e-Roads and i-Ways

A Sociotechnical Look at User Acceptance of E-Books

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Introduction

Despite repeated claims of a definitive breakthrough, e-book uptake remains surprisingly slow. Many factors that aid or inhibit the acceptance of this new text technology have been identified. These factors include technological as well as social ones. So far, most commentators have emphasized technological and socioeconomic ones. This paper will be arguing that research on user uptake of the e-book needs to take into account sociocultural factors that are currently underresearched. Taking cognisance of the sociocultural context will give a better insight into the conditions that need to be met for a successful introduction, marketing, and uptake of e-books, and it will account for local (national or regional) variation.

E-books are a difficult phenomenon to discuss with any objectivity. The civil war between digital gurus and diehard bibliophiles causes sectarian sentiments to creep into any discussion. This is not surprising, as any scholar researching the phenomenon will inevitably take a position of his or her own. As an interested party – probably even more interested than most – a researcher ought to make a full disclosure of that position, which I shall do here. To begin with, I recognise of course that all resistance against new reading and writing technologies – which is of all times, beginning with the distrust of writing so passionately expressed by Plato – is always temporary. Eventually that resistance dies down, the perceived problems and disadvantages which informed it being either forgotten or accepted. However, that does not mean that the effects the critics observed or foresaw were not real or less far-reaching. For example, in a world suffused with paper and print, memory is no longer the vital asset it was in a preponderantly oral society. Writing, and a fortiori printing and the World Wide Web, did allow us to neglect that faculty. Equally, "printing presses ... corrupt susceptible hearts" and spelled the end of monastic scribal...
In fact this worried contemporary observation barely begins to hint at the magnitude of the corruption that ensued. The rift in the Christian church it fostered was never to be healed. Nor did the print-fuelled Enlightenment improve the church’s position. If it was their aim to avert disaster, the critics did not even cry loudly enough. But then again, crying would not have availed them much: technologies have a social life of their own. A scholar’s task is not to resist, but to observe and analyse the developments and their potential consequences dispassionately. All the same, I have to declare myself a techno-sceptic in the sense that I do not believe that technological progress necessarily equals social improvement.

A further complication presents itself in that ‘e-book’ is not an unproblematic term. For pragmatic reasons I have settled on a very straightforward and simple definition: ‘a book-length digital text that may be read on an e-book reader’ (it may of course also be read on another type of device, using e-reading software). In fact, I will restrict myself even further, and focus chiefly on general trade books, occasionally mentioning text books, academic books, or any other specific publishing field in passing. Perhaps my ‘definition’ is somewhat circuitous, but what is more serious, it pretends implicitly that there is a consensus on the notion of e-books. Even at the technical level nothing could be further from the truth. The technology (both hardware and software) is certainly not yet mature. Being still under hectic development, it is hard to pin down what exactly we are talking about. It is of course highly likely that current e-reading devices will be regarded as mere e-incunables. In fact, even to a non-technical beholder, current e-books look rather unsophisticated. Their further development will be – or certainly ought to be – dependent on user demands. Currently it appears to be widely assumed that users are interested in adding as much e-functionality as possible to the evolving e-book. In Books in the digital age Thompson, for example, concentrates on the (potential) value added by the digital form. The concepts of the Vook and the Movel go much further. Sharing the vision that readers will want to enrich their reading experience with moving images, they have gone ahead and developed e-book forms enhanced with video.

**E-book user acceptance**

Though there are signs that sales are accelerating, especially in the US, the e-book appears not to have taken the world by storm yet. During the first four months of 2010 in the Netherlands 14.5 million physical books were sold, against a paltry 95,000 e-books (and 23,000 e-readers). Apart from a limited group of early adopters, public enthusiasm for the e-book remains limited.

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Incidentally, considering the long (in computer terms) history of digital text it is quite surprising that the e-book revolution has yet to happen. The oldest e-book reader, the Sony Data Discman of 1990, is by now twenty years old: aeons in computer time. But e-books as texts are even older: Project Gutenberg [which makes available digital versions of out-of-copyright books] began in 1971 when Michael Hart was given an operator’s account with $100,000,000 of computer time in it by the operators of the Xerox Sigma V mainframe at the Materials Research Lab at the University of Illinois. Text was the first modality after numbers – the computer remains after all in essence a calculating machine – to be digitised for the purposes of making it computable. As early as the 1940s the first computer applications involving text were developed, and word processing came in widespread use in the 1980s. Yet today, books still keep stubbornly being consumed almost exclusively in a printed form. Compare this to the modalities of music and video, whose digital form – though implemented much later – found general acceptance much sooner. Digital audio was embraced by consumers soon after the introduction of the CD by Philips and Sony in 1982, and apart from pockets