

## Electronic Books Seek A New Opportunity



By Nicolai Pogrebnyakov

Post-Doctoral Researcher, IESE

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The new eBooks are still not ready to replace traditional books, but time is working in their favor. While purchases of traditional books seem to be in continuous decline, the publishing sector is showing renewed interest – not without certain fear and trepidation – in the possibilities of digital technology. With their potential for on-line distribution cost savings and enhanced mobility, eBooks appear to be emerging as a way of reactivating this market.

Although interest in electronic books has experienced periodic resurgences, technological immaturity has continuously frustrated initial expectations. Up to now, forecasts have always turned out to be too optimistic. In addition, the actors involved have turned a deaf ear to all such projects until more propitious times are upon us. The most credible signals that these times are drawing near occurred a little over two years ago when Sony launched its “Reader” reading device, which sold 300,000 units in the United States alone. More importantly, there was a total run on the market last Christmas for Kindle, an electronic book-reading device promoted by Amazon.

Now, Amazon’s virtual bookstore run by Jeff Bezos has just presented its 2.0 version, which conforms to recent progress in this technology. The new model will be available in the United States at the end of this month for a price of 349 dollars. Its latest features include an electric ink screen that reduces readers’ eyestrain and a battery that lasts up to five days without a charge. Another key feature involves a wireless connection that allows books to be downloaded from the Internet via 3G networks without having to use a computer. It has also improved the way readers turn pages as well as its overall capacity, now a full 2 gigabytes. This allows for storage of approximately 1500 titles. Amazon’s initiative is attempting to confront another of the sector’s weaknesses: the limited

availability of titles. Jeff Bezos' bookstore already offers 230,000 titles for downloading. Among these are practically all the New York Times best sellers. In addition, Amazon offers Kindle users the option to subscribe to newspapers and magazines for prices that range between 2 and 15 dollars per month. These commercial options are working despite free alternatives such as WikiBooks, the new incentive of Wikipedia, and other similar open projects.

### **Books in Mobile Phones**

Sony Reader, Amazon's Kindle, the Chinese Jinke and Irex's Iliad will all have to compete with a new candidate that may replace the electronic book: namely the mobile phone. Even though mobile phones were not designed for this purpose, they do not require the purchase of any one of the above platforms. In Japan, publishing successes have been registered with novels specially edited for reading on phones. Google wants to make 1.5 million of the works in its Google Book Search library available on-line at no cost for its U.S. users who own iPhone or Android mobile phones. A similar offer involving 500,000 works would be extended to users of these two devices in other countries. At the Mobile World Congress, Adobe is presenting a technology development kit for electronic books and mobile phones that, according to company sources, has already been adopted by companies such as Bookeen, Irex, Lex Cicle, Plastic Logic and Polymer Vision. The kit is also used by Sony Reader and EPUB, a standard XML-based format featuring DRM protection.

With all the momentum generated by Reader's excellent reception in the United States and Japan as well its successful presentation in England, France and Germany, Sony is now preparing to launch Reader in Spain, where some publishers are finalizing the launches of their electronic book projects for the end of this year. One of the companies to have already entered the market is Leer-e from Navarra. This company sells readers from various manufacturers and, for 10 Euros, sells coupons giving readers the right to download titles such as "*El Camino*" and "*La Sombra del Ciprés es Alargada*", both written by Miguel Delibes.

Beyond the technology, there is a certain restlessness regarding certain non-fixed aspects of this market, such as how to monetize electronic books, how to avoid piracy, or how to predict the role that traditional bookstores will eventually play.

Sony believes that the publishing industry will have time to prepare a proper transition. They claim this because, as far as they are concerned, Reader is not cannibalizing traditional book sales. Instead, it is providing additional sales. Nevertheless, there is evidence that digital options historically end up victorious on practically all fronts where they are applied, and it does not appear that the electronic book front will be any different. This holds true for the written press as well. This medium is experiencing major difficulties right now, and it looks at the Internet with a rare mixture of terror, insecurity, and hope. The question now is in knowing how long it will take for the gap to close between the obvious media interest awakened by electronic books and their real results.