When Ebooks Are the Only “Books”

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The Coming Age of Ebooks

The Kindle is popular. Amazon doesn’t release any useful sales figures, so we have no hard data. But on my daily commute on Boston’s subway system, I usually see several people reading on their Kindles. Add in the ebook readers released by Sony, Barnes & Noble and other manufacturers, Apple’s iPads, iPhones and the many Android smartphones, it certainly seems that more and more people are doing their reading in the form of ebooks.

When technology changes our habits, it rarely does so by putting up a neon sign blinking the words THE FUTURE IS HERE. It simply takes over gradually, from one day to the next, without anyone realizing that it’s happening. Can you remember the exact day when you stopped writing letters and switched to using only email? It will be the same with ebooks.

The transition from paper books to ebooks won’t happen overnight, and we won’t be able to pinpoint exactly when we stop buying paper books – in fact, we may continue to buy a small number of paper books indefinitely into the future, just as we still write real letters instead of emails once in a while, but I agree with those who believe that ebooks will replace paper books as the main form in which we read within a few years.¹

For book lovers, this is an exciting time, and more than a little scary. What aspects of paper
books will survive the transition to ebooks? Which aspects will not? How will these changes affect the future of reading? And of writing?

There aren't any clear answers (yet), but one of the benefits of a technological shift is to allow us to see more clearly those features (and limitations) of old technologies that have been taken for granted.

For example, the transition to email from handwritten letters gave us an opportunity to reflect on what features of the handwritten letter were useful, interesting, and absent in the new form: the ease of inserting doodles and diagrams, the simplicity of writing in multiple languages without worrying about “encodings,” the richness of what we can express when we are not limited to digital text, the sense of personal connection between the writer and the reader. But it also allowed us to realize how limiting letter writing was, how the ability to send mail immediately and without cost would transform our communication patterns.

Ultimately, new technologies succeed because they bring advantages that we could not even conceive of under the old technologies, but some of the benefits of the old technologies will never be replicated in the new (and that is why we still sometimes, if rarely, write letters). A technological shift is never costless, and we should evaluate, carefully, what features we love about the old and how best we can transfer them to the new. But we should also think about how we may have been constrained by the old technologies and unnecessarily cabined our imaginations. A slavish imitation of the old in the new is rarely the best course.

As a starting point, it may be helpful to separate the abstract concept of a book – a collection of written material – from its container: a bamboo scroll, a parchment codex, a paperback, or a smartphone running an ebook reading application. Though a book like The Gospel According to John can exist in any of these containers, the container also changes and influences how we interact with and think about the book.

For example, compared to the scroll, the codex is far easier to transport, allows “random access” to any section, and is far more economical in its use of space for text (not the least because it can make use of both sides of each page). It is hard to even imagine how reference works like dictionaries would be useful in the way we think of them without the capacity for random access to any section. These advantages of the codex probably accelerated its adoption over the scroll in the West during the first centuries of the first millennium AD.

Similarly, in China, the popularity of poetry composition among the literati during the Tang Dynasty (AD 618-907) may have driven the wide adoption of “whirlwind binding,” a transition format between the scroll and the codex that was made from a stack of long rectangular pages bound together at one end and then rolled up like a scroll, in the production of rhyme dictionaries and other reference works. The same text, arranged differently on a scroll versus a codex, gives rise to different ways of reading.

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From the Codex to the Ebook
But back to the present. Right now, we are in a transition stage, and most ebook makers devote the bulk of their energy to making ebooks copy the appearance of the codex. The fact that ebooks are trying so hard to imitate paper books and the expectation of readers that ebooks be perfect imitations have caused ebooks to appear to be inferior to paper books in many ways.

Such imitations are sometimes comically slavish and useless, as when Apple’s iBooks app includes graphics and animations meant to evoke the stack of unread pages in a paper book and the turning of a paper page. These superfluous gestures will likely soon fall by the wayside.

Some of the limitations of the current generation of ebooks seem to be mere temporary constraints due to the immaturity of the technology, and will be resolved in time as the technology improves. Charts and photographs in ebooks are grainy, low-resolution, sometimes to the point of il-