Just half of the most popular 24 are Blio editions, and these are very strong on material in the public domain (but priced as Blio editions) and books by Orson Scott Card. One curiosity: Blio books have a “BUY” button while others have an “ADD TO CART” button—and there seem to be a lot of duplicates.

Interesting that one of the top results for Blio on Google is a note on Blio under a “How to Remove Bloatware” heading. Blio seems to function as a front-end to Baker & Taylor. Actually, over the past year Blio turns up mostly in library items as a way of borrowing (some) library ebooks.

### *B&N’s PubIt self-publishing platform goes live*

By David Carnoy [on October 4, 2010](#) at *c|net*, this piece discusses B&N’s direct competitor to the Kindle Direct Publishing/Digital Text Platform. (Not sure if those are the same thing.) It’s now apparently called “[NOOK Press](#),” which makes sense.

The screenshot in the Carnoy article includes an interesting claim: “Publish with the world’s #1 bookseller.” Was that true in 2010? Is it in 2013? Notably, the service didn’t allow free ebooks and had a similar price/royalty setup to the Kindle process (albeit slightly less generous): the author gets 65% of sales if the price is between \$2.99 and \$9.99, but only 40% if it’s \$0.99 to \$2.98 or \$10 and up.

### *Open Books*

[This site](#) is from [Calibre](#), the free ebook organizer, converter, reader-emulator software that’s very widely used (18.6 million installs since August 2009, of which 3.5 million have been started at least once in the past two months as I write this) and generally very good. (When I last tried, its conversion to EPUB would not pass Lulu’s validation process, but that may have been fixed since. It’s great as an ereader emulator.)

Open Books is specifically for DRM-free ebooks that are *not* already in the public domain. It links to Project Gutenberg for public domain books. It’s sort of a portal. It appears to offer 3,383 books as of September 23, 2013 (two-thirds of them novels), so it’s not a *big* resource. The idea is commendable, however.

### *This Is Why We’ll Never Have Innovative E-Books*

After a headline like that—on this Tim Carmody story [posted August 2, 2011](#) at *Wired Business*—you’d expect some major shocking development.

What do you get? Push Pop Press was acquired by Facebook. The startup published one—count ‘em, *one*—multimedia book for the iPad. (*Only* for the iPad, apparently.) Push Pop was purchased for the people and technology, not because Facebook wants to publish ebooks. No sales figures quoted; I’m guessing that, even though the ebook was by Al Gore, it probably didn’t set sales records. (It’s available for the great unwashed as a paperback or audiobook.)

Carmody’s bummed out—yes, he says “this news frankly bums me out.”

We sorely need independent innovation in digital publishing. We need talented people who are willing to try things. Meanwhile, all of the money, attention and technological skill is marching in the opposite direction. Most big media companies with plenty of capital and deep technical talent see few if any reasons to innovate or invest in books.

Not that books aren’t selling in the tens of billions of dollars, more than some other “big media”; they are. But big media companies that don’t already own book publishers may not feel there’s a screaming need to be filled.

Carmody says “Surely there are writers with fantastic ideas for new kinds of publications.” If that’s true, there will be other startups to serve them—if there’s evidence that readers want them. Or that most book writers want multimedia.

### *How Apple is sabotaging an open standard for digital books*

Ed Bott wrote this [on January 22, 2012](#) for the Ed Bott Report at ZDNet. Bott is saying that, after strongly supporting EPUB and building iBooks on its back, Apple is “deliberately locking out that popular open standard” with iBooks 2.0 and iBooks Author software.

Without going through the whole post—and noting that EPUB is *designed* to be extensible—here’s a key paragraph:

With last week’s changes, Apple is deliberately sabotaging this format. The new iBooks 2.0 format adds CSS extensions that are not documented as part of the W3C standard. It uses a closed, proprietary Apple XML namespace. The experts I’ve consulted think it deliberately breaks the open standard.

One expert explains that the new format, while “mostly EPUB3,” is set up so that it will choke regular EPUB3 readers. There’s a lot more in the post—and it’s really about iBooks Author not creating standard EPUB files more than about the iBooks 2.0 format, which can add interactivity.

## Past and Future

A few of items on the history and future of ebooks.

## Why E-Books Failed In 2000, And What It Means For 2010

Michael Mace originally wrote this for his own blog. It appeared [on March 19, 2010](#) at *Business Insider* with his permission. Mace is a consultant who used to work for Palm, Apple and Silicon Graphics.

I love the first four paragraphs:

It's a great time for ebooks.

There are at least six ebook reader devices on the market or in preparation. A major business magazine predicts that up to seven million of these devices will be sold next year.

A major consulting firm says ebook sales will account for ten percent of the publishing market in five years. And an executive at the leading computing firm predicts that 90 percent of all publishing will switch to electronic form in just 20 years.

But the year isn't 2010—it's 2000, and the ebook market is about to go into hibernation for a decade. What went wrong, and what can the failure tell us about the prospects for ebooks in 2010?

Remember that "90%" quote? That one's tricky: depending on your definition of "publishing," it could happen—without reducing the sales of print *books* at all.

Mace's quick take:

Although some of the barriers that stopped ebooks in 2000 have been reduced, most of them are still in place. So I think the market isn't likely to grow as quickly as many optimists are predicting. However, the economics of traditional publishing are very vulnerable to a paradigm change. That change is likely to happen later than most people expect, but once it happens it'll probably move very quickly indeed. So stay out of the avalanche zone.

I tend not to believe the last bit—and wonder whether the first part was a little too negative.

It's a long piece, probably worth reading in the original (after you get past the website's ads). I'll only note a few items. Briefly, his reasons for the relative failure of ebooks in 2000: Not enough ebooks, the ebooks were too expensive, the hardware form factor was wrong, periodicals weren't ready—and the marketing stunk. He thinks most of those problems still obtain (while some periodicals are "ready," they're usually not very good—and they're even worse on e-ink readers, since you lose color and decent photo reproduction). I don't believe print magazines *that are properly designed as magazines* are likely to shift heavily to e-form in any case, but that's me: I believe that, for those of us who value magazines, the print package works extremely well as a package.

Those were just the short versions; he says a lot more. He believes Amazon and Sony were *subsidizing* the ebook/e-reader market in 2010. He

didn't see near-term explosive growth; depending on your definition of explosive, he was dead wrong for 2010-2012.

His suggestions to help establish ebooks and undermine the print publishing industry? "Save the short story"—an interesting notion if it would work. "Free the backlist"—here Mace indirectly comes off as pessimistic about libraries as well (not too surprising). "Rethink the periodical"—his discussion here tells me that he doesn't understand *or* like print magazines, that he *completely* misses the relationship of relevant ads to copy in specialized magazines (where we don't "fumble past ads," we view them as another part of the package that we can set aside or not). Indeed, he says this:

I think some magazines believe they can force the current ad experience on users. Some of them even have persuaded themselves that readers see the ads as part of the value of the magazine (see my discussion of phantom value, above). But publications need to understand that they'll be competing with a new crop of publishers who grew up online and are not hamstrung by the same thinking.

Mace says it's phantom value. That may be true for general-interest magazines. It's most assuredly *not* true for relevant advertising in enthusiast and niche magazines, and most magazines are niche magazines, whether the niche is tiny or large. Basically, what Mace thinks of as an appropriate electronic magazine is something like Yahoo! News. To which I can only say: Meh.

The rest of the article is aimed at publishers. I didn't go through it in detail. There are 92 comments; they vary widely, and I only went through some of them. At least one notes that Mace wholly ignored DRM as a reason for ebooks failing in 2000. A *lot* of semi-cleverly-done spammings (where one paragraph makes sense but is followed by a link to the real payoff), *not* stripped out—actually, it looks as though *most* comments are spam. If *Business Insider* wants to be an electronic magazine, it should know that failing to monitor a comment stream and delete *dozens* of obvious spammings undermines its credibility.

### *Some Kindle (and related) figures and quotes*

This one's from a *long* time ago—[November 6, 2009](#)—by Robert Slater, posted on *The Overly Caffeinated Librarian*. It's long and well worth noting as a baseline of sorts. It's easy to forget that there *were* significant ebook sales in the first decade of the new millennium, with wholesale figures starting at \$5.7 million in 2002, breaking the \$10 million mark in 2005 and reaching \$53 million in 2008.

He offers a "Rosy" extrapolation through 2020, based on the absurd notion that sales could continue to increase at an annual growth rate of 189.1% and noting that wholesale figures for print books were \$24.3 billion. That methodology, which he admits is implausible but "best-

case,” if combined with essentially flat sales for print books would have ebooks becoming the majority format in 2018 and having \$111.8 billion in sales in 2020. I can pretty confidently predict that the latter is not going to happen, and the former’s unlikely.

There’s a lot more here, mostly quotes with sources cited. Some of the sources are almost certainly wrong, such as the one claiming that the majority of Americans over the age of 13 didn’t read even one book in 2008. Who said that? Bowker, on a no-longer-reachable page.

### *Predictions for 2011 from Smashwords Founder*

I know, I know, the 2013 edition of Mark Coker’s annual predictions appeared in the “Miscellany” section of Part 1 of this roundup. That happens. In this case, it’s actually a Jeff Rivera post at *Galleycat* [on December 28, 2010](#) about Coker’s predictions. At this point it’s both futurism (or near-term predictions) and history, since 2011 is long gone.

What did Coker predict? That ebook sales would approach 20% of trade book revenues in the U.S. “on a monthly basis” by the end of 2011 (that is, presumably, in December 2011) and that ebooks would be at least one-third of unit consumption. Was that on the money? Maybe for the end of the year, not for the full year. According to BISG figures (probably the most comprehensive, covering many more publishers than AAP) [as reported here](#), ebooks made up about 15% of trade-book units and revenue for 2011. (As usual, it’s important to note that trade books are only part of the overall book market—maybe half, maybe less.)

Coker thought *agents* would encourage their authors to self-publish. I suspect that didn’t happen, but I could be wrong. There’s a bunch more here, which I won’t go through (and haven’t attempted to check). As usual, Coker thinks self-publishing (preferably through Smashwords) should be the preferred method of book publishing.

### *Startup Launches E-Books With Soundtracks For Immersive Reading*

John Paul Titlow wrote this [on August 24, 2011](#) at *ReadWriteWeb*—and the tease is less overenthusiastic than I might have expected:

The digital age just gave birth to something few of us were clamoring for, but that might turn out to be a worthwhile experience: books with soundtracks. Booktrack, a startup that publishes e-books containing movie-like soundtracks, went live with its first few titles yesterday. The result is a Kindle-style e-book with music and sound effects...

The books are apps. Titlow tried a freebie title:

When we downloaded Sherlock Holmes: *The Adventure of the Speckled Band* for iPad and started reading, scene-appropriate, cinematic-sounding music began playing. A few paragraphs in, we could hear the crackle of a fireplace and later, creaking doors and footsteps.

Some of the sound effects were slightly distracting, but just subtle enough that they didn't interrupt our reading.

What makes this approach interesting is the underlying technology, which syncs the changes in sound with your reading speed, which is something the application learns as you go.

Titlow links to two other early reactions: A wildly enthusiastic bit at *Business Insider* and a reaction from Charlie Sorrel that might be summarized by the title: "Bad Ideas: Booktrack Adds Sound Effects, Music to Books." Sorrel found it distracting and that it knocked him out of the reading experience and back into the mundane world.

The website is still there (although the link in Titlow's article is defunct with no redirect), and its fundamental claim is far from modest: "Booktrack is transforming reading the way sound transformed silent film." Two years down the road, Booktrack has a management team of six (all with big shiny pictures), a board of five (all men—whereas two of the six managers are women). Oh, and a *huge* collection of books: thirteen, from what I can see. The blog has one post in the last two years.

Personally, I loathe the idea—but that's me. Transforming reading? Not likely.

### *Is It time to Rethink E-Books?*

Kristina Bjoran posed that question [on September 16, 2011](#) at *Six Revisions*. She calls Michael Hart the "father of the e-book" and laments the notion that almost all contemporary ebooks are just books in digital form. She particularly laments this because she's *not* a death-of-print person: She expects print to be around for "at least several more decades."

She uses a different audio media analogy than the usual "X replaced Y and Z replaced X" with a situation in which CDs and cassettes had the same audio fidelity (and, I'll suggest, durability, although she doesn't mention that)—and people had warm feelings about cassettes. Would CDs replace them rapidly? That's tricky, because to some extent record companies *forced* the transition from LPs and cassettes to CDs. But she's more interested in "the future of the ebook"—that is, as something more than regular books.

Her first example is Ted Nelson, "a visionary and, some say, quite quirky." "Quite quirky" is *such* a mild version... Then there's MIT's Nick Montfort, who advocates for interactive poetry and fiction.

She also offers real-world examples: Enhanced Editions with its load of extras (the link is now something entirely different, but there does appear to be such a company), "cinematic e-books" and a couple of others (including BookTrack).

Bjoran's case boils down to not seeing any *point* in having ebooks if they're just books in digital form. She closes: "E-books shouldn't just be a

facsimile of what they may one day replace. With all the technology they're riding on, e-books have the potential to take the narrative experience to new heights."

The typical problem is that few writers or media production teams seem to see ways to "take the narrative experience to new heights" that aren't movies. Some commenters—especially those who read novels—basically say "What's wrong with well-written text?" Others applaud.

### *The Future Of Books: A Dystopian Timeline*

John Biggs wrote this on September 27, 2011 at *TechCrunch*—and he's an extremist:

I'm a strong proponent of the ebook and, as I've said again and again, I love books but they're not going to make it past this decade, at least in most of the developed world. [Emphasis added.]

Right. Come 2020, *there won't be any printed books* in developed nations. And, of course, *all* bookstores will be gone in a few years because...reasons, I guess. (You know, when someone says "I love X but..." I'm beginning to suspect an odd sort of love.)

His timeline is nothing if not audacious. Examples:

- 2013: Ebook sales surpass *all* other book sales, including used books—and emagazines start cutting into paper magazines.
- 2016: Lifestyle magazines and popular Conde Nast titles go tablet only.
- 2019: B&N (still around, but the stores are 100% cafes and digital access points) and Amazon publishing arms "dwarf all other publishing," and most publishers disappear.
- 2023: Ereaders as thin as a few sheets of paper.
- 2025: Transition complete even in the developing world, with the printed book "at best an artifact and at worst a nuisance."

In an early comment, Lori Reed notes the absence of libraries in this timeline—and Biggs has pretty much written them off as well. Lots of comments, some of which think he's too conservative—but most comments are from *TechCrunch* readers. (I notice that I tagged this both as "futurism" and as "humor." Somehow, I don't see the humor in it when I reread it—he seems as serious as he is almost certainly wrong.)

### *Why the book's future never happened*

Here's another one that could have gone elsewhere: Paul LaFarge's [October 4, 2011 Salon](#) article asking "We now read on iPads and Kindles and Nooks. So why did the hypertext novel fail to launch?" (The title in the URL is interesting: "return of hypertext.")

LaFarge reminds us that in the 1990s there was lots of hype for hypertext, "a medium that had the potential to transform storytelling in

the post-Gutenberg era.” There was some hypertext fiction—on diskette, on CD-ROM, on the internet, mostly in the very early 1990s.

And then ... nothing happened. The [Wikipedia entry](#) for hypertext fiction lists no works published after 2001, and although Wikipedia isn't the final word on anything, you have to think, if someone had written a hypertext fiction, this is where they'd want to tell you about it.

He talks about the wondrous ebook developments, the multimedia projects and the “crisis in traditional book publishing”—and thinks this should be the time for hypertext fiction. (He's working on a hypertext novel.) Why is this?

I'd quote a paragraph about the experiments of the 1990s not being very good or working very well, but copying-and-pasting from *Salon* seems fraught with difficulties. He makes good points: the user interfaces were frequently awful (monospaced type, for example)—and “too many of the early hypertexts relied on the novelty of their form to do literary work.” A crappy novel turned into hypertext is still a crappy novel?

But, he says, that's a failure of craft, not a flaw in the medium. (I think “flaw” is the word—*Salon's* interface is so flawed I can't be sure). He says hypertexts are harder to write than linear novels “because you don't have the spring-loaded crutch of linearity and ‘arc’ to support your work.” That may be the first time I've heard narrative arc described as a spring-loaded crutch! Later, he calls hypertext fiction “impossibly hard to create.” Oh, and not only do you have to create the fiction, you probably have to build the app as well.

LaFarge is a believer—for reasons I don't really understand.

On the other, the form fits with life now. So much of what we do is hyperlinked and mediated by screens that it feels important to find a way to reflect on that condition, and fiction, literature, has long afforded us the possibility of reflection. Just as the novel taught us how to be individuals, 300 years ago, by giving us a space in which to be alone, but not too alone—a space in which to be alone with a book—so hypertext fiction may let us try on new, non-linear identities, without dissolving us entirely into the web.

Huh?

In the article, LaFarge complains about one early hypertext novel not running any more. The company (still around, still tiny) added a comment saying there's a new version...but the fact that the comment *fails to use HTML properly*, resulting in most of it appearing in red, does not inspire wholehearted confidence. (The person closed a hyperlink with “</a<” rather than “</a>,” turning the whole rest of the comment into one big red link. And apparently never looked at the comment after it was posted or could find no way to convince the powers that be to fix it.)

A number of commenters noted that people reading novels maybe don't *want* to follow various links. "Eastgate"—the hypertext publisher in question—seemed eager to refute them. One or two comments refer to some videogames as being a different form of hypertext fiction. Was that especially true of Infocom's classic text adventures? (I own them—on an omnibus CD-ROM with more than 30 of them. They run. I've never spent more than ten minutes with any of them.)

A couple of other hypertext fiction publishers bring up their own "highly successful" works in the comments. If readers want them and writers can create them, there's no strong reason they shouldn't succeed—but those are two *very* big "if"s. When somebody committed to a medium calls it "impossibly difficult," you have to wonder. Maybe he meant "fiendishly," but still...

It would be snarky to say that, based on the quality of writing in the quoted paragraph, I probably won't be rushing to buy this person's hypertext novel. But it would also be true.

### *The line between book and Internet will disappear*

Then there's Hugh McGuire, in this [September 10, 2010 item](#) at O'Reilly TOC. The subhead: "The inevitability of truly connected books and why publishers need APIs." *Inevitably*: that word you have to love!

More than three years after this item, it's so charming and absolutely certain that I can't help but discuss it—especially since the key prediction is now apparently 3.5 years old:

A few months ago I posted a tweet that said:

The distinction between "the internet" & "books" is totally totally arbitrary, and will disappear in 5 years. Start adjusting now.

The tweet got some negative reaction. But I'm certain this shift will happen, and should happen (I won't take bets on the timeline though).

It *should* happen because a book properly hooked into the Internet is a far more valuable collection of information than a book not properly hooked into the Internet. And once something is "properly hooked into the internet," that something is part of the Internet.

It *will* happen, because: what is a book, after all, but a collection of data (text + images), with a defined structure (chapters, headings, captions), meta data (title, author, ISBN), and prettied up with some presentation design? In other words, what is a book, but a website that happens to be written on paper and not connected to the web?

So *within eighteen months from now* (24 to be generous), *all books* will be, in essence, websites "properly hooked into the Internet." Because a book's just a defective website!

He dismisses current ebooks for the usual reasons: they're just digitized books. He discusses all the things you *can't* do with a book, and to me it's a strange list indeed—but then, to me McGuire's definition of a book is eccentric at best.

There's not much more here, mostly saying that, because EPUB uses XHTML, an epub is “really just a website” with a few special characteristics and wrapped to be a separate item. “EPUB is really a way to build a website without letting readers or publishers know it.” He says publishers need to be API providers because books *need* to be “truly of the Internet.”

I wonder whether McGuire has ever read a novel or whether he regards fiction as irrelevant—or, possibly worse, whether he believes that making a novel “fully hooked into the Internet” would be a wonderful thing? I'm clearly in the minority of readers of this website—nearly all the comments are enthusiastic. Therefore, I guess, we can expect that by, say, August 2015 all (or at least all new) books will be websites hooked into the internet. Because, you know, it's *inevitable*. End of discussion.

### *Why e-books will be much bigger than you can imagine*

This one—by Trey Ratcliff on January 16, 2012 at *GigaOm*—is interesting in a number of ways, as Ratcliff tells us why he thinks “the e-book business can really take off.” He goes through an odd story. He's a photographer who specializes in HDR (high-dynamic-range) photography, the kind of ultrasaturated stuff that's very popular these days. He's “slowly built up a great audience” for his website.

He was approached by publishers to write a book about HDR. He chose one, got a good advance (by my standards at least!), wrote the book and flew out to have dinner with some of the senior execs at the publisher...and they asked him what he planned to do about marketing. Since he has “hundreds of thousands of people” coming to his blog and all these other folks who love his images, he managed in various ways. And concluded in the process that the traditional process chewed up too much of the profits. Here's the relevant paragraph (his publisher was Peachpit, apparently very big for photography books):

Let's look at Peachpit. Now, I still really like Peachpit. It's filled with very smart and clever people who are stuck in a dying system. Remember, just because I got only 15 percent of the book sales does not mean that Peachpit makes 85 percent. That money is like the great catch in Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. It's nibbled away by the book binder, lawyers, the guy that drives the truck to Borders (er, Barnes & Noble) the printing company, the book stores and all the other little people required to physically produce a book and get it into the hands of the reader. No one is getting rich off these things. In fact, everyone involved with the old book business is just

barely scraping by with profit margins that'll make your Adam's apple shake up and down like Eve's eyebrows.

So, he says, he started his own photo-related ebook company “and now we operate at an 80 percent profit margin.” The company almost immediately hit six-digit income. It's all *wonderful!*

He has “emergent behaviors.” One is that ebooks won't just sell by displacing print books, but more because “people are collecting e-books like nuts for the winter.” Is that still happening? Then there's this:

E-books are also more efficient in the way they communicate ideas. Our e-books happen to be mostly instructional, and it seems most people prefer an e-book that is about 50 pages long. Here's a secret: Most authors can tell you all you need to know about a subject in 50 pages. The reason that many instructional books in bookstores are 300+ pages is so they look impressive and thick. Just like those old wonderful computer game manuals, a bit of heft indicates quality.

I believe he's partly right *for some types of nonfiction book*—specifically instructional books. (But go back to the Smashwords discussion: Long ebooks sell best.)

“Emergent behavior 2” I'll quote verbatim: “Social media is a marketing multiplier.” So for those authors who have more than 750,000 Google+ followers and 150,000 daily views on their blog, social media is *the way to go*. All you need to do is get 750,000 Google+ followers...

He doesn't *entirely* dismiss print books:

Traditional books will never die completely. I still have a great library here at home with countless stuffed shelves heaving forth with wonderful books. I expect many people do the same thing I enjoy doing: collecting my favorite books in real life. I like to get first editions, rare copies, signed editions, and this sort of thing. I use Alibris to find signed copies and interesting editions of books to collect.

I'm not dismissing his discussion. Read it for yourself. I'll offer the same advice to my Google+ followers... Hmm. There doesn't seem to be a “follower” category in Google+, but 519 people have me in their circles, so I'm *almost there*. Just 749,491 more to go...

Which, desarkned, is partly to say that *he's probably right*: If you have hundreds of thousands of social media followers, you can probably sell hundreds, possibly thousands, of copies of an ebook just by pushing it to those followers. If you don't, well, tough.

### *The Future of the Book Business: A Classicist's View*

Emma Wright wrote this [on March 5, 2012](#) at *Futurebook* (from *The Bookseller*). Note that this is an industry site catering to bookstores.

Wright looks for historic parallels to the situation in publishing, and here's what she sees:

The historical parallel which comes most strongly to mind as I follow the evolution of the publishing industry is that of 4th-century Greece, when the major city states (Athens, Thebes and Sparta) were engaged in a near-constant round of wars with each other. Meanwhile, Philip of Macedon was in the north whipping his country into shape and developing a new style of warfare. The Greeks did not see Macedonia as a threat because it had until recently been an undeveloped backwater full of barbarians, and so it was allowed to grow unchallenged until Philip and then Alexander were ready to move in and conquer them all.

She sees “the complacency bred of contempt” in the attitude of traditional publishers toward Amazon and self-publishing—first denial, then supreme confidence that the upstarts can’t overtake them.

She notes Joe Konrath’s attack on traditional publishers but also self-publishers signing up with traditional publishers. She says the real question is why publishers aren’t putting up more of a fight to justify their existence.

She lists core strengths of traditional publishing. Of those, experienced editors, promotion, production and design and advances are all good to mention—but “contacts within the industry” doesn’t mean much to me.

More interesting is her “Issue 2: Where is the industry currently going wrong?” The first of three items is excellent: “Assuming that Amazon and self-publishers are putting out shoddy products and the reading public will come down on the side of quality. Kindle sales beg to differ.” It doesn’t help that so many recent Big Publisher books are shoddy products—full of bad breaks, apparently not proofread carefully, in some cases apparently not edited. The second: fixating on preserving printed books *at the expense of robust ebook standards*.

Her third focus: what should publishing do to survive? “Take digital seriously for a start.” That’s not a bad idea. Get more people to read books, regardless of the medium. (That’s specifically notable because Wright explicitly says the printed book “is not going to die out in our lifetime.” The point is to grow the pie—make more avid readers—not just fight over the slices.)

### *The ee!book is coming!*

Here’s a very specific one that I’m nearly certain is correct, by Jamie LaRue [on March 25, 2012](#) at *myliblog*. Worth noting, if you don’t already know: Not only is LaRue a pioneer at creating library ebook systems that *own* ebooks rather than leasing them, he’s one who believes that libraries should and must deal with self-publishing—and should be facilitators or publishers themselves.

He starts with the assumption that your library does or will have infrastructure for the management of digital content, and sees at least

four kinds of content: crap, OK stuff, great works (there *will* be and probably already are great self-published books: of that there is no doubt at all)...and “the evil e-book” or ee!book.

What’s an ee!book? Here’s LaRue:

The idea is that the ePub format—the emerging standard for e-books, not only has text, but audio, embedded video, and external links. That last one is the problem.

This is inevitable: there will be books that are (a) 80% plagiarism (stolen from other works), (b) 15% links to live pornography, and (c) 5% malicious code.

Librarians have often spoken of books that take over your life, that are so compelling, so much better than your own life, that you are swallowed up by them for a while.

But I’m talking here about books that clean out your bank accounts, then e-mail, or tweet, or otherwise transmit themselves to everybody you know.

He thinks libraries need to figure out strategies—not strategy, but strategies—for coping with such books. He’s probably right.

*Is making books social a good thing or a bad thing?*

Mathew Ingram poses that question on April 2, 2012 at *GigaOm*—with an odd lede and summary:

As virtually every form of media from newspapers to television shows becomes more socially aware, the book remains stubbornly anti-social.

Because there are no book clubs, GoodRead and things like it don’t exist, nobody ever posts anything about the books they like or dislike... whereas you can comment *directly to your TV show*. Right? I must have missed that last one: Seems to me most TV “social awareness” is precisely equivalent to that of books—it takes place outside the medium itself.

Never mind. Ingram is pointing to a [Clive Thompson post](#) (actually an interview with Thompson). Thompson says, among other things:

I am absolutely convinced that being able to see what other people have said about a book and to talk about it and respond to it is going to be a freakishly huge boon for books. If you think about it, so much of how people who love books have dealt with their love is by trying to put together social environments where people can talk about books, like book clubs. Universities are essentially institutions designed to let people talk about books. We do this over and over and over again.

Of course, all but the first sentence of that refutes Ingram’s introduction: Thompson’s saying books *already* have social elements.

Apparently Thompson annotates like crazy when he reads, because to him it's All About the Conversation. If you "really dig books" you make a point of creating conversations about them.

I'm almost trembling with excitement, because I foresee this point when we surmount some of these design challenges and we'll be able to have different ways of reading a book. You'll have a digital book, and if you want, you'll turn off all the comments, read in solitude—"everyone shut up"—or you can say, show me the most awesome comments, show me the highest-rated comments, show me everything, show me the firehose. What have my friends or people I care about said about this book? Are there any actual people reading this page right now that I might want to have a live conversation with about it? There's so much fun someone could have with these layers, ranging from classic, total isolation to like rollicking bar-party conversation.

*Almost trembling with excitement.* Hand me that fan, will you?

By the way—or not—it wouldn't hurt to offer Thompson's answer to "So do you think print is going anywhere?"

No. I think print will remain around but will become much weirder...

Print-on-demand machines have gone from being ridiculously expensive to the point where it'll one day sit on your desk. Right now they're about \$100,000. In like 10 years, you're going to be able to print a good-looking softcover at home. And things get really weird then. In the same way they got weird when you gave everyone word processing and then you gave them cheap printers and then you gave them Photoshop and design tools that were free. What you see with print on demand in the last couple of years is that there's been explosion in the number of things printed, but they're printed in small quantities: three, four, five copies total. They tend to be things like very specialty books; weird memoirs only three or four people want to read; mementos: people put together photographs of their vacation with a little writeup. You get books that get updated in curious new ways. The University of Calgary hosted the former prime minister of Canada, Kim Campbell, and offered to sell copies of her book at her event. But her book was out of print. So she got the digital file, wrote two new chapters, a new introduction, and they printed 50 copies of it for the event.

I think the mass books, the one where you sell 2 million copies, will go digital. Print-on-demand is going to cause this explosion of weird interesting experiments in print that were never before possible because you could only think of books that were going to sell to 10,000 people. There will always be a boutique market for things you only do in print or only want to see in print. Sometimes I worry the

opposite—people worry books are going to go away, and I worry we’re going to be ass-deep in them. [Emphasis added.]

I don’t disagree with most of this. I would not be surprised to see ebooks replace 90% of mass-market paperbacks, possibly 100%. I’m less convinced that mid-market books, those selling 1,000 to 100,000 copies, will go digital (and I don’t see Thompson making that claim). Since I published a (ahem) traditional print book touting micropublishing, the books “only three or four people want to read,” I believe that trend will grow. Will most people actually have home book-production machines? I think not: I doubt that the binding/gluing technology and ecologically sound paper-cutting technologies scale *down* that well. It would make far more sense for public libraries or, for that matter, Fedex Kinko’s to have such machines, so that they’re used at least a few times a day. Thompson later suggests that bookstores or drugstores might have \$10,000 PoD machines: That seems about right.

Back to Ingram’s item. He says Thompson’s predicting a future in which books have “comments and conversations integrated into them”—but note that Thompson also suggests readers would have a trivially easy way to turn off all that noise and just *read the damn book*.

I find it odd that Ingram seems to think GoodReads is *not* much of a success but touts “the 1book140” project as hot stuff. I’ve never heard of the latter, but Ingram wrote about it, so that may explain it. In any case, Ingram raises a reasonable question:

Is that because most people still see reading as a fundamentally solitary activity? Whenever social features come up, I hear friends say that they have no interest in making their books more social, and some even say they prefer reading on a Kindle or Nook because it just has text, and therefore they don’t get distracted by other things while they are trying to read.

Ah, but he says the young’uns are different, that they don’t like using e-readers “precisely because they *\*aren’t\** social” (oddly, he uses asterisks for emphasis within his article. Italics stopped working?) I went to the link for that assertion, and it’s remarkably thin stuff—especially since one age group quoted was *entirely second-hand*, since the survey was of its parents!

The close of this story makes it clear that Ingram *believes* in embedded social networking and group comments within ebooks—he’s “surprised we are still so far away from the future that Thompson envisions.”

The first comment nails it: the commenter, who enjoys GoodReads and others, “can’t imagine being social while I’m actually reading.” Several people make the point that books are already social (indirectly)—and Ingram’s response is to agree (thus negating his lede) but to say that the social part needs to be integrated.

Thompson comments, noting “probably only a minority of book readers will be excited by social reading”...which is, as he says, also true of sharing in other media. It is interesting that Thompson seems to think the minority who are really into commenting can produce “a towering amount of good commentary!” One wonders whether he reads comments at CNN or /. or, for that matter, *Wired*? He also seems to get that “even the die-hard fans of social reading won’t want commentary built into a book,” but that “manifestly cool conversation” might change their minds. He uses comments on *newspaper stories* as an example of “manifestly cool” conversation. I really *do* wonder what sites Thompson reads! (Oh: Never mind. He cites Anil Dash and blames bad comments on site owners.)

### *Some Tough Questions for Enhanced E-Books*

This one comes from Andrew Rhomberg [on April 10, 2012](#) at *digital book world*—another industry site. He notes [a Pew study on e-reading](#) as giving publishers hope that consumers are ready for enhanced e-books. He’s not so sure.

If the enhanced e-book is the future, then why is (almost) every enhanced e-book start-up either bankrupt, struggling or has pivoted to something else?

Why are most big publishers losing money on enhanced e-books (a few notable exceptions in specialized segments)?

And at what point is it no longer a book, but a game or video with some text (i.e. the equivalent of the free “extras” on a DVD)?

And has anybody actually tracked how readers “read” enhanced e-books? Do they click on those audio and video links and if so, when? Do we really understand this medium?

I am a big believer in enhanced e-books for children (replace carousel books and the like) or for travel books (now apps). But replacing narrative-driven books (novels) for adults? Gulp, hard to believe.

Very good questions. The first comment is interesting—partly because of what it says about hyperfiction:

If by “enhanced ebook” you mean ruining a perfectly good novel with distracting and superfluous video, I’m with you all the way.

But it’s way too soon to declare the sum total of the ebook product to be long form text, which is your implication. As the cost and technical complexity of building books and paginated apps drops to simple ebook levels, and it will, and there’s support for richer experiences in ebook reading systems, we’ll have an opportunity to see what the book-inclined imagination is capable of.

At the moment, calling time of death on anything but long form text would be like declaring DOS, in 1983, the ultimate in operating systems.

I didn't see that implication. I certainly see that there's room in "ebooks" for more shorter things—maybe that's the natural form for things that are ebook first or only. It turns out, in his response to this comment, that Rhomberg was set off by a typically idiotic deathwatch statement:

This post was born in response to a statement "in 10 years the books as we know it will be dead" and the enhanced ebook will totally dominate".

Not that Rhomberg is a great believer in the future of print books! He goes on to say that, by 2022, printed books "may still have double digit market share (10%, 20%, maybe even 30%)."

Comments are all over the place, with some denouncing him as protecting the old ways, some saying enhanced e-books may be *another* medium or may be suitable for special purposes (which he doesn't deny), blather about the Wonderful New World of Storytelling and a future "story experience" that includes everything but the kitchen sink. When Rhomberg says he's complaining about the hype and the idea that *all* books will be enhanced ebooks, one response basically says "hype is how you sell things."

I used the word "blather" for one comment. The same commenter popped up again with a discussion of the wonderful future of storytelling—which I admit I couldn't read to the end of—and I believe being able to write coherent sentences and paragraphs comes before multimedia enhancements. I did love Bob Mayer's comment: He *created* an enhanced version of his historical novel—then dropped it all, because he found it interfered with reading.

Will there be worthwhile enhanced ebooks? Certainly, just as there were worthwhile title CD-ROMs. Will they succeed? Probably, in some cases. Will they *replace* (wholly or mostly) linear narrative? I discussed that in Part 1 of this mega-essay, but I believe the answer is "Almost certainly not."

So, I'm fairly sure, does Rhomberg.

*Why e-books will soon be obsolete (and no, it's not just because of DRM)*

That startling assertion comes from Jani Patokallio, writing [on April 30, 2012](#) at *Gyrovague*. What does "soon" mean? "Within five years"—so by April 30, 2017. Mark your calendar.

Why? You'll need to read the post, but it has *partly* to do with DRM (and geographic restrictions) and much to do with proprietary formats. Apparently, this writer is certain that devices such as the Kindle Fire are

also “rapidly becoming obsolete.” Oh, and ebooks as digital representations of printed books: that’s doomed.

What replaces ebooks? *Web pages*—or, for linear narrative, PDFs. What’s that you say? Book-length PDFs *are* ebooks? What a silly thing to say! They can’t be e-books—because this writer thinks that’s what will replace ebooks where interactivity and multimedia aren’t needed, and *all* ebooks will soon be obsolete. QED: PDFs can’t be ebooks.

Damn. And here I thought I’d published half a dozen or more ebooks, where in fact I’ve only published one or two...

How do publishers get paid for these webbooks (or whatever you’d call web pages that replace books)? That’s a detail...

## Humor

I’m pretty sure these are *intentionally* humorous, unlike the many moments of probably-unintended humor in most aspects of ebook discussions.

### *The Electronic Publishing Bingo Card*

John Scalzi published this [on March 20, 2011](#) at *Whatever*—“because someone had to do it, and why not me.” It’s just what the title says: a set of 25 (generally annoying and sometimes false or overstated) comments about ebooks, e-publishing and the like—including “In just [x] years everything will be digital” and “Printing is the most costly part of publishing.” And, of course, the essential “These anecdotal unverified statistics mean I’m right.”

Scalzi’s been doing epublising and self-publishing for years, along with traditional publishing, so his point here is *not* to attack electronic publishing. He’s saying these arguments are clichés (even those that have a bit of truth):

You might wish to cultivate new ones, or at least learn why your favorite argument isn’t always super-mega-ultra-convincing to those of us who have to think about this stuff as it regards our professional lives.

A clever bingo card. Two hundred forty two comments, some additional suggestions, many either amusing or useful. No, of course I didn’t read them all.

### *Epublishing Bingo card: the traditional media edition*

Cory Doctorow linked to Scalzi’s post, but here—on [March 22, 2011](#) at *boingboing*—also reprints and links to what I guess is sort of a “countercard” entitled Traditional Publishing Bingo, prepared by “Shmuel510,” a professional copyeditor. Where Scalzi’s clichés are those of epublising and self-publishing advocates, this card lists clichés of the traditional book publishers *against* self-pubs and ebooks. For example,

“You want authors and editors to starve” and “Without copyright, we wouldn’t have Shakespeare.” For that one, he notes: “Lest anybody think I’m descending into satire with the Shakespeare square, it was in the [New York Times](#). I admit that it’s otherwise so obviously [contrary to fact](#) that I’d feel silly including it at all.”

Guess who made that nearly-insane argument? Scott Turow.

By comparison to Scalzi’s commenters, the *boingboing* crowd is terse: only 28 responses. Some of them get bogged down over one of the squares: “Fanfic is crap.” To which Sturgeon’s Law is the appropriate response...90% of *everything* is crap.

### *The Future of Books*

Much as I’d love to put this one—by James Warner [on March 24, 2011](#) at *McSweeney’s* (finding the date took a little work...)—in Past and Future, it clearly belongs here. It’s a set of seven projections, one for each decade starting with 2020.

You really need to read [the piece itself](#), but here’s a sample:

2020: All Books Will Be Cross-Platform and Interactive.

Future “books” will be bundled with soundtracks, musical leitmotifs, 3-D graphics, and streaming video. They’ll be enhanced with social bookmarking, online dating, and alerts from geo-networking apps whenever someone in your locality purchases the same book as you—anything so you don’t have to actually read the thing...

There’s more—and I do recognize that there are writers who’ve made that first prediction quite seriously. For 2030, Warner has all books crowdsourced and cloudbased...and you *really* need to read that one! Also 2060, when physical books make a comeback. Of sorts. Oh, and one great sentence from 2080:

For the benefit of those people at future-of-publishing panels—there’s always one, for some reason—who insist it’s really not about the text but the smell of the book, books will by this time be available exclusively as lines of fragrances.

And, of course, for every such panelist there will be ten others sneering about “booksmellers.” The final sentence is...no, sorry, you really need to [go there](#).

### *If It’s E, It Leads*

Thanks to *Library Journal’s* custom Google search box, I was able to find [this September 22, 2011](#) “Peer to Peer Review” column by Barbara Fister even though my tagged URL resulted in a 404. (The link here is correct as of October 3, 2013.)

Fister grew up in an editorial family:

My father wrote the book on news editing—literally. He started his journalism career at a small town weekly in North Dakota, where he got a job as a printer’s devil at age 12, becoming a reporter, editor, and salesman before he left for college. After J-school he worked in the newsroom of the Providence Journal before a detour into the army. Eventually, he returned to school, this time to teach several generations of journalists. [News Editing](#), a textbook he wrote that helped feed and clothe his five kids, was born the year before I was and went through two more editions. He decided not to publish a fourth edition because newsrooms were changing too fast—and because he’d grown disgusted with the soaring cost of permission payments required to give students examples of poorly-written headlines and buried ledes.

That’s the lede but not the real story—which is Fister’s felt need to “take a red pencil to news stories about ebooks.” She offers [an example](#) with a couple of remarkable statements—the number of Americans using ebook readers has almost doubled in a year, and one out of six Americans who *don’t* own them planned to buy one within half a year.

Print is doomed! The e-future is here! But hang on a minute while I look at the actual figures.

Oh.

The Fister News Service would report: “a Harris Poll has just revealed the vast majority of Americans—a whopping 85 percent—do not own e-readers, and five of six Americans who don’t own an e-reader today do not plan to buy one anytime soon.” But that would be boring.

I’ve enjoyed number-flipping at times, and this is a good example. (She notes a more encouraging item from the same survey: 68% of American *purchased* at least one book during the previous year—which sure looks good compared to some of the absurd infographics about how so few people read anything anymore. Unless tens of millions of Americans buy books just to put on their bookshelves...)

Fister has fun with other silliness in reporting, such as the astonishing survey result that “eReader owners bought considerably more eBooks than the general population.” Wowzer! And the compound fracture: “One out of five eBook publishers generates more than 10% of their sales from eBooks.” Note that that’s *eBook* publishers—and 80% of them were getting 90% of their sales from print. (I’m sure the figures were different for 2012.) There’s more here, and of course it’s worth reading.

### *Ebooks Are Horrible: A Consideration*

Joshua Ellis wrote this [on January 24, 2012](#) at *pandodaily*—and no, it’s not really a broadside against ebooks. Or at least not entirely. It’s a little hard to summarize, so I’ll just point to it.

## Rights

These are items that *seemed* to be more specifically about rights than most others. The first few relate to a widely publicized incident that, in the long run, had less of an effect than it should have (except that Amazon promised it would never do it again).

### *Some E-Books Are More Equal Than Others*

An oldie (more than four years!) but a goodie, this David Pogue post [on July 17, 2009](#) at the *New York Times* is the oldest one I tagged on the Great Orwell Scandal, the point at which Amazon made it clear that—with some exceptions—you don't own ebooks:

This morning, hundreds of Amazon Kindle owners awoke to discover that books by a certain famous author had mysteriously disappeared from their e-book readers. These were books that they had bought and paid for—[thought they owned](#).

You know the heart of the story: it was claimed that *1984* and *Animal Farm* for the Kindle were unauthorized editions, so Amazon simply removed them from the Kindles of those who had “purchased” them and refunded the purchase price.

This is ugly for all kinds of reasons. Amazon says that this sort of thing is “rare,” but that it can happen at all is unsettling; we've been taught to believe that e-books are, you know, just like books, only better. Already, we've learned that they're not really like books, in that once we're finished reading them, we can't resell or even donate them. But now we learn that all sales may not even be final.

Pogue notes the irony of Orwell being the author so honored. The short post is followed by 584 comments, many from people saying they'd never buy a Kindle now, not with DRM.

### *Amazon, Why Don't You Come In Our Houses And Burn Our Books Too?*

That's MG Siegler, also [on July 17, 2009](#), at *TechCrunch*. Siegler felt the need to weigh in “because it's just so ridiculous.” Siegler flatly states that the books were “perfectly legal versions”—which is apparently false, but never mind. (Odd that Siegler didn't bother to add the report that the editions weren't authorized.)

He also notes that Steve Jobs confirmed that Apple has a “kill switch” allowing it to remove apps from your iStuff if it thinks it's necessary.

Fewer comments, but still close to 200, and much ruder than the first few at *NYT*. One of them is factually wrong—responding to a dismissive comment saying Amazon's terms of service probably allowed this:

“ToS”? The books that exist on your bookshelf and ‘digitally’ in your Kindle aren’t a “service”, nor sold as such. They aren’t beholden to any ToS. They are “permanent”. They are YOURS. They are private property. They belong to YOU and you only. Forever. Nobody can take them away from you. Get it? Don’t confuse the books’ sale with their delivery, which does occur over a service, called “Whispernet”, to which unrelated and irrelevant terms of service do apply.

That *should* be the case, but it’s clearly not. Not as long as DRM is around. Commenters on both stories noted that the ability to remove a book implies the ability to *revise* a book without your knowledge, a far more Orwellian prospect (one welcomed by some ebook advocates who want self-updating books).

I had two more items tagged for this topic. One is a big take on book-burning...from a technophilic “journalist” who later declared that he so loved the new Kindle that he’d never buy print books again, so I’m not going there—and the other is “Lost in the Clouds,” as the 404 message says.

Here’s the thing: Four years later, the Kindle is still the dominant ereader (and there are a *lot* more of them now than there were in July 2009), Amazon is still the dominant ebook seller...and Kindle ebooks still carry DRM. Meaning that, while Amazon may pledge not to do this, it’s certainly not impossible. But it seems as though many folks have accepted the “everything is licensed” future. A shame, really.

### *Digital Books and Your Rights: A Checklist for Readers*

This *long, long* post by Corynne McSherry and Cindy Cohn appeared [on February 16, 2010](#) at the Electronic Frontier Foundation. How long? The [PDF version](#) is 18 8.5” x 11” pages, 16 of them single-spaced text.

It’s well worth downloading—and of course it’s CC-BY, so I can quote as much of it as I want. Which, in this case, will be the short version (substituting letters at the second level for the numbers in the original):

1. Does it (your e-book reader/service/tool, etc.) protect your privacy?
  - a. Does it limit the tracking of you and your reading?
  - b. Does it protect against disclosure of your reading habits?
  - c. Does it give you control over the information it collects about you?
  - d. Does it tell you what it’s doing with the information it collects and can you enforce its commitments to you?
2. Does it tell you what it is doing?
  - a. How clear are the disclosures? Will they be updated and, if so, how?

- b. Does it let you or others investigate to confirm that the product, device or service is actually functioning as promised?
- 3. What happens to additions you make to books you buy, like annotations, highlights, commentary?
  - a. Can you keep your additions?
  - b. Can you control who has access to your additions?
- 4. Do you own the book or just rent or license it?
  - a. Can you lend or resell?
  - b. Is it locked down or do you have the freedom to move it to other readers, services or uses?
  - c. Can the vendor take it away or edit it after you've purchased it?
- 5. Is it censorship-resistant?
  - a. How easy is it to remove or edit books once access or possession has been given to readers?
  - b. Is there a single entity that stores all the books, as in Google Books or the Kindle, such that political or legal pressure on that place might result in a loss of the work for all readers?
  - c. Are the books stored in a location where censorship is historically a problem, such as China or Saudi Arabia, or in a place that is relatively free of censorship?
  - d. Are the copyright or other laws applicable to the books balanced, giving readers the protection of doctrines like fair use or copyright exceptions and limitations?
- 6. Is it burdened with digital rights management ("DRM")?
  - a. Is there DRM? If so, how does the DRM limit your use of the book? Can you still lend, give or resell the book? What features are enabled and/or disabled?
  - b. Are you locked into a single technology or a group of technologies, or can you choose any device you wish to read and otherwise use your book?
  - c. Has the DRM been studied by independent researchers to confirm that it causes no security or other problems?
  - d. Does it report on your activities or otherwise violate your privacy?
- 7. Does it promote access to knowledge?
  - a. Can authors and publishers easily dedicate their books to the public domain, or use Creative Commons or other flexible licensing schemes?

- b. Can you trust your “digital librarian” to enable access to as many works as possible?
  - c. Is it available to people without money, as public libraries are?
  - d. Is it cost-effective for people of limited means?
  - e. Is it available to people with disabilities?
8. Does it foster or inhibit competition and innovation?
- a. Can books from this source be read on a variety of readers or formats or are you locked into a single format or reader? Conversely, can you read or access books from a variety of sources?
  - b. Can the device or service features be easily added or modified by users or third parties or must features be pre-approved by the provider?
  - c. Does the provider depend on or promote agreements that limit competition?

Those are just the checklist points; each receives one or more paragraphs of commentary on why it matters (and in some cases sets of subpoints) in the full post or download. I can't even begin to comment on these points. Here's the conclusion:

The future of digital books must not be shaped solely by authors, publishers, booksellers or even librarians. Readers can and should play an active role in realizing the extraordinary potential of digital books — but only if we stay informed, ask questions, and demand that providers respect the rights and expectations that have been developed and defended for physical books. We hope readers will use this checklist to do just that.

### *A proto bill of ebook management rights*

Peter Brantley posted this [on March 16, 2010](#) at *Shimenawa*. Where EFF offers a checklist, Brantley offers a different form. I could do without the preface's assumption that we're leaving print books behind, but that's beside the point.

Brantley's blog does have a CC license (BY-NC, the same as *Cites & Insights*) and the statement's worded well enough—and is interesting enough—that I think it's worth quoting in full. It adds some items *not* on the EFF list.

Reader privacy is a user controlled option, not a whimsical gift from the bookseller. I should be able to choose how much information is obtained and utilized by a book vendor, either directly on my behalf (e.g., on profile based recommending) or to enrich the experience of other readers (collaborative recommending).

I own the books that I buy. Books are not munitions, nor they should they ever be subject to an end user license.

A bookseller should never ever be able to remove a book from my account , or otherwise render a book unavailable, without my express permission. Never, never, never, ever. ( The 1984 clause.)

Digital first sale. I should be able to associate any other reader account with my own for gifting and lending books, on a book by book basis, and at no additional cost, as long as the recipient agrees. These associations might be ephemeral, e.g. the duration of a loan, or persistent, e.g., my partner and I might choose to link our accounts. (One book, one loan).

No DRM on purchased books. Readers should not be restricted in their ability to move their owned books among their devices, nor should any barriers be placed in the way of adding or removing devices to their account.

Virtual bookshelves should be portable. Readers should be able to create bookshelves in an open format, such as OPDS, and be able to move them from one book platform to another. Over my reading lifetime, I may acquire books from different vendors, and the network-based associations for these titles should be portable. Book platforms should compete on services.

I should be able to “mask” books. I should be able to selectively make private my purchases of books from other users or the vendor’s social systems. For reasons of personal health, sexual preferences, or other privacy matters, I should be able to cloak any otherwise permissible data harvesting for whichever books I choose.

Book culling is a right. Readers should be able to permanently remove their purchased books from their bookshelves. Readers can throw or give away books they no longer want to own; it should be possible to delete books from a virtual bookshelf.

Accounts should be cloud-resident. Readers should be able to manage multiple authorized accounts from any given device.

Books are inviolate. I have a right to expect that the books that I buy will not have been maliciously altered, expurgated, or censored without explicit warning.

Brantley invited additional suggestions. There are only two comments. One of them raises interesting questions. The other is...well, you can read it in the original.

### *The loan arranger*

This one’s from *The Economist’s* “Babbage” blog [on November 4, 2010](#). It takes off from Amazon’s plan for lending Kindle ebooks. The lede:

AMAZON.COM says soon [you will be allowed](#) to lend out electronic books purchased from the Kindle Store. For a whole 14 days. Just once, ever, per title. If the publisher allows it. Not mentioned is the necessity to hop on one foot whilst reciting the Gettysburg Address in a falsetto. An oversight, I'm sure. Barnes & Noble's Nook has offered the same capability with identical limits since last year. Both lending schemes are bullet points in a marketing presentation, so Amazon is adding its feature to keep parity.

Allowing such ersatz lending is a pretence by booksellers. They wish you to engage in two separate hallucinations. First, that their limited licence to read a work on a device or within software of their choosing is equivalent to the purchase of a physical item. Second, that the vast majority of e-books are persistent objects rather than disposable culture.

The post notes what you can do with physical books that you can't generally do with ebooks—and also takes shots at most ebooks, called “disposable and ephemeral” (with Dan Brown's novels offered as a prime example).

I won't quote more—except for one sentence that I believe to be true for at least some publishers: “Publishers don't much like libraries, either, despite the chin-wagging otherwise.”

There is the odd claim that fewer adults are reading books (that might be true in the UK, just as public libraries do apparently see falling circulation there), but it also has much interesting to say.

### *Kindle lending*

Phil Bradley offered this critique of the Kindle lending program [on January 10, 2011](#) on his eponymous blog. It's nicely done. He offers the key factors and some useful commentary.

As Bradley notes, the idea that the owner of the book can't read it while it's being read by somebody it was lent to makes perfectly good sense—but not in the context of the other key limitation: You can only lend an ebook once, *ever*.

There is a clear inconsistency here, since if they are trying to replicate the 'book experience' for want of a better term, surely the book could be loaned more than once? I think that's generally referred to as 'having your cake and eating it'.

Sounds about right (that last sentence). He also noted a Kindle Lending Club, a startup Facebook group with 3,000 users in ten days. The link offered now redirects me to my home page on FB, and searching for the group yields a closed group with 77 members. Dunno what happened there...

### *You don't buy ebooks*

Christina Pikas offered this brief commentary about ebooks and ejournals [on February 16, 2011](#) at *Christina's LIS Rant*. With the mild caveat that this isn't *always* true, it's a worthwhile reminder.

Let me say that again: You don't buy ebooks. You license them.

You don't buy ejournals, you license them. In most cases, you stop paying, you no longer have access. Ebook collections in the library? In most cases, you stop paying, you no longer have access.

She offers a couple of examples and discusses what libraries are trying to do about it, including this useful message:

AND we do everything we can to make sure we hold up our end of the license (no bulk downloading, only the people who are supposed to have access do, etc.). This is why we sometimes seem like the watchdogs for the publishers.

Her advice? Get your (e)stuff from a library—then when it goes poof you can just check it out again.

If, that is, libraries are allowed to act as something other than group lessors...

One comment is *very* odd, as it accuses Pikas of confusing buying and leasing. That's not true. She specifically discusses Kindle and iBook purchases, and those are not described as leases.

### *The eBook User's Bill of Rights*

Sarah Houghton offers a much briefer suggestion for a bill of rights in [this February 28, 2011 post](#) at *Librarian in Black*. It's CC0 (public domain) and brief enough to quote the whole thing, which should make it easy to compare with other similar statements:

The eBook User's Bill of Rights is a statement of the basic freedoms that should be granted to all eBook users.

The eBook User's Bill of Rights

Every eBook user should have the following rights:

- the right to use eBooks under guidelines that favor access over proprietary limitations
- the right to access eBooks on any technological platform, including the hardware and software the user chooses
- the right to annotate, quote passages, print, and share eBook content within the spirit of fair use and copyright
- the right of the first-sale doctrine extended to digital content, allowing the eBook owner the right to retain, archive, share, and re-sell purchased eBooks

I believe in the free market of information and ideas.

I believe that authors, writers, and publishers can flourish when their works are readily available on the widest range of media. I believe that authors, writers, and publishers can thrive when readers are given the maximum amount of freedom to access, annotate, and share with other readers, helping this content find new audiences and markets. I believe that eBook purchasers should enjoy the rights of the first-sale doctrine because eBooks are part of the greater cultural cornerstone of literacy, education, and information access.

Digital Rights Management (DRM), like a tariff, acts as a mechanism to inhibit this free exchange of ideas, literature, and information. Likewise, the current licensing arrangements mean that readers never possess ultimate control over their own personal reading material. These are not acceptable conditions for eBooks.

I am a reader. As a customer, I am entitled to be treated with respect and not as a potential criminal. As a consumer, I am entitled to make my own decisions about the eBooks that I buy or borrow.

I am concerned about the future of access to literature and information in eBooks. I ask readers, authors, publishers, retailers, librarians, software developers, and device manufacturers to support these eBook users' rights.

These rights are yours. Now it is your turn to take a stand. To help spread the word, copy this entire post, add your own comments, remix it, and distribute it to others. Blog it, Tweet it (#ebookrights), Facebook it, email it, and post it on a telephone pole.

Lots of comments (I didn't read them all), and one of the first was truly odd. Mike Cane objected that it wasn't a complete list—and here's Cane's own *first* right: "You have the right to a proper cover." There are other oddities in his list.

Minor note: I originally tagged Cliff Landis' repost of Sarah's post—which he accidentally forgot to credit to her until some months later. Since it's CC0, it's perfectly legal for him to do that, but I'm 100% certain the lack of credit and a link in the original post was an oversight.

Sigh. More than one author goes to bat for the tightest possible DRM and other restrictions on ebooks so they can make a living. I did not find their arguments convincing, and I'd love to see authors make livings. Maybe even specialized nonfiction authors. DRM isn't the way.

## General and Miscellany

Noting again that this already-too-long Part 2 doesn't have enough room to deal with ebooks versus (or and) printbooks, ebooks as textbooks, and ebook/library issues (that last one may be too big to deal with at all!), let's finish with items that didn't fit neatly into one of the other categories. Some of these are anecdotes and accounts that I think are

worth repeating at a slight historic distance. Arrangement, as usual, is chronological based on when I tagged an item in Diigo.

### *Death to e-classics. Long live e-classics!*

This one's by Sara Quinn Thompson [on March 5, 2011](#) at *Librarianne*. She admits “e-classics” is a silly word and defines it as “ebook versions of dearly beloved public domain works by authors such as Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, H.G. Wells, Shakespeare, and so on.” She notes that her first four ebooks were such e-classics—Sherlock Holmes mysteries found on [FeedBooks](#).

Side note: The first ebook we “purchased” after acquiring our Kindle Fire HD 8.9 was *The Complete Sherlock Holmes*, a limited-time freebie that added an introduction to the texts and *acknowledged* that the texts were in the public domain.

Thompson anticipated a big revival of PD classics beginning in 2009, since these books were easy to find for free—but also a little too easy to pay for:

In Amazon's Kindle Store, you'll see a whole slew of these public domain ebooks for sale from swindlers for anywhere from \$.99 to \$5. I say swindlers because these are public domain texts and the “sellers” usually haven't added any value whatsoever from what I've seen in sample chapters. Added value to me would include at the very least a linked table of contents (which Amazon should be adding by default but they don't), or a map, a timeline, something to help readers make sense of the content of the book itself.

I'm not inclined to use the term “swindlers”; at the very least, presumably, these sellers have put the texts into proper Kindle form. That may not be much, but it's something. But never mind... As of early 2011, she thought she was wrong:

If anything, these free ebook versions of the classics are just mucking things up royally. Please don't take my word for it. Do your own investigations and see what you come up with. Here are three anecdotal pieces of evidence that I can offer:

She steps through several examples: *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (the Project Gutenberg version at the time was the censored version), *Jane Eyre* (she couldn't find the specific edition she wanted) and *The Maltese Falcon* (not in the public domain and it was difficult to find/buy an ebook easily).

Her conclusion? She's not reading a classic at this point. Thompson *prefers* reading on the iPad to reading on paper—she calls it “a beautiful, relaxing experience.” She looks forward to the day “when publishers have rendered themselves obsolete to readers...” The way I read this suggests that she believes everybody else will prefer ereaders or tablets to

actual books. Maybe I'm misreading it. I'm including this mostly as one specific set of anecdotes; not sure there's a broader meaning.

### *Some Things That Need to Be Said*

By Amanda Hocking [on March 3, 2011](#) at her eponymous blog—which has the subtitle “Where Amanda Hocking Says Things About Amanda Hocking.” I like that...

Hocking was, at the time, a 27-year-old phenomenon: she'd written a bunch of YA paranormal romances in her spare time and self-published nine of them, pricing them at \$0.99 each, selling millions of copies and making millions of dollars. In the process, she became the Poster Person for Self-Publishing and Fearsome Ogre to Traditional Publishers.

Or not.

Everybody seems really excited about what I'm doing and how I've been so successful, and from what I've been able to understand, it's because a lot of people think that they can replicate my success and what I've done. And while I do think I will not be the only one to do this—others will be as successful as I've been, some even more so—I don't think it will happen that often.

Traditional publishing and indie publishing aren't all that different, and I don't think people realize that. Some books and authors are best sellers, but most aren't. It may be easier to self-publish than it is to traditionally publish, but in all honesty, it's harder to be a best seller self-publishing than it is with a house.

Hocking mentions the *enormous* amount of work she put into marketing. At the time she posted this, she said she barely had time to do any writing. She mentions the value provided by a good editor (and how hard it is to find a good editor outside of publishing houses).

As to that Ogre part:

Here's another thing I don't understand: The way people keep throwing my name around and saying publishers are “terrified” of me and that I really showed them.

First of all, no publisher is afraid of me. That's just silly. I'm one girl who wrote a couple books that are selling well. That doesn't scare them—they just want to be a part of it, the same way they want to be a part of any best seller.

And just so we're clear—ebooks make up at best 20% of the market. Print books make up the other 80%.

I think 20% was high for March 2011, although it might have been right for the kind of book she's talking about. She believed traditional publishers would control most of the market “for a long time, maybe forever.” Here's a sentence that shows decent writing and thinking chops:

Saying traditional publishing is dead right now is like declaring yourself the winner in the sixth inning of a baseball game when you have 2 runs and the other team has 8 just because you scored all your runs this inning, and they haven't scored any since the first.

She also notes that, if ebooks become the majority medium, it's likely that most of them will be published by traditional publishers.

There's more in the post—including her assertion that nobody knows why some books become bestsellers and others don't.

I guess what I'm saying is that just because I sell a million books self-publishing, it doesn't mean everybody will. In fact, more people will sell less than 100 copies of their books self-publishing than will sell 10,000 books. I don't mean that to be mean, and just because a book doesn't sell well doesn't mean it's a bad book. It's just the nature of the business.

*Fewer than*, but this is a blog post, not an edited ebook. It's a good, realistic post. It might be worth noting that Hocking later signed with St. Martin's Press, an imprint of Macmillan.

### *E-Book Tarnishes The Reader-Book Relationship*

This odd one's by Andrei Codrescu [on March 7, 2011](#) at NPR's website—a transcript of Codrescu's comments on "All Things Considered."

It's a snappy little commentary. For example:

I won't enumerate each new snare in the house of virtuality, enclosing what remains of our human bodies as the net tightens and we, the fish, thrash about. But here's a new one. I'm reading a new book I downloaded on my Kindle and I noticed an underlined passage. It is surely a mistake, I think. This is a new book. I don't know about you, but I always hated underlined passages in used books. They derail my private enjoyment.

When somebody offers perception of what's important, something moronic, usually, which is why I always prefer buying books new so I could make my own moronic marks. But moronic or not, it was all between me and my new book...

After discussing the "horror" of prehighlighted passages and the even worse horror of View Popular Highlights, which he says marks "the end of the illusion that it is your book..."

Conformism does come of age in the most private of peaceful activities -reading a book, one of the last solitary pleasures in a world full of prompts to behave. My Kindle, sugar-coated cyanide.

Possibly a little overwrought? One of 15 comments doesn't seem to think so:

It appears that the Kindle is catering to a generation who cannot do anything without looking over their shoulders to see if someone else is doing it, too. This shows an enormous lack of self-esteem. Does

that become apparent in a generation of kids who have always had supervised play activity that usually did not include their working parents? At some point, quality time loses out to quantity time.

The commenter doesn't say "*those damn kids...*" but the reek of wild generality and ageism (against the young this time) is almost palpable on the screen.

Others note that *you can turn the feature off*. Easily. One notes that she was asked whether she wanted to read other people's comments and contribute her own *during the first set-up session*. She chose to opt out. We probably did as well. But that, of course, requires paying attention.

That isn't good enough for Verso Rojo:

Regardless of whether the feature can be turned off or not, all among us who are able and like to make our own assessments of whatever we decide to read, do not like having that "option," period. Personally, I believe it is an insult to the reader's intelligence.

You know what? I don't like eggplant. Therefore, eggplant should be banned. Because what I don't like should not be an option for anybody else. Right, Rojo?

### *The Kindle Swindle*

Laura Hazard Owen posted this on [March 31, 2011](#) at *Publishing Trends*—and an alternative title might be "the Kindle Store's unfortunate lack of censorship."

Say what?

The article's quoting a guy at a UK digital marketing agency who "believes that ebooks are the next frontier for content farmers and is already noticing an increasing number of spam e-books hitting ebookstores like the Kindle Store."

The guy, Mike Essex, says there's nothing to stop people from gathering content from the web and creating an ebook: "Someone could go to a blog, grab any content they want, label it as their own and make money from another person's content." That's called plagiarism. It's nothing new and it happens in every medium. Apparently, Essex believes it is both feasible and *necessary* for ebookstores to check every submission with a "good plagiarism detector" before putting it up for sale. Really?

Does this happen? Absolutely. Essex provides some examples—e.g., an "author" who created close to 3,000 ebooks in a couple of years. Essex shows how this could be profitable if the spammer's willing to do a *lot* of work. [His post](#) lists a bunch of solutions:

- Integrating a plagiarism detector that compares book content to scans of the web
- If content is syndicated from a blog, ask blog holders to upload a verification file to prove they have the rights to the content

- Compare eBook content to that written in other hosted eBooks to look for similarities
- Add a link on every eBook listing page where people can report the book for stolen content
- Ask writers to verify their address before a book is added, this stops duplicate accounts and ‘publishers’ selling the same content
- Investigate any content creators with more than fifty eBooks to check the quality of their content
- Create an independent website where people can store reviews in one place will be a better way of spotting bad apples
- If you spot someone who is trying to game the system then spread the search for their book online and post a bad review on every site they’re listed
- Allow search engines to crawl eBook content so they can rank stolen content lower, using their existing checks.

Some of these might be plausible. Of course, several would require that all ebooks be in plain text or some plain text equivalent: a plagiarism detector can’t do much with a PDF, for example. I wonder whether it’s plausible to compare each book’s content to a scan of the web—and if so, what constitutes plagiarism? Full replication? One sentence? Presumably, *Cites & Insights* would be nabbed as plagiarism, since portions of it are quoted from other sources... (Isaac Asimov would be investigated, since who could possibly write more than 200 books?) Independent websites that house reviews already exist, of course. (At some point, Essex must have tired while writing bullet points; the seventh and eighth do not appear to be in English. When he repeats the bullet points in Owen’s piece, he fixes the grammar.)

Owen quoted Essex’ post and asked him some questions. One prime selection from his responses:

If someone buys a book in my niche and it’s rubbish, they won’t buy another.

Amazing. So if I accidentally buy a piece of trash disguised as an SF book, without bothering to read the free portion, I’ll *never buy another SF book*.

Essex makes it clear that it’s *up to Amazon and Apple* to remove “bad content.” After that, he seems to devolve into MarketingSpeak, including advocacy of search engine optimization by authors and publishers, as well as marketing advice for self-publishers.

Comments are all over the place. It appears that one “spammer” identified in the article is mostly in the business of repackaging PD books and selling them cheaply as ebooks—which, if he’s turning badly formatted Project Gutenberg texts into more readable ebooks (I haven’t looked), is not only legal but reasonable.

My own take? A reader who buys an ebook—no matter how cheaply—without looking at a page or two deserves what they get. A reader who decides that one garbage ebook negates an entire category of books is an idiot.

After the first half of the comments come a *lot* of spammings. Apparently *Publishing Trends* doesn't have the wherewithal to monitor its own comment streams.

### *5 Reasons Why E-Books Aren't There Yet*

Long-time readers know that I've generally written off *Wired* material, even in THE BACK, but in this case including John C. Abell's [June 3, 2011](#) piece at *Wired* allows me to also include Phil Bradley's spirited response, which follows.

Abell charms me with the first two sentences—one that is just fine, the other that's, well, one reason I don't deal with *Wired* very often:

There are no two ways about it: E-books are here to stay. Unless something as remarkable as Japan's reversion to the sword occurs, digital books are the 21st century successor to print.

But even though *it's inevitable that ebooks will entirely replace print books* (the way I interpret that second sentence), they're not ready yet. You still lose something by going digital, and he's going to tell us why. Before his List of Five, though, he offers some other examples of *Wired*think:

It isn't always that way with tech: We rejoice at cutting the phone cord, we don't fret that texting causes lousy penmanship and we are ecstatic that our computers, tablets and phones are replacing the TV set.

What you mean *we*, *Wired*Man? (If I've given you an earworm of [Oscar Brown, Jr.'s great song](#), my work here is done: Here's your silver bullet.)

Abell's a true believer: "since getting an iPad on day one, I haven't purchased a print edition of anything for myself." He's convinced that print books are *already* "forever marginalized as a niche medium." In 2011. After that we get his List of Five. Without expansion, here are the reasons print books haven't disappeared entirely:

An unfinished e-book isn't a constant reminder to finish reading it.

You can't keep your books all in one place.

Notes in the margin help you think.

E-books are positioned as disposable, but aren't priced that way.

E-books can't be used for interior design.

I could fisk the expansions, but why bother? Oddly enough, even though he's said books are already "marginalized" and "niche," he's not ready to actually predict their death.

More than 500 comments—but let’s not go there. Let’s proceed right on to:

### *Wired gibberish: 5 Reasons Why E-Books Aren’t There Yet*

It’s too bad Phil Bradley writes such subtle titles for his posts, like [this July 8, 2011 one](#) at his eponymous blog; after all, some writers might take “gibberish” as a form of praise.

Paraphrasing or “quoting” portions of his rejoinders (Bradley’s a good and forthright writer and it’s not a very long post):

“If you haven’t finished a book there’s probably a reason for it”—and his Kindle keeps all his unfinished books in one place.

Booklovers can’t keep all their *physical* books in one place, and there’s nothing stopping you from having multiple ereader apps on a single device.

Some of us don’t like to write notes in margins (especially in library books!). Some Kindles allow you to add notes separately.

Lots of ebooks are free or really cheap.

Bradley chose not to comment on the “interior design” thought, although his non-comment is quite nice in its pithiness.

### *When Editors Don’t*

James Grimmelman posted this [on August 13, 2011](#) at *The Laboratorium*; it’s a grump about crappy conversions of print books to ebook form.

One of the main arguments publishers make for how they add value in the book ecosystem is production values: a professionally edited and designed book will be attractive, clean, and readable. Why is it, then, that the e-reader versions of so many books from major publishers are riddled with obvious design mistakes?

The list is interesting:

No chapter divisions

Non-interactive indices keyed to physical page numbers (useless in a “location”-based Kindle book)

Drop capitals formatted inconsistently within a book

Endnotes with no way to navigate between note number and note

Unnecessary hyphens wherever there were line breaks in the physical book

Typographically incorrect quotation marks

Repeated passages

The antepenultimate one (sorry, couldn’t resist) is sheer incompetence, as is the last. The second, fourth and (probably) next to last (if

“typographically incorrect” means that quotation marks appear as inch signs) are a little tougher.

But most of these aren't editing at all; they're layout or conversion. They do all reflect sloppiness on the part of major publishers, and if Grimmelmann's only finding such sloppiness in the ebook versions, he's a lot luckier than I am.

He closes: “The argument that only professionals can do good work isn't very convincing if the professionals don't actually do good work.” True, but in this case editors aren't the ones at fault.

The comments are interesting, including one where the commenter accuses Grimmelmann of cherry-picking. Given that a *majority* of print books from the Big Six (at the time) that I sampled in a multi-dozen-book sampling at the public library had layout issues suggesting that nobody ever actually looked at the final layout, I don't doubt his response (between a third and a half of more than two dozen ebooks had one or more of these problems).

### *Missing Entry: Whither the eBook Index?*

For all I know, the problem described in [this September 2, 2011 item](#) by Peter Meyers at *A New Kind of Book* has been solved by now—I haven't purchased enough non-fiction ebooks to know one way or the other. The problem: Ebooks without indexes—or at least without *workable* indexes (since reproducing the print book's index is essentially useless if the ebook doesn't have the same page numbers).

Meyers notes the “reader services an index provides” and that doing a word search in an ebook doesn't replace: Indexing concepts, not just words; providing “guided discovery” (in a hierarchical index); helping to find things when you're not sure what they're called; signaling depth of coverage and *tallying* coverage.

He recognizes some of the problems. It's harder to implement a really good ebook index, as it requires hyperlinks. Not only does he believe that can be solved, he thinks a good digital index would be *better* than a good book index—but he also provides some inside-baseball reasons that's not happening.

No comments; I don't believe the site is set up for them. The site itself is interesting—Meyers is clearly a believer in ebooks as being *superior* to print books (and says there's a “remarkable, epochal transformation from print to digital” going on) and has a very high opinion of his own writing (check the About page)—and while the site's still there, the most recent material is dated July 10, 2012.

An interjection here: I've just skipped over a bunch of items I tagged from 2011 either because they're now too “historic” to bother with, they might embarrass somebody at this late date who I don't see any reason to embarrass, they're how-to articles that were wrong at the time...the list goes on.

## Rules for Anchorites

The short version of my comments on [this October 13, 2011 piece](#) by Cat Valente at Valente's LiveJournal: Go read it. It still speaks to me two years later—a little too much so, although it may also help explain why I hadn't written about ebooks much.

The slightly longer version. Here are the first four paragraphs:

Here's the thing. I'm sick to death of talking about ebooks.

In the current economic and publishing climate, that is a shocking thing to say. Posts about epubublishing regularly get the most comments and pingbacks, I'm constantly asked to give talks about my own experiments in that arena, and I usually agree to do them. It is the topic of conversation among authors, agents and publishers alike. How we're going to adapt, how it will change the publishing environment, how, most importantly, to make money with ebooks.

But I've had it. Because something seems to get lost all the time in these endless conversational loops that make me want to embed something in Data's wrist so that I know how to break the cycle.

And that something is, you know, *books*.

The rest of it is eloquent, funny and to the point. Valente notes that all the discussion of Amanda Hocking's brilliant success as an ebook author seems to omit one thing: Are the books any *good*?

I and you and everyone has heard a lot about Amanda Hocking in the last year. But no one has ever said to me: *Amanda Hocking's books moved me and spoke to my life, I love them and I read them over and over because they mean so much to me.* They say: *Amanda Hocking sold a million ebooks.* Frankly, I couldn't tell you one of her titles without Googling if you paid me. And this gets repeated over and over. It doesn't seem to matter what's in the ebook as much as that it's an ebook. I hear about so-and-so and how they charge 99 cents for their ebooks and make money hand over fist. And that's the topic for an hour in some con bar, and it might not even get mentioned what the book in question is about.

That's a prime example—in 2011, probably *the* prime example—but it's only one. Valente feels as though “ebooks are now a subject almost wholly unrelated to books. It's about money and it's about ‘the industry’ and it's about form, but not content.”

There's a lot of truth in that. Valente's been doing digital publishing for some time, and speaks about when asked to—”But the fact is, I would, a thousand times over, rather talk about what I wrote than how I published it.”

Valente would like to see more discussion of story and less of technology. That's the theme of this excellent commentary. Go read it.

## Your E-Book Is Reading You

This one's by Alexandra Alter [on July 19, 2012](#) at the *Wall Street Journal*.  
The lede:

It takes the average reader just seven hours to read the final book in Suzanne Collins's "Hunger Games" trilogy on the Kobo e-reader—about 57 pages an hour. Nearly 18,000 Kindle readers have highlighted the same line from the second book in the series: "Because sometimes things happen to people and they're not equipped to deal with them." And on Barnes & Noble's Nook, the first thing that most readers do upon finishing the first "Hunger Games" book is to download the next one.

Authors and publishers never really knew this sort of thing about their books—after all, how would you?

For centuries, reading has largely been a solitary and private act, an intimate exchange between the reader and the words on the page. But the rise of digital books has prompted a profound shift in the way we read, transforming the activity into something measurable and quasi-public.

We're told that the major e-bookstores can *and do* track "how far readers are getting in books, how long they spend reading them and which search terms they use to find books." The third of those doesn't bother me: I assume website owners in general can tell which search terms were used to get to them. I know I can.

Book apps apparently record how often they're opened and *how much time* is spent in them—and retailers "and some publishers" are starting to work with that data. Barnes & Noble is tracking reading behavior and "starting to share their insights with publishers to help them create books that better hold people's attention." The piece goes into some detail on this. Oh, and look at *how this can "improve" ebooks*:

Pinpointing the moment when readers get bored could also help publishers create splashier digital editions by adding a video, a Web link or other multimedia features, Mr. Hilt says.

Would you be surprised that Scott Turow thinks this is a *great* development? Would you be surprised that *some* publishers don't relish the idea that books should be written to spec, tailored to suit reader preferences?

How about Amazon? "Kindle users sign an agreement granting the company permission to store information from the device—including the last page you've read, plus your bookmarks, highlights, notes and annotations—in its data servers." Damned if I remember "signing" any such agreement, but who knows what might have been hidden in some novel-length Terms of Service thingie that I couldn't use the Kindle without clicking on?

The EFF isn't wild about this. Others raise useful issues—such as the likelihood that readers who understand the extent to which they're being tracked will shy away from books on health, sexuality, security and the like.

### *Scribd, HarperCollins Launch \$8.99 Subscription Book Service*

I'll wind up this segment with a piece that should have been in "Competition" in Part 1—except it's too new. This one's by Austin Carr, [posted October 1, 2013](#) at *Fast Company*.

You've probably heard about the hot new thing: For a mere \$8.99 a month you can get unlimited access to some of HarperCollins' books. Of course Scribd's CEO immediately says "disruption" and "inevitable" (remember, it's his service)—and "it could be a really big business." The claim is that Scribd is already huge (80 million users, but presumably if you've ever read a document at Scribd you're always a user) and "quite profitable."

"We're really moving beyond documents," Adler says. "We see ourselves as the library of the future."

Ah yes, *the library of the future*—because, you know, libraries are doomed. After nine months of experimentation, the service doesn't work on e-ink readers, but you can't have everything.

One other teeny-tiny limitation: It includes "all of the publisher's books *until 2012*, with exceptions." In other words, *no current bestsellers*—not even close. If it's "until" 2012 in October 2013, that's at least a 21-month embargo. I'm sure HarperCollins would love to impose a similar embargo on public library circulation of its books. The Scribd person suggests that it's like the movie model, flowing from theater to Pay TV to DVD and Netflix—but there are damn few movies that take nearly two years to get from Pay TV to DVD (and Netflix *can* send out any DVD available for sale, even if it can't stream most of them).

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# Masthead

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