

A primer on eBooks

Introduction to eBooks: eBooks (also written as e-books e-Books) are increasingly occupying a large portion of any discussion that involves publishing or publishers. While many of us are told that eBooks (and e-Publishing, the process of publishing e-Books) are an inevitable part of the future landscape of publishing and, therefore, must receive due attention from publishers that do not wish to be driven to extinction, very little information about it is readily available. Some questions persist: What are eBooks? How are they developed? What are the formatting guidelines, if any? What might be the costs involved? What are the returns on investment? How do they reach customers? These questions have no easy answers. This paper attempts to answer these questions so that the publisher can make an informed choice when it comes to decisions regarding e-publishing and eBooks.

Scope of this document: This document is only an introduction to eBooks and is not a manual on how eBooks can be produced. eBooks can be produced by the DTP division of the publishing houses or its production can be outsourced to digital publishing firms that are competent in the field. Although e-publishing currently seems an inevitable step to take, publishers are advised to re-examine their strategy and understand their customers, especially their buying habits and reading preferences, before undertaking to publish electronically.

The case for e-publishing: e-publishing is gaining acceptance among publishers for a variety of reasons and it can be argued that e-publishing, or at least examining its feasibility, is now a necessary step every publisher must take. Some of the reasons why e-publishing has become so important are:

1. Proliferation of reading devices: If the numbers are anything to go by, it seems like publishers can ill afford to ignore e-publishing. These past few years, e-Readers¹ of all shapes and sizes have introduced into the market, each time at a lower price, and are selling in large numbers. With the proliferation of mobile handsets and the increasingly large screen size available on them, these mobile devices too provide sufficient e-reading capability to its many owners. Thus there is no dearth of e-Readers available to readers. Publishers are therefore scrambling to offer their books as eBooks to these readers.

Reading devices, and tablets, have found favour with readers primarily because they are portable devices that allow their owners to work on the move. This means books can be read during a stopover or while waiting to meet someone. Because eBooks can easily be accessed via the Internet, one does not have to be prepared with something to read during an emergency.

¹ Much like audio CDs are of no use by themselves and need a CD player to render them useful, eBooks too cannot be used without an e-Reader. The popular e-Readers available in the market today are Kindle by Amazon, Nook by Barnes & Noble, Kobo by Borders, Pi by Infibeam and Wink by DC Books, the last two developed for the Indian market. Although the prominent e-Readers are all marketed by bookstores, there are others such as the Sony E-Reader that do not follow that trend. E-Readers are different from tablets, which are essentially computers that can run other software programmes too. Apple's iPad is the most famous of all tablets in a list that includes the BlackBerry Playbook and the Samsung Galaxy Tab. It is rumoured that Amazon will also introduce its own tablet.

2. Availability of cheap Internet connectivity: Internet connectivity, especially broadband connectivity, is becoming increasingly cheaper and, thanks to government and private initiatives, available in many remote locations. eBooks, being electronic files in nature, can be easily distributed over the Internet much like files are sent through e-mail. The easy availability of Internet connectivity thus allows eBooks to be transferred to customers no matter how remotely they might be situated. Thus distribution costs are rendered negligible and the location of the customer does not prove to be a barrier to accessibility of eBooks.

3. Media Assimilation and Content Creation: eBooks in its most basic form consist of PDF files that the reader can read on a PC or a laptop. However, these eBooks can also be “enhanced” to make them engaging and entertaining. This is done by incorporating voice and visuals within the context of the eBook. A medical textbook may, thus, explain a disease using a video clip or a children’s book may contain a series of animations to depict a situation. eBooks thus become more attractive to the average reader².

4. Access to distant markets: As already explained, eBooks are distributed as files over the Internet. That means that the geographical boundaries that deter sale of physical copies are removed making it possible to sell to readers all over the world. This makes eBooks an attractive proposition especially while addressing small, geographically dispersed markets that cannot be efficiently served with printed books.

5. Always available: Given the fact that eBooks do not occupy any shelf-space and can be easily reproduced, publishers need not worry anymore about limited shelf exposure or an out-of-print backlist. eBooks have allowed publishers to have greater visibility for their entire list.

From the customer's perspective, as mentioned before, readers can access eBooks with great ease and speed so not having a book to read isn't an issue because one can be downloaded and read.

The cons: Among the few factors that have discouraged publishers from taking the “e” route, the primary one is the threat of piracy. eBooks can be easily duplicated and disseminated and can easily lend itself to unauthorized copying and distribution.

The development of eBooks does cost money and publishers must carefully examine the returns they hope to achieve on such an investment. Development of eBooks therefore must be a choice one takes after examining all costs involved and the ability of the market to “consume” the eBooks.

Since the next eBook costs next to nothing to produce, readers expect eBooks to be priced much lower than their printed counterparts. The jury is still out on this one but discussions on the Internet point towards growing resentment in cases where the paperback and the eBook have been priced equally.

² It is important to remember that one should not get carried away while incorporating other media within the context of the eBook so as to almost render it into an animation film. Besides technical considerations that might hinder the usage of such an eBook, such a move defeats the purpose of the eBook. Some books also do not lend themselves to the use of other media and should be retained only in text form.

The nuts and bolts of e-publishing: This section attempts to explain what is involved in e-publishing. Before that, let's understand more about e-Readers and eBooks.

As mentioned before, eBooks need e-Readers to render them useful. However, e-Readers, or platforms as they may be commonly referred to, are not similar. They are tuned to recognize eBooks that appear only in a certain form, or format. If the eBook is of a format that is different from the one that the e-Reader recognizes, the eBook will be rendered incompatible. Think of it as the inability to play vinyl LP records on a CD player.

Different e-Readers are tuned to read different eBook formats. The format of an eBook is recognized from the extension of its file name³. Prominent eBook formats are .mobi and .azw, which are recognized by the Amazon Kindle, and .epub which is recognized by the Sony E-Reader, the Nook, the Wink and many others. It is also important to note that some e-Readers do not recognize some eBook formats.

Publishers must therefore take care to see that their books are published in more than one format if they wish to reach out to a larger readership⁴.

In most publishing processes, PDF files of the entire content of the book are already produced before the book goes into print. PDF files can themselves be distributed as eBooks or can be converted into .mobi or .epub files for distribution to a larger number of e-Readers⁵.

The costs of producing an eBook will depend on whether or not the process was outsourced and on the quantum of books being converted to the electronic version. Some publishers have chosen to convert their entire list and make them available as eBooks while others have adopted a cautious approach, choosing to produce just a few titles as eBooks and tracking the return on investment before converting the other books. Some publishers choose to convert only their out-of-print back lists into eBooks. Publishers are advised to choose an option that fits their budget and their appetite for risk.

While deciding which books should be converted to eBooks, publishers must also bear in mind the technological constraints imposed on certain types of books. Graphic-intensive books, for instance, are laboriously displayed on e-Readers and need processes that might be expensive to develop. Similarly, books written in other scripts besides the Roman script have encountered problems related to the font that renders them incomprehensible, especially when converted into formats such as .epub and .mobi. Publishers are advised to discuss these issues with their eBook developers before they invest in the process.

³ Remember that eBooks are electronic files much like MS Word and PDF files which, too, are recognized by its formats, .doc and .pdf in this case

⁴ .pdf and .txt are also legitimate eBook formats that can be read on a wide range of devices.

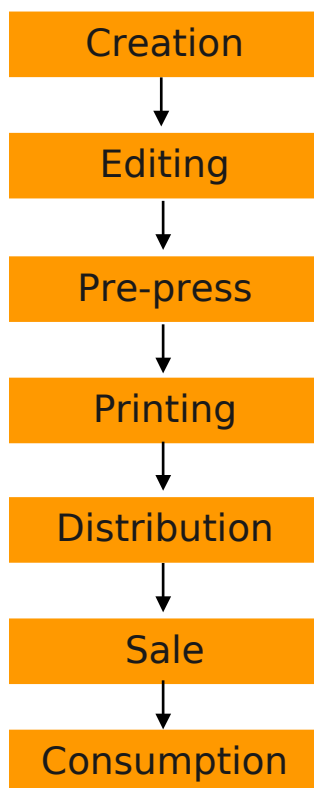
⁵ It is important to note that much of the formatting that is used during the typesetting process, such as headers and footers, bullet points and tables, make the book extremely unreadable when converted to any of the eBook formats such as .mobi or .pdf. The files have to be therefore reformatted for proper compatibility with these formats. Ensure that your book is readable in all the formats you have chosen. This can be achieved through the use of ebook viewers, most of which are freely available on the Internet.

Since eBooks are available primarily on the Internet, it is important that they can be searched and located easily. This is achieved through the use of what is called metadata, data regarding the book such as its title, the names of its authors, its ISBN and other such related data. Publishers should make sure that the appropriate metadata is generated for each book.

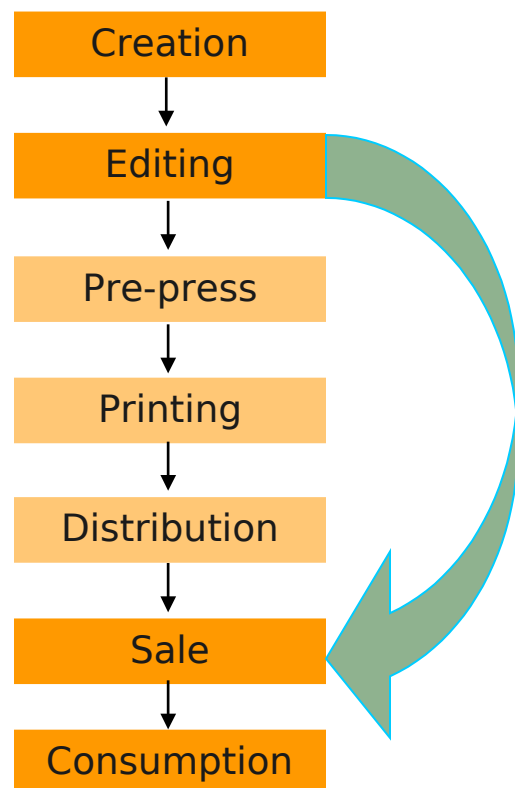
Comparisons in process: The development of eBooks has witnessed a large number of authors being able to self-publish. Besides, many publishers, most of whom are based in the US and in Europe, have launched eBook-only lists. This can be attributed to the fact that the production of eBooks does away with most processes traditionally associated with the production of books (the printed or “dead-tree” version). This change is explained in the figure on the following page.

A close examination of the illustration shows that in the case of e-books the publisher can do away with the pre-press and printing stages and, in some cases, with the distribution stage. This allows the publisher to bring the book to market in a relatively short span of time. Books can therefore be launched with relatively greater ease and speed.

Traditional Process

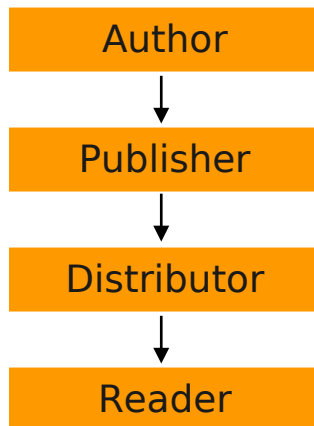


The New Process

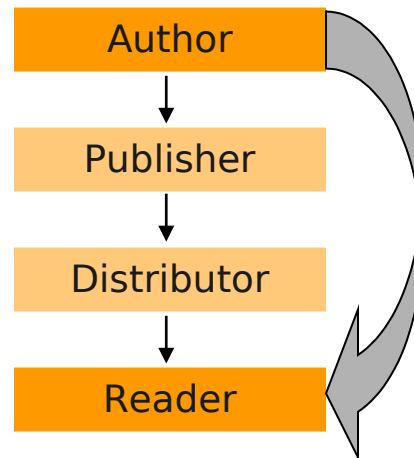


Comparisons in engagements: Similarly the advent of eBooks has rewritten the rules of engagement between the authors, publishers and other players in the supply chain. As depicted in the following figure, authors can directly reach out to readers. The need for publishers is therefore being questioned and their role as content curators has become more important now than before.

Traditional Process



The New Process



Digital Rights Management: The main concern most publishers have regarding eBooks is that related to piracy. If eBooks are indeed electronic files that can be transferred over the Internet, there seems to be nothing that will stop readers from sharing these files much like music is shared. That should, theoretically, result in a loss of sales for the publisher.

This threat has been recognized and addressed in the form of what is called Technical Protection Measures (TPM). These TPM primarily safeguard the “digital rights” of the owner of the intellectual property, the publisher in this case, and is therefore also sometimes referred to as “digital rights management” or simply DRM. One may find that TPM and DRM are used interchangeably.

DRM is currently mostly managed by the manufacturers of e-Readers. These e-Readers possess the “key” to a “lock” on the eBook. So if the eBook is “locked” for reading on the Kindle, only the Kindle will possess the “key” to it. The user will therefore not be able to read it, for instance, on an iPad because the iPad will not have the key for that file. Many times, the key is unique to each device implying that two users of the Kindle will also not be able to share an eBook. The argument is that if a reader has purchased an eBook then he/she should be able to read it only on his/her own device. Another device implies another user and hence, the argument goes, evidence of unauthorized sharing.

No doubt effective, this kind of DRM has also caused angst among readers who might have multiple devices and cannot read their books on all of them because the books have been rendered device-specific. Many publishers who have opted to protect their books through the use of DRM have experienced a backlash in the form of readers refusing to buy their books.

The emphasis has, therefore, shifted to what is called "Social DRM", a less-intrusive type of DRM. This advocates the use of information, usually in the form of a line of text, which uniquely identifies the author and can be used to detect whether the file has changed hands. Publishers have, in fact, been quite innovative in the use of Social DRM, using text such as "Presented to Kate for her reading pleasure" or a customized bookplate (ex-libris) developed uniquely for each buyer.

Although piracy remains a large threat to the profitability of publishers and the integrity of their content, publishers must approach the issue of DRM after examining all the issues concerned.

Next Steps: The publisher must have an idea of how eBooks will be sold after they are produced. The channels of distribution that will be employed must be determined before the eBooks are produced so that the eBooks can be immediately put up for sale. While the publisher may choose to sell these eBooks on their own websites, they may choose to do so also on other websites that aggregate books by many publishers and facilitate their sale. This is much like having distributors for your book and also choosing to sell your book yourself. They must be extremely cautious about the terms of your agreement, just like they would in the case of printed books.

As in all cases, sales must be tracked and returns on investment calculated. If eBooks are indeed the way books will be traded in the future, publishers must be wary of adopting another's way of doing things and devise a method of developing and distributing eBooks that suits it best.

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