

Are Books as We Know Them Dead?

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The printed book is an amazing thing. Between those two covers, are thoughts, facts, knowledge and imagination. Books have represented the power of ideas and wisdom of humans for thousands of years.

Knowledge was once passed along through writings on stone, papyrus and even animal skins.

When Gutenberg invented the printing press around the year 1440, mass printings of books were finally possible, and authors could share their writings with more and more people.

For me, books represent many things. Fantasy, mystery, adventure, experience, and knowledge. And to me knowledge is power. I have quite a few books – over 800 in fact, enough to form a small library. Some people might think that is a little excessive...but to me books have always been a source of inspiration, imagination, and wisdom.

I may not have read all of the books that I own – not even close, in fact. But I know they are on the shelf, should I need to look something up, or if I am in the mood to read up on the history of tech companies like Intel, Microsoft or Google (ok I did read that one), then they are at my disposal. I'd like to read a lot more of my books – but honestly, I just don't have the time. Oh and did I mention I am trying to write a novel of my own? Well that's another story...

So why would I ask if books as we know them are dead? By this I mean traditional books...books printed on paper, and available at your favorite bookstore.

With the increasing popularity of digital ebooks, and the vast amount of information available on the Internet, will the printed book soon be relegated to libraries and private collections? Ebooks are cheaper and more portable than paper books. Today's eReaders can hold thousands of books – and these books are always at your fingertips.

Amazon's Kindle is perhaps the most popular device, having sold several million units over the last couple of years, and Amazon has a digital library of over 500,000 books available for download – most at lower prices than the paper copies. In fact, most best sellers are just \$9.99, a definite selling point!

Numerous other eReaders are on the market as well, including those from Sony, Barne's & Noble's Nook, Chapters/Borders' new Kobo eReader, and even Apple's iPad or iPhone.

And now Google itself is getting into the business. With the upcoming Google Editions, according to PCWorld, "E-books will be universal in that users can access them from any Web-connected device, and roughly 500,000 titles will be available at launch. Online books are cached once you've loaded them, so they can also be viewed offline."

I have my own opinions, but I thought that I would ask someone who actually works in the field, and would have some insights on the subject. Ken Hernden, the Library Director at Algoma University was kind enough to share his thoughts:

Q. As the Internet has developed and become a daily tool for many people, have you noticed any impact on library use or traffic? If so, what age groups?

A. As more resources have migrated to electronic, networked formats, we've noticed an increase in traffic and use virtually and physically in the library. Despite the fact that most resources are available from home or anywhere through the library's proxy server, the library still seems to serve as a space for people to focus their efforts.

Q. What are your thoughts on digital books?

A. I like them; they have enormous potential...the main challenge (for librarians) will be preventing information overload, letting people know about these resources, and teaching them how to be informed users of so much information.

Q. Do you think that books retain their "essence" if they are not on printed paper?

A. In some ways, the ebooks offer more "essence": you can rapidly keyword search the content and they often offer features like chapter annotations not in the hard copy version and linking to related or cited articles, books, images and audio files that enhance the core content. The danger again is that the reader is led away from the book's content and becomes overwhelmed by the enhancements. I liken learning ebook literacy to showing a non comic book reader a graphic novel or comic book – it takes time for them to learn to be literate in that format and consider the words, images, layout and spaces in between the elements.

Q. What do books mean to you?

A. I think books are critical to maintaining the health of a society. They transmit wisdom knowledge across time and are available to anyone with the inclination to open them up.

Q. Do you see digital books replacing written books some day? If so, when?

A. Possibly, but I think it would take at least a couple of generations of readers and it depends on the ubiquity of readers and networked content. There are many parts of the world where this is not true yet. Much will also depend on reader tastes and the marketplace as well.

Q. With the digitizing of so much information, growing popularity of ebooks, and convenience of e-readers like the Amazon Kindle, do you think that traditional printed books will decline in importance?

A. Hard-copy editions might eventually fill a role that vinyl does for high-end audiophiles. Also, preservation of information remains a conundrum and PH neutral paper lasts hundreds of years, whereas digital formats and hardware do not. At the very least the printed codex may remain our permanent archival format.

So what do you think? Will you continue to buy traditional books, or are you planning to buy more and more digital ebooks for your mobile phone, eReader or even your computer? How long do you think it will be before digital overtakes the printed word?