Electronic Books Increase Mileage for All

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With the increased use of the internet for work and play, it is inevitable that publishers should want to present the printed book in other formats too, in order to reach a wider audience. The increasing ability of readers to make their purchases globally and to access information from almost anywhere creates the need for publishers to convert their printed content into various electronic formats.

A new printed book is usually welcome to take its share of the shelf space in bookshops. But a book's staying power depends very much on its ability to attract buyers. There are always new titles vying for prominent shelf space. A book can be relegated to the back shelves – or even returned to its publisher – in a matter of weeks, sometimes days.

At the Institute of Southeast Asia Studies (ISEAS) in Singapore, we not only publish books and journals, but also actively use new technologies to ensure that the content is available in electronic format as e-books and e-chapters. ISEAS also explores and implements new ways to promote and sell in order to ensure as wide a dissemination as possible.

Widest possible audience

There are numerous advantages to e-books, both for publishers and for their customers. A good publisher employs various marketing strategies to ensure that the books in its list sell well and reach the widest possible audience. Many are familiar with traditional marketing channels such as advertisements, direct mail, participation in book fairs and academic conferences, and distribution of review copies. But in this internet age, publishers must also diversify the ways in which the worldwide audience can get hold of a book, and not necessarily just in the printed form. With digital technology, an electronic book or e-book can be created simultaneously with the production of a printed format, or it can be converted from an existing hard copy book from the publisher's backlist by document scanning.

The electronic format creates additional ways for a book to be sold and read. It can be converted into a complete e-book, or split up to produce e-chapters. E-books and e-chapters can be offered for sale on a publisher's own website or through online booksellers, just like the traditional printed form. Only the delivery method differs.

Ordering an e-book through the Internet eliminates the need to wait for the arrival of the physical product, which might take a few days to a few weeks depending on the mode of delivery. With e-books, delivery can be instantaneous, with the digital file being downloaded direct to the customer's computer the moment payment is received. On top of that, the customer saves on postage, which tends to add considerably to the cost.

Ease of use

Electronic books offer advantages that cannot be obtained from a printed book. Manoeuvring through e-books and e-chapters is relatively simple. It is much easier to do a keyword search in an electronic book than in a printed book. This advantage is fully appreciated by those who do research as opposed to those who read for leisure. And since digital files are transferable, they can be accessed anywhere a computer is available, making life easier for students as this eliminates the need to carry around numerous printed books.

A printed book needs to be kept in a relatively safe environment, and it must be cared for in order to prolong its lifespan. Libraries all over the world spend large proportions of their budget on preserving their valuable collections of books. For an e-book, however, the issue of wear and tear does not arise, and there is minimum risk of damage or vandalism to an e-book.

With e-chapters it is possible for publishers to assemble electronic course packs for university lecturers and students which is useful when a large number of students need access to a common set of materials. Such packs are particularly appropriate when the course is aimed at part-time or distance-learning students who may have limited opportunities to visit the library. E-chapters make good materials for course packs if only certain chapters from a book are needed, since they eliminate the need for students to buy the whole book.

Online immortality

Many new online libraries and digital content retailers are being established to take advantage of the increasing popularity of digital content. If publishers already own the digital content, they can sign up with online libraries so that their books gain a wider readership among users of these libraries. Some online libraries sell monthly or annual subscriptions that allow reading access to all the digital material in their collection. Others sell individual e-books or e-chapters direct to users. Most online libraries and digital content retailers pay royalties to the content providers (publishers) based on the number of usage incidents or downloads of the digital material.

Electronic books can be offered indefinitely, never going out of print, allowing readers to find older works by favourite authors. Even books that have gone out of print can be brought back via the digital world using document scanning technology, which is much more cost-effective than having to re-typeset an entire out-of-print book. Once the digital files have been made available, publishers can make use of print-on-demand (POD) technology to put a print verion of the book back into circulation. Print-on-demand is the term used for the digital printing technology that allows a complete book to be printed and bound within a short time. POD technology makes it possible to produce books in small quantities rather than in larger (more risky) print runs of several hundred or several thousand.

Most readers still prefer the printed book to the electronic version. However, authors should consider the benefits of making their books available in the electronic format as well. It increases visibility, readership and sales, and these factors translate to a higher royalty payment and greater recognition.

> *I am very optimistic about print as a technology. Words on paper are a wonderful information storage, retrieval, distribution and consumer product. Imagine if we had been getting our information delivered digitally to our screens for the past 499 years. Then some modern Gutenberg had come up with a technology that was able to transfer these words and pictures on to pages that could be delivered to our doorstep, and we could take them to the backyard, the bath, or the bus. We would be thrilled with this technological leap forward, and we would predict that someday it might replace the internet.*
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> *Walter Isaacson, former CEO of CNN, on www.edge.org, 2007*