

Understanding a Book: A Few Digressions on Forms and Meanings

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This article analyzes differences between analogue and digital reading. It demonstrates that the differences between e-publishing and print publishing processes heavily influence meanings formed through reading.

Keywords: book history / e-book / enhanced e-book / book market / reading culture

1.0 What is a book?

With the advent of e-books, both the publishing landscape and reading practices started to change. As a point of departure for almost any serious analysis of these processes, it became necessary to reconsider the very notion of the book. Rather surprisingly, this proved to be a complex task.

At least at first glance, the answer is obvious: the printed book (or “p-book”) is a device for storing and disseminating information and knowledge—in short, a container of knowledge (see, e.g., Wischenbart) in which a variety of navigation tools are used in order to organize and make accessible the stored information (see Phillips and Cope). What further differs p-books from other communication devices is that the information stored in them is predominantly in textual or textual/visual form and—as stressed by Eco in a debate with Carrière—longer than, for example, information in papers and magazines (see Carrière and Eco, kindle edition, location 3304-14). This is valid for a huge variety of p-book genres: a cookbook or a book on gardening contains more information than a single recipe or a gardening tip published in a daily paper or on the web. A novel is longer than a short story, and a scientific monograph is usually longer and more complex than an individual research article. All these different genres invoke different reading practices: as stressed by Mangen and Hillersund, reading a scholarly text requires studious immersion, and reading a novel

invokes more emotional immersion, whereas browsing through a gardening book or a cookbook involves more fragmented reading.

In short, a printed book is a communication device empowered with navigation tools, used for transmitting longer texts that invoke a variety of different reading practices. In order to further describe how the book does what it does, I look at the ways in which publishing processes determine the format and content of texts stored in printed books and influence the meaning of what is read. Below, I shift to the more technical vocabulary of publishing studies and predominantly rely on Genette's concepts of epitext and peritext.

1.1 Formats and marketing of the book

As shown in Gérard Genette's *Paratexts* and as analyzed by Claire Squires in *Marketing Literature*, reader's choices are heavily influenced by paratexts: by the visual and physical appearance of a printed book, including the design of the front and back covers, blurbs, the name of the author, dedications and inscriptions, prefaces, the title of the book, and so on (which Genette calls the peritext); and by the retail, social, and personal contexts in which the book is sold, marketed, and read (Genette's epitext).¹ Such effects of the paratext were empirically proven at the beginning of the twentieth century, when research funded by two British publishers, Orion and Penguin, showed that in trade publishing, the cover (i.e. the peritext) was the key factor in deciding whether to buy the book (see Clark and Phillips 130). Moreover, a study commissioned by Chorion emphasized that a good cover "will encourage the consumer to pick up a book, and the consumer is then five times more likely to buy" (Phillips 28–29).

In short, at least in trade publishing, the reader's first decision to take a look at the book has little to do with its content: it is the look of the physical book that sparks the first impulse to read or buy it.

This indicates that peritexts and epitexts of printed books attract readers' attention in a different way than their e-counterparts: so far, narrative e-books have not had covers as visually attractive as p-books (and in case of e-editions of gardening books and cookbooks, tourist guides, coffee-table books, and health manuals there was no artwork embodied in the materiality of the book). Moreover, in traditional bookshops customers can find books they do not expect to discover. The metadata of e-books—accompanied by suggestions from other readers—do help a customer find books from a specific field in a quicker and more exact way than browsing

in a brick-and-mortar bookshop, but (again, according to anecdotal evidence because no serious research has been done on this) hints from other readers rarely suggest to a customer to buy a book from a genre he or she never looks at. As such, marketing tools in an e-book environment diminish the role of surprise and randomness. In 2011 in American bookstores, the reluctance of book readers to give up such accidental browsing led to a practice known as showrooming: in fall 2011, a survey conducted by the Codex Group revealed that 39% of customers that bought books (either print or digital) from Amazon in the past thirty days said that they looked at the book in a brick-and-mortar bookshop before buying it online—as though the marketing power of online retailing and of e-paratext could not compete with its analogue and brick-and-mortar counterpart.²

Or, switching back to the language of publishing studies, due to economic and technological differences between e- and p-books, filtering and marketing processes in the e-book retail environment are different from those in brick-and-mortar bookstores. Click bookstores do not allow customers to engage in unintended shopping for titles in unfamiliar genres in the same way as brick-and-mortar bookstores, nor can e-books persuade customers to look at them by the mere beauty of their cover and/or artwork. Besides the fact that, so far, software has not been able to adapt e-versions of illustrated books to different screen sizes of color reading devices as in the case of text-only e-books, the strength of paratext (and, in the case of illustrated books, of their layout and design) might be one of the possible explanations for the fact that sales of illustrated e-books and enhanced illustrated e-books have not gained momentum yet and that as late as fall 2011 sales of illustrated printed books were actually growing in U.S. brick-and-mortar bookstores (see Shatzkin, 13 November 2011). According to US Bookstats data, in 2010 e-books comprised 13.4% of adult fiction sales, 3.9% of adult non-fiction, and 1.8% of children's book sales. Enhanced e-books were only around .01% of all book sales (Publishers Lunch, 9 August 2011).

To make a long story short, the marketing process in which customers' attention is changed into interest in the book, and then into desire and the action of buying it, is different in the world of narrative p-books than in the world of narrative e-books, and very different in the world of illustrated books. Stated more plainly, regardless of the same content, it is much more difficult to fall in love at first sight with a digital file than with its embodiment as a printed book. Hence, readers' decisions about what books to buy and what to read are different in an e-environment than in its analogue counterpart.

1.2 Formats and the symbolic value of the book

Moreover, in many cases, the visibility and materiality of a printed book have a significant value for its owner; as stressed by van der Weel,

besides the material and instrumental value attached to books, books also carry an important symbolic meaning, especially as carriers of knowledge (both religious and secular), and culture. ... Even a sense of identity might be said to attach to books; hence the persistence of the old saw “show me your book case, and I will tell you who you are”. What is important in all these cases is the *visibility* of books, resulting from their materiality, and the obvious ownership relation projected by this visibility.

These p-book-related identities can vary from religious to political, cultural, and ethnic. It is hard to imagine a devoted Christian without a Bible at home, or a true-believing communist (although a rare and almost extinct species these days) without at least one book by Karl Marx on the bookshelf. In addition, at least smaller nations in Europe strongly link their identity to men and women of letters that wrote in their national languages: being a Slovene, for example, almost requires owning a book of poems by the nineteenth-century romantic poet France Prešeren, who is considered to be one of the founding fathers of the modern Slovene language.

On the other hand, fandom as a more contemporary identity phenomenon relates to a specific book genre instead of to the language in which the book is written, and as such does not require the author to have the same national identity as the reader. Nevertheless, ownership of printed books still matters: even though, in 2011 in the U.S., fiction bestsellers were selling better in e-format than in p-format, *Dance with Dragons*, the fifth part of George R. R. Martin's *Songs of Ice and Fire* saga, was selling better in print than in e-format on the first day of its publication in July 2011—clearly indicating that fans wanted to have a physical copy of the book as a part of their Martin collection in their home libraries (Publisher's Lunch, 13 July 2011). A month earlier, on the other side of the Atlantic, during his visit to Poland and Slovenia, Martin attracted thousands to autograph sessions (see <http://grrm.livejournal.com/>). It is worth mentioning that in Ljubljana about half of his fans came with English books that were about 30% cheaper than Slovene translations, as though the language of the book they owned and read mattered less than its price—which would be an outrageous gesture in the eyes of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Slovene nationalists. I also noticed a fan with a kindle (Martin signed the back of the device using a waterproof pen), clearly showing that it is the physical object and not the digital file that carries symbolic value for its owner.

1.2.1 Education and symbolic capital of printed books

According to a study conducted by Mariah Evans, Jonathan Kelley, Joanna Sikora, and Donald J. Treiman in 2010, the home library of printed books heavily influenced the educational success of children. This is how they introduce their study:

Children growing up in homes with many books get 3 years more schooling than children from bookless homes, independent of their parents' education, occupation, and class. This is as great an advantage as having university educated rather than unschooled parents, and twice the advantage of having a professional rather than an unskilled father. (Evans et al.)

Because their research was based on data from the 1990s, when e-books were still rare, they could not ask whether an e-book library stored on smartphones or in the e-book readers of unskilled parents has the same positive effect on their offspring as a home library of printed books; nor did the available data allow them to see whether a home library full of fantasy and pulp fiction in paperback (of course, in countries where paperbacks existed) had a similar effect on the education of children as a library full of more “snobby, literary, prestigious” (Thompson 35, 37) hardcover books. As a result, we do not know whether printed books as such brought symbolic capital with them that had a positive effect on children's education, or whether some particular types and genres of books had more symbolic capital than others.

However, regardless of all these unanswered questions it is clear that at least in the last decade of twentieth century printed books still had significant symbolic capital.

On the other hand, due to their immateriality, inability to establish an ownership relation projected by their visibility, and lower prices, e-books will undoubtedly obtain less symbolic capital than their printed counterparts. Future historians of both the book and literature will therefore very likely raise the interesting research question of how much of an author's symbolic capital is generated not only by the materiality of the book but also by the publisher's financial capital (i.e., by the fact that somebody was willing to invest a significant amount of money to produce and disseminate the author's work).

All this of course remains to be seen—just as it remains to be seen what such transformations of the book's symbolic capital mean for education and for personal and national identities linked to printed books.

1.3 Book formats and book institutions

With the advent of e-books, it became obvious that both the content of the printed book and its structure were closely related to the technology and economy of printing and bookbinding. Simply put, throughout the twentieth century, printing technology did not allow for the printing of works longer than, say, 1,000 pages and shorter than 48; in addition, the economy of printing made financially unsustainable all books that were printed in runs of fewer than 500 to 1,000 copies. As a consequence, only those books were published for which the publisher assumed that at least 500 copies would be sold and that were not longer than 1,000 pages or shorter than 48. These two simple rules—together with limited shelf-space in brick-and-mortar bookshops—triggered a complicated set of editorial and publishing practices that filtered the book content, determined the length of fiction and non-fiction books, and eased life for readers as only the texts selected by publishers became publicly accessible. Huge quantities of unreadable texts written by would-be authors simply did not find their way to regular book-trade channels.

Moreover, professions of publishers, booksellers, and librarians came into being because printed books are complex products to create, physically produce, filter, ship, store, distribute, market, and disseminate: for example, in 2010, the number of professional attendees at the Frankfurt book fair was around 300,000. This global armada of book people produced, marketed, and disseminated books; moreover, they also promoted the printed book as a medium—which was very often a preconscious side effect of their activities—and consequently enforced book-reading habits. Never mind how fiercely they competed, quarreled, or even hated each other: the end effect of their efforts was beneficial to all of them because they helped create and maintain spaces of book buying and reading, making—through a chain of bookshops and public libraries—the book and book-reading visible parts of urban landscapes.

Hence, in the book business, a set of self-regulated business practices, professions, and institutions appeared through which printed books were filtered, produced, marketed, sold, stored, disseminated, and read. Although this was not their primary goal, all these activities and institutions supported and maintained reading practices and influenced the content of printed books. In Claire Squires' words, in the world of print, the transformation of text into a marketable product called a book “entails overlapping interpretations, incomplete translations, and a continual shifting of meaning from text to written and consumable object and back again” (Squires 57).

Now what happens to all these institutions and professions if e-books take over? Moreover, what happens to the book as a medium if some of these institutions and professions go away?

1.3.1 Disintermediation: new formats and new institutions?

In 2011, there was only one fair and clear answer to this question: we don't know because it has not happened yet. Nevertheless, it was obvious that the end of the printed book would seriously change not only the urban landscape and publishing professions, but also the very notion of the book.

The reasons for such a conclusion are as follows.

In the e-environment, the technological and economic pressures that triggered the rise of book professions and determined filtering processes and the size and length of printed books in p-publishing are disappearing. First, e-book technology and the economy of e-publishing allow even the publication of titles that would sell only in one copy; second, there are no upwards or downwards limits to the number of pages; and, third, the limitations posed by the meters of shelves in brick-and-mortar bookstores became irrelevant with the advent of e-book stores with unlimited storage capacity (see Kovač, "The End").

The consequences of these changes are twofold: first, in the U.S. new book genres, such as Kindle Singles, appeared that do not follow the traditional conventions regarding the length of narrative books.³ Second, some fiction authors have discovered that in the e-environment they do not need publishers anymore. The most successful among them, such as John Locke, became self-publishing millionaires (<http://lethalbooks.com>) that hired editorial staff to help them edit their work and—at least in Locke's case—marketed their books by themselves thanks to their marketing experiences generated in their previous careers.⁴ Third, Amazon as the biggest e-book-seller globally started to publish e-books and act as a publisher, as did some agents. If these current American trends continue and spread to Europe, the authors, publishers, agents, and e-booksellers of narrative books might globally merge into a new kind of book profession, and some of the middlemen that exist in analogue publishing process might be cut out.

But will they be? Will e-publishing destroy the entire p-book infrastructure together with bookshops and libraries around the globe, or will these processes slow down? And is such disintermediation of publishing global and unavoidable, or is it predominantly an American phenomenon that could be avoided in the rest of the world merely by deciding not to publish e-books?

In order to answer these questions, one should take a look at three additional sets of trends in the cultural and social environment of the contemporary publishing industry that support and reverse the marginalization of p-books.

2.0 Global English, controlled reading, and book preservation

At least in continental Europe, an e-supportive trend is the rise of English as a global language. Because there are no hard data on the number of people that speak English as a second language and read and buy e-books in English, the evidence can only be as anecdotal as Kobo's CEO Michael Tamblyn statement at Frankfurt Bookfair 2011 about the 300% rise in sales of English e-books in continental Europe. In this context, an educated guess might lead to the conclusion that, if Pareto's law applies to buyers of English books in continental Europe, a switch of the top 20% of book buyers from print to digital might mean an 80% drop in sales of printed English books. At least for those bookstores in the city centers of Amsterdam, Ljubljana, and Copenhagen that stock 30 to 40% of books in English, this might have quite unpleasant consequences. Should this be the case, it might represent an important turning point in economic history: for the first time, an overseas competitor would cause a serious problem for an entire industry without physically setting foot in the territories where the battle takes place, achieving all this with products that were not primarily intended for sales in those territories.

Currently, the growth of English as a second language, and with it the growth of English reading as an e-book accelerating process, seems to be unstoppable. In the long run, however, the economic turmoil in Europe might have some unexpected consequences for the future cultural development of the continent about which I do not dare to speculate.

Counter-trends that work in favor of p-publishing seem more controversial and difficult to spot. Let me mention an obvious and controversial one: preservation and the need for privacy. The existence of e-books relies on the supply of electricity, and it is common sense that, much like a few copies of a manuscripts on paper, a few information clouds in which e-books are stored are by definition more exposed to natural and human disasters than hundreds of copies of the same printed book stored in a variety of private, public, and special libraries in different geographic locations. Not to mention that any failure in electricity supply would make all the books in the clouds temporarily inaccessible. Thus, if we want to store book content safely for a longer period, it still makes a lot of sense to print it.

Privacy, of course, is different matter: while reading an e-book either on a dedicated device or a tablet, one can simultaneously communicate about what he or she reads via social networks such as Twitter or Facebook. Moreover, e-booksellers that sell dedicated reading devices and tablets know for each and every customer which books he or she purchased, at which time of the day the user of the device reads, with what pace the pages are turned and how long he or she reads, what he or she underlined, and what kind of notes were made. In short, e-reading is controlled and public in comparison with reading on paper.

At this point it is of course difficult to speculate whether such visibility and controllability of previously private reading, together with distractions caused by communicating about read material via social networks, will lead a significant number of book readers back to print as they become fully aware of all this—or whether the wish for visibility of our private doings becoming part of our newly born digital mentalities and is speeding up the digital transformation.

3.0 Conclusion: Indeed, what is a book and what does it do?

If I were to upgrade the definition of the book from section 1.0 on the basis of everything said above, I could describe the printed book as a highly preservable information tool that through its materiality and visibility invoked a set of different private and uncontrolled reading practices influenced by marketing and symbolic effects that were executed through the book's epitext and peritext by a variety of book institutions run by an armada of book professionals.

However, in the digital world, almost all book marketing and reading practices, together with the symbolic capital of the book, seem to be changing. With them the definition of the book is changing, too—although more slowly than expected. The fact that, in 2011, e-books were still lagging behind p-books in terms of both preservability and marketing could be seen as a proof that Eco was right when he stressed that the printed book as an information device became almost perfect in the last two thousand years and as such could not be terminated overnight (see Carrière and Eco). Therefore, the printed book could be understood as “part of our second nature” (see Kovač, *Never Mind*)—and destroying a device that became both perfect and part of our second nature requires more time than just a few years and cannot be achieved by one or two globally expanding companies alone. Controversial trends that both support and slow down the global spread of e-books described in section 2.0 seem to confirm this conclusion.

In the book business, all these controversies are reflected in the fact that, in terms of sales and marketing, e-books were to a significant extent parasitically dependent on the peritext and epitext of printed books. It is not yet clear whether the parasite will kill the host and simultaneously injure itself, or whether a symbiosis will appear in which p- and e- books will coexist in a kind of dual economy. One can assume that, in the latter case, book markets would continue to exist, and in the former they would shrink significantly until they would either turn into something completely different or, just the opposite, e-books would become as preservable as p-books and an e-paratext would appear that would allow better marketing practices as the paratext of printed books. Clearly, a happy ending is not guaranteed: it is not hard to imagine circumstances in which the disappearance of some book professions might significantly slow down the dissemination of book content, especially if we have in mind that—as shown by Nicholas Carr—digital civilization is not a place where immersed and concentrated reading and thinking thrives.

Regardless of the outcome, at least one thing is certain: all the scenarios described would involve different forms and meanings of reading materials than in the print civilization. Moreover, they might involve a very different understanding of a book than the one presented in this article. Therefore, analyses of the transition of the book industry from print to digital (and the behavior of book professionals and authors in this process) and of the differences between e- and p-books when it comes to their respective epitexts and peritexts will be essential to understanding the changed mentalities of contemporary *homo digitalis*. Somewhere deep in these processes are hidden the answers to the question that I see crucial for future book research—namely, how information devices and market forces that drive their production and dissemination interact with our ways of reading and with our making meaning out of the material read.

NOTES

¹ A high level of conceptual similarity exists between Thompson's publishing field and Genette's epitext. I leave for the future a more detailed examination of differences and similarities between these concepts.

² See also <http://mediadecoder.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/12/04/book-shopping-in-stores-then-buying-online/>.

³ A hypothesis for further research might be that Kindle Singles appeared not only because e-technology and the e-publishing economy made it possible, but also because shorter texts somehow correspond with a shorter amount of time dedicated to reading in the digital age, as noted by the National Endowment of Arts' longitudinal research on reading habits in U.S. (Reading at Risk, NEA 2004: available at <http://www.nea.gov>).

⁴ For more, see Mike Shatzkin's blog on 26 June 2011 at www.idealogy.com, and Locke's own account of his success at: <http://www.amazon.com/Sold-Million-eBooks-Months-ebook/dp/B0056BMK6K>

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Razumeti knjigo: Nekaj digresij o formah in pomenih

Ključne besede: zgodovina knjige / e-knjiga / obogatena e-knjiga / knjižni trg / bralna kultura

Članek pokaže, da so do konca 20. stoletja knjigo definirali bodisi kot besedilo bodisi kot fizičen objekt, s prihodom digitalnih medijev pa je postalo možno knjigo razumeti kot komunikacijsko orodje, na katero so vezane različne bralne prakse, na katere pomembno vplivata peritekst in epitekst. S pojavom elektronskih knjig sta epitekst in peritekst izginila ali se pomembno spremenila, zaradi česar so morale elektronske knjige parazitirati na epitekstu in peritekstu tiskanih knjig. Članek opozarja, da je zaradi tega analogna knjižna infrastruktura morda bolj trdna, kot se zdi na prvi pogled. Šele na tej osnovi in skozi spremembe v delovanju sodobnih knjižnih industrij je možno razumeti digitalne mentalitete.

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