Brittany Kulcsar

Professor Phillips

VAST 231

23 April 2013

The Future of Ebooks

Electronic technology has become such an engrained part of American culture that it is almost impossible to imagine a modern world without its presence. It is no question that those who lived long before the advent of modern technology would never have been able to predict the thousands of different technological inventions that exist today. However, of all the modern gadgets that exist, ebooks are perhaps one of the more surprising of these innovations. A strong cultural consensus that has existed for quite some time and continues to exist in the minds of many Americans is the idea that paper books will last forever. Although this idea is not incredibly far-fetched and likely holds some validity, ebooks have certainly begun to challenge their growth in today’s world. The question many people ask in response to this statement is whether this is a good thing. Should people purchase ebooks over more traditional printed books despite the largely held issue that ebooks pose an enormous threat to reader privacy? Many would answer this question with a stern “no”. The fact of the matter is, despite their easy-access, ebooks possess many cons when it comes to reader privacy rights.

Ebooks have undoubtedly turned the act of reading into a much more public activity and taken away a lot of the privacy that traditional printed books allow readers. With an individual’s purchase of an ebook comes a long list of different privacy infringements that are thrown their way. Ebooks are designed to record the digital reading habits of the book owner, something that is extremely controversial. “Data collected from Nooks reveals, for example, how far readers get in particular books, how quickly they read and how readers of particular genres engage with books”(Alter). However, this is not all that ebooks have the ability to record. Many companies such as Amazon “will be provided with information on not only what books you have bought, but also annotations, bookmarks, notes, highlights, or similar markings you make using your Kindle”(Huang). They allow for absolutely everything the reader does with his or her ebook to be noted and compared to the activities of others. In fact, they can even give away the reader’s location using a GPS device. Even worse, “none of the major e-reader manufacturers have explained to consumers in clear, unequivocal language what data is being collected about them and why”(Flood). This means that a large number of ebook users are likely unaware that their reading habits are being tracked. This can be an extremely unsettling thought to many people, especially those who grew up only knowing traditional books and who were taught at a young age that “reading is a solitary and private act, an intimate exchange between the reader and the words on the page”(Alter). This is something that printed books allow through their simplicity. Many people today still feel this way, and choose to purchase printed books over ebooks for this reason.

A lot of these tracking activities may seem harmless to the companies putting them into effect, but many readers simply do not feel comfortable with so much of their information being reeled in to strangers just seconds after opening their ebook. It is a bit too Big Brother-like to know that whichever activities are performed on an ebook will be reviewed by a complete stranger in a different part of the nation. One issue that this poses is that it may influence “readers to steer clear of digital books on sensitive subjects such as health, sexuality and security out of fear that their reading is being tracked”(Alter). This is a huge issue considering that it suggests ebooks are taking away the confidence for individuals to read what they choose and consequently ruining reading experiences as a whole, making reading a public activity. In fact, it is even possible that “someone who downloads a lot of literature on terrorism and has an interest in Arab writers could have problems entering the United States” due to ebook tracking, regardless of whether or not they actually pose a threat (Drumm). It is for this reason that an individual with a taste for Arab literature may restrain from reading such novels on an ebook—something that simply is not fair to the reader. The privacy breaches allowed by ebooks take away one of the major reasons people become literate in the first place—to be able to read and gain knowledge on the subjects that interest them. Ebook growth will never hit the point that ebook companies hope for it to reach if readers are not able to feel comfortable reading their preferred choices of literature.

However, despite the privacy breaches ebooks have created, they still pose a challenge to traditional book sales. Since ebooks obviously fail to triumph printed books in the privacy department, what is it then that makes them so appealing to readers? The answer to this question lies in the accessibility of ebooks in comparison to that of printed books. The fact of the matter is that all humans seek to obtain instant gratification. This applies to all aspects of life, including the world of novels and literature. Although tradition definitely plays a role in a person’s decision to choose a reading source, “when it comes to book-buying the power of instant gratification can never be underestimated”(Sarath). Although a trip to the bookstore may be fun and exciting, many people simply do not possess the patience to drive all the way to the bookstore when they can simply click on a button to make the same purchase. Furthermore, another aspect of ebooks in regard to accessibility that makes them appear more desirable than printed books is their ability to store dozens of novels on one small device. Readers are able to access their entire book collection on a solitary screen, making the act of reading while traveling a much simpler task. It is impossible to deny the fact that ebooks certainly do have their advantages over printed books. However, unless something is done to deal with the privacy issues ebooks pose it is unlikely that they will completely eradicate the existence of more traditional forms of reading.

In order for ebooks to continue to thrive, legal steps need to be taken to change the privacy settings currently existent among ebooks. Several laws have already been put into effect in an effort to do this. For example, California was just recently one of the first states to implement an act addressing reader privacy in which “agencies must get a court order before they can require digital booksellers to turn over information revealing which books their customers have browsed, purchased, read and underlined”(Alter). This act was created in the hope that readers might feel more comfortable purchasing and using ebooks, as well as to ensure that companies do not have such easy access to reader privacy as they currently possess. Other states are now following California’s lead in trying to enact similar laws, something that benefits both reader rights and the ebook industry itself. There is no doubt that if the presence of these type of laws continue to become enacted, ebook growth will soar. Readers who are currently anti-ebook due to their privacy issues would begin to purchase ebooks themselves, making the ebook an unstoppable force. Through these laws, ebooks might even gain enough momentum to challenge the existence of printed books as a whole.

Ebooks have the potential to truly become an engrained part of American culture if the privacy problems associated with them can be taken under control. If the know-all aspect of ebooks can be made less threatening and intimidating to readers, then they definitely have a shot in becoming the main source of reading material in America. As the book industry stands in its current form, it does share a relation with the electronic industry, but the two industries are not directly related. However, if more legal actions are taken to preserve the rights of ebook readers then the future of reading may take a direct turn and merge wholly with the future of electronics, changing the entire essence of what it means to read.

Works Cited

Alter, Alexandra. "Your E-book Is Reading You." *The Wall Street Journal* (2012): n. pag. Print.

Drumm, Marcela. "Ebooks Are Tracking Your Reading Habits." Ed. Chiponda Chimbelu. *Deutsche Welle*. N.p., 11 July 2012. Web. 26 Apr. 2013.

Flood, Alison. "Big E-reader Is Watching You." *The Guardian*. N.p., 4 July 2012. Web. 26 Apr. 2013.

Huang, Yian. "Privacy Rights Re-kindled: Ebook Reader Privacy." *Science and Technology Law Review*. N.p., 10 Oct. 2011. Web. 26 Apr. 2013.

Sarath, Patrice. "Instant Gratification, or Ebooks." *Bizmology*. N.p., 19 July 2010. Web. 26 Apr. 2013.