

# Convergence and its discontents: From a book culture to a reading culture

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‘Convergence’ is the acknowledged name of the digitisation game. As virtually all modes of human expression are going digital, they converge. The book is no exception of course, as the book trade well knows. In the heated discussions about the subject, the term ‘convergence’ has been used frequently and conveniently, for example to describe the horizontal integration between books and other media value chains. For established parties in the book chain this horizontal integration has raised the spectre of disintermediation as well as its counterpart re-intermediation—the opportunity for new parties to enter the chain. One insistent question has been who earns what, and how, in the resulting new value chains.

No doubt the best (and certainly the best-known) example of convergence is Apple’s iTunes Store. Soon after Apple added the iTunes Store to the already very strong iTunes–iPod combination in 2003 it began to dominate the music market—to the extent that the US Justice Department has recently started an antitrust inquiry.<sup>1</sup> After starting with music the iTunes store branched out into video (2005), and is now breaking into books, newspapers and magazines. Besides being the best-known example it is also a convenient one because, after that other Internet presence haunting the book trade, Google, Apple is a new entrant into the world of books.

Yes, they’re only e-books, and yes, e-books are only an infinitesimal part of the book market, at present.<sup>2</sup> But growth is exponential,<sup>3</sup> and like the hapless farmer, we might be surprised by how quickly the proverbial lily pads manage to cover the pond. Despite their long awareness of many of the issues attending the digitisation of the printed word, I would like to suggest that the current focus among book professionals on the economic aspects of digitisation is dangerously narrow. Digitisation is causing a major transformation of our book reading and buying culture, with enormous repercussions. I’d like to sketch a number of ways in which this transformation might affect the general book buying public—with obvious potential implications for the book trade.

That the book trade is keenly interested in developing new business models, pricing structures, and royalty rates for the e-book vs the p-book goes without saying. In this context it will no doubt also want to consider for example the question of ‘windowing’. That is to say, the question where the e-book should fit in the long-established hardback-

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<sup>1</sup> New York Times, 25 May 2010; see <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/26/technology/26apple.html?nl=technology&emc=teehupdateema1>.

<sup>2</sup> In the Netherlands, .004 percent in 2009 according to GfK figures.

<sup>3</sup> See [http://www.openebook.org/doc\\_library/industrystats.htm](http://www.openebook.org/doc_library/industrystats.htm).

paperback-mass-market paperback sequence. But these are very much trade concerns. Others parties besides publishers and booksellers take an interest in digitisation and convergence issues, and they should be regarded as stakeholders in the digitisation process. The e-book hardware and software manufacturing industries are an obvious example. When all is said and done, they have only a single interest: how to speed up and expand user uptake of their products. They might do this chiefly by improving device hardware (battery life and screen technology), and overall functionality and ergonomics. But however limited their agenda, it is inevitably going to interfere with that of the traditional book trade. What is more, their singleness of purpose makes them an exceptionally strong driving force.

Apart from the already mentioned example of ‘outsider’ Apple (with its iPhone and, more recently, the iPad), other device makers have been part of the book trade longer, such as Amazon (with the Kindle), and Barnes and Noble (with their Nook). This notion of insiders and outsiders raises the interesting question what constitutes ‘the book market’ and, more interesting still, what motivates it and how it works. Long gone are the days of the guilds when, in spite of fierce competition, at least the rules, set out in intricate and detailed regulations, were clear. No single player would have been capable of changing the rules. As it is, new entrants of the size and market penetration of Apple or Google can, and do, singlehandedly turn the market upside down. They carve out what initially look like niches, but soon turn out to be sizeable chunks, large enough even to give rise to virtual monopolies. That booksellers suffer from these newcomers is obvious; but publishers may also have plenty of reasons to be wary.

Another important category of actors is national governments. With such general aims as achieving high literacy levels, a level media playing field, and high international competitiveness, governments will be concerned to develop a variety of policies on such subjects as media regulation, reading and literacy promotion, and book promotion. This leads them to confront various questions like:

- Whether to stimulate the p-book or the e-book;
- Whether to apply high or low VAT rates for e-books;
- Whether and how to apply subsidies for manufacturing, infrastructure, etcetera;
- Whether or not to extend the fixed book price (if any) to e-books.

Authors, and educators, too, will want to take account of the possibilities offered by digital books and turn them to their advantage. But by no means least of the stakeholders are the actual consumers. Despite the fact that the book trade so fervently hopes that the general public will continue to play a role as buyers and not just readers, this large and diffuse group of actors appears to be rather neglected. It is they who are going to make the difference, through their attitudes to copyright (and consumer resistance to Digital Rights Management, or DRM, is only one way in which this plays out), by adopting or not adopting new book forms and new reading practices. Of the many possible digital developments with a direct consumer angle—including the potential of P.o.D.; the growth of online bookselling; copyright issues and DRM—in what follows I will use the

implications of the current growth in e-books for the public as a concrete example. This is after all supposed by many to be the year of the big e-book breakthrough.

One of the first things to notice when looking at the general public is that reading as a pastime is becoming alarmingly less popular. Figures from most Western countries show a serious decline in the number of hours of leisure time devoted to reading.<sup>4</sup> Curiously, the book trade appears—at least for the time being—to have been spared the consequences, with volumes of titles published, number of copies sold, as well as value of total sales continuing virtually unchanged with only tiny fluctuations. It must follow that more books than ever are being bought that are not being read. This is less surprising than it seems. Books are after all very cheap at their symbolic value. The practice of owning, giving, and receiving books is readily available and eminently affordable. It represents a relatively cheap means to confer a certain intellectual status on all parties concerned. (I will return to the status question later.) But that does not mean that the effects of the downward trend in reading will continue to be mitigated in this way.

I am not suggesting that the end of the book is nigh: but simply that the decline of reading is an incontrovertible fact. (It is apparently also an irreversible trend; it has been going on for some decades now.) In any event, it makes sense to bear this fact in mind in an exploration of the consumer's perspective on any p-books to e-books transformation trends and their ramifications *for the book trade*.

I started out by saying that 'convergence' has become such a buzz word in the book trade. In what follows I will adopt that same term. However, I propose to extend its coverage to include two further phenomena that are extremely relevant for analysing the consumer perspective on digitisation and e-books. These are that the e-book, and all screen-based text consumption, (1) is being developed in a world of converging 'modalities': not only those of numbers and text, but also sound and still and moving images; and (2) is situated in a world of converging—and increasing—media consumption: a world not only of textual media, but also of radio, television, films, games, as well as shopping and other newly 'mediated' activities.

Dedicated e-book reading devices have been around for a long time, though without a great deal of market success. It was at the 1991 Frankfurt Book Fair that Sony presented the first electronic book reader ever, the 'Data Discman'—never to be heard of again. The first e-book reader to be sold in commercial quantities, the Rocket e-book, was also presented at the Frankfurt Book Fair, by Nuovo Media in 1997. Since then, of course, e-reading devices based on the technology of e-paper or e-ink have been hailed as a

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<sup>4</sup> Older generations read more than younger ones, but the truly alarming finding is that generations are not reading more as they age. Reading is 'dying out' (see Frank Huysmans, 'De openbare bibliotheek in Nederland en de veranderende leescultuur sinds 1975', in *Jaarboek voor Nederlandse Boekgeschiedenis* 2007, pp. 179-192). As *The Bookseller* reported recently, 'People aged 60 plus buy 40% of the books in the UK' (9 April 2010, pp. 26-27).

breakthrough. It is true that the number of devices on the market using this reflective screen technology has mushroomed in the last couple of years. There are currently dozens of brands and models, competing on screen size, battery life, wireless capability and other functionalities. However, market adoption remains as yet extremely small. In the meantime, it looks like dedicated, offline, e-reading devices may not necessarily be the future platform of choice. They threaten to give way to allround devices such as the iPad (and smartphones like the iPhone), using 3G technology to be permanently online. In either case, e-book devices (including the e-paper ones) are increasingly equipped with Internet connectivity, be it through a cable, wifi or 3G connection. This brings reading out of its relative isolation. In terms of the convergence of modalities and media, reading increasingly shares its channels with other media.

As the appeal of conventional book reading *for its own sake* is diminishing, alternative leisure time spending on media is nearly exclusively screen based and digital. It is surely not very far-fetched to surmise that reading in a networked and permanently online environment, where it is juxtaposed with so many competing media, will lead to less concentration on the act of reading, and also to less time devoted to dedicated reading. Purely timewise the presence of many media jostling for attention on one screen is a reason why reading might not fare so well in a multi-media environment. But there may be a further factor. In the competition between text and the other modalities, text might be less appealing. That is not because text is less eloquent than other modalities—on the contrary, despite the saying that a picture is worth a thousand words, text is a great deal more precise, for example—but because text is simply harder for our brain to consume. Within the range of converged modalities, text might be a less popular mode of communication because it requires more exertion. Hence the increasing use of other modalities in the digital realm, such as navigation through icons, or the popular practice of sending photos or films instead of text messages on the mobile phone.

As the once separate, even isolated, act of book reading becomes situated within the entire range of modalities converging in the digital realm, it is not inconceivable that the traditional activity of reading books from cover to cover may suffer a further decline. This would of course affect especially longer texts. No wonder that some think that the very future of reading as sustained activity is uncertain. Says Harvard Business School professor Peter Olson, previously CEO of Random House: ‘I think the fundamental issue is not the rate of adoption of the e-reader, or whether publishers will survive in their current form, or what their role will be in the future. The fundamental question at the very bottom of this is, will people read books at all?’<sup>5</sup>

True, this is not only a pessimistic but also a highly speculative argument. It is also possible to construe the reverse argument, that the e-book will enable people to turn to book reading more readily. This argument seems to be borne out by persistent rumors that Kindle owners buy more books, both e and p. (Against which, however, equally persistent

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<sup>5</sup> Harvard Business School Blog, 5 April 2010, <http://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/6369.html>.

rumors must be placed that older generations of readers are over-represented among e-reader users. In other words, these are more avid readers anyway.) However this may be, having books always at one's fingertips, on a pocket-sized device like a phone, a personal organiser, or an e-reader that can instantly connect to an online bookshop might just offer the convenience that some people need to overcome a barrier in their book consumption. (The same could be said for writing. That it has become so easy to share one's thoughts with the world, notably through blogs, seems to have triggered an unprecedented wave of written outpourings.) Also, it is true that most screen activities, such as gaming, texting, social media, MSN, blogging, etc., still involve reading of some sort, and so, technically speaking, require literacy. We are, in other words, not likely to see the end of the need for literacy and the technical ability to read any time soon. It could be argued that even if there may be a decline in *book* reading, the need for reading as a mental ability continues as strong as ever. Reading would merely take a different shape.

Leaving such musings for the speculations they are, another aspect of e-books and e-book devices moving online is that prospective readers are confronted with a truly bewildering choice of sources for their reading matter. Because online booksellers do not actually need to make a distinction between books residing physically in their warehouse and titles they are able to source as soon as there is a customer request for them, they can always give the impression to be much better stocked than their brick-and-mortar counterparts. But in addition, just a mouse click away from online booksellers designated as such is a huge range and variety of other online book sources. The iTunes shop, publishers' web sites, Google Books, scholarly repositories, Project Gutenberg: these are just some of the numerous outlets. Their presence in a single online environment means of course that texts at published prices will need to compete with free or virtually free e-texts (e.g., Gutenberg, Google). Also, this vast number of titles represents an embarrassment of choice to consumers. This will be regarded as a good thing by some, but no doubt be experienced as confusing by many others, thus offering opportunities to publishers and booksellers.

In this mixed online environment ripe and green—the meticulously edited and the casually thrown together—lie side by side. Once again, this can be variously construed as intellectual and material 'contamination' and a recipe for disaster, or as an opportunity. Many readers will want or even need to know what edition or translation they are looking at; whether the text is abridged or not, and similar bibliographical information that printed books rarely fail to deliver. It is an opportunity for any actors who are able to offer a seal of quality. This need for quality appraisal will become even more apparent as more 'user-generated content' appears.

This is how digitisation may affect the status of authors and texts. But the status question is not confined to authors and texts; it will also affect the 'incarnation' (if this is a possible concept in the digital case) of texts as e-books. One effect of the loss of materiality is that all books will end up looking and feeling the same on whatever e-reading device they are consumed. This means that familiar material cues for determining the quality of books will need to be replaced by immaterial ones, with obvious consequences, for example, for

marketing. Immateriality is also sure to have an impact on the sense of ownership and the satisfaction that usually brings. As buying turns into gaining access to text (which may be temporary access only, amounting to hiring), ownership will become much more tenuous. That this is bound to take its toll on the status of books in private life as well as society at large again seems obvious.

Closely connected to this is another potentially problematic aspect of the immateriality of the digital book: its reduced social visibility. Music shops are already disappearing from the street, but it can be argued that the effect of this on music consumption will be minimal. People are happy to obtain their music wherever they can find it (though whether they are also happy to pay for it is another matter). One important difference between music and books is that the latter require more effort to consume, even if by common consent they are vital to our culture. This is one reason why so much effort is expended on reading promotion. The importance in an educational context of the visibility and presence of books in society is testified by recently published scholarly research:

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. It holds equally in rich nations and in poor; in the past and in the present; under Communism, capitalism, and Apartheid; and most strongly in China.<sup>6</sup>

These findings are particularly revealing as to the social importance of *physical* books. It is an intriguing question how this status could be affected by the move from physical paper book forms to the virtual forms of the e-book.

Virtual forms of the book are fluid and can be extraordinarily diverse. The question what will happen to the format of the book in its e-manifestation is directly connected with the issue of the convergence of modalities and media. The transformation of the concept of the book into various digital guises has already begun. The invention of Vooks<sup>7</sup> and Movels<sup>8</sup> urges the question how much 'e' and how much 'p' the public actually wants in its reading fare. Or perhaps the real question is how to define what a book really is. Never mind how much digital wizardry went into the manufacture of a printed book, at least everyone is happy to call the tangible product by that name. The paper book took centuries to perfect before becoming the reading machine it now is. E-books on the other hand are totally protean in shape; there are no 'natural' or innate properties of the digital medium, neither as regards textual form nor device capabilities. Anything that is programmable can be designed and created. The question is whether the results of such creative programming

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<sup>6</sup> M.D.R. Evans, Jonathan Kelley, Joanna Sikora, Donald J. Treiman, 'Family scholarly culture and educational success: Books and schooling in 27 nations', *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility*, 28, 2 (2010), pp. 171-197.

<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.vook.com>.

<sup>8</sup> See <http://movels.wordpress.com/>.

are still to be regarded as books rather than multimedial experiences of one kind or another.

Similar issues attend the matter of literacy. For digital reading, being able to read is only a minimal requirement. In addition to functional ‘reading literacy’ it requires what might be termed ‘meta-literacy’. This holdall term covers the ability to understand such things as navigational issues, and hardware and software issues, such as how to authorise a device to consume ‘content’.<sup>9</sup> Never mind the sort of literacy that is needed to look through the verbal surface tissue to be able to apprehend and comprehend any authorial designs on the unsuspecting reader. Admittedly, in principle this requirement for literacy is the same regardless of the material substrate on which reading takes place. In reality, however, digital text forms offer different rhetorical devices than printed text.

Free digital access to the classics has been an aim of computer enthusiasts from the very beginning. As Project Gutenberg’s website proudly proclaims, its founder, Michael Hart, ‘invented e-books’ as far back as 1971.<sup>10</sup> For a long time this remained a marginal phenomenon. Though many people still declare that they won’t read texts of any length from a screen, there is no doubt that screen technology has improved tremendously, and will continue to improve. As we saw, sales of e-books, however minimal they are at present, are growing exponentially. This growth does not take into account downloads from Project Gutenberg or other sources of free e-books. In addition, Google is about to unleash the backlist of centuries of publishing. All in all it is not impossible that screen-based reading is really poised to take off. To what extent this will counterbalance the downward trend of overall time spent on reading is a matter of speculation.

However this may be, it should be clear by now that in looking at an e-book future I am not sketching a scenario in which people stop reading—although I think the type of reading will tend to shift away from traditional paper-based formats such as books, newspapers and magazines towards any sort of text at all. I’m also not sketching a scenario in which people will stop paying for their reading necessarily—although I think that the competition from huge numbers of free and very cheap titles, such as the classics, will be fierce. After all, e-texts, regardless of provenance and price, will to all intents and purposes all look and feel the same on whatever e-reading device they are consumed. What I am sketching is a scenario in which the reading of the traditional formats that people used to pay to read, such as books, newspapers and periodicals, will experience strong competition from other mediated screen-based leisure pursuits as well as from free and cheap downloads. This is a scenario in which readers will expect lower prices, and will explore other channels than the conventional book trade (think of Apple, Google, and other new entrants) to obtain reading matter.

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<sup>9</sup> The brief Norwegian sketch called ‘Helpdesk’ (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pQHx-SjgQvQ>) is a very funny illustration of the meta-literacy demands made by new media technologies.

<sup>10</sup> See <http://www.gutenberg.org/wiki/Gutenberg:About>.

These are fundamental changes, with obvious repercussions for the book trade. We might be witnessing the transformation of our book reading and buying culture into a culture that may still be called a reading culture, but will probably be less a book culture—unless the meaning of the term ‘book’ is widened greatly. In the course of time the paper book has created a natural place for itself in society—so natural in fact that in spite of its omnipresence it became virtually invisible. In that invisibility the book could come to be taken almost for granted. Moving the book into the digital realms has put an end to that. The e-book does not have a natural place in our lives; there is no natural way for it to be produced, distributed and, not in the last place, consumed. The e-book forces a reconsideration of what a book is, what it is for, and following on from that, how it can be produced, distributed and consumed.

In this re-invention of the book there are obviously many ways forward for the book trade—provided it can suppress its conservative instincts. To recognise and embrace the digital challenges in their full magnitude and extent—rather than to cling to the economics of the paper book—offers many opportunities. By providing new services; by making the book buying process accessible and attractive; by emphasising the experience of online buying; by playing the quality and status cards cleverly: by these and many other means the book, and the reading of books, can, in marketing terms, be newly branded. For let’s not mistake the e-book for a p-book.

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**Pull-out quotes:**

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**(BIOGRAPHY)**

Adriaan van der Weel is an extraordinary professor in the Book and Digital Media Studies MA Programme at Leiden University, the Netherlands, where he lectures on publishing, digital media technology, and the history of information transmission.

Mr Van der Weel serves on the editorial board of *Scholarly Communication, Digital Humanities Quarterly, Bibliologia*, and of *Book History* (published annually by SHARP), and on the scholarly board of the Scaliger Research Institute of Leiden University. In the beginning of 2010 Mr Van der Weel took on the position of interim editor-in-chief of *Logos*.

His most recent book, *Electronic Text and the Order of the Book* (forthcoming from Manchester University Press), explores the parallels and discontinuities between shifting paradigms of textual transmission in the past and the most recent one brought about by the advent of the computer-in-a-network.

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