
Ebook distribution 2010

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Unfortunately, the distribution stage is still the bottleneck in the ebook process. Where music has many DRM-free distributors and a successful iTunes model, with one distributor offering hundreds of thousands of items from different music publishers, ebook distribution is still piecemeal and poorly structured, with unnecessary difficulties in the way users look for particular books. Things are changing, however, and this article looks at current trends and innovations in ebook distribution.

Will 2010 be the year that ebooks really catch on? As we saw in my previous articles,¹ new ebook hardware is attracting worldwide attention, and the ePub open standard is showing us a way out of the Tower of cBabel formed by the proliferation of standards and formats. Maybe all we need is ebook distributors to come to the party with a simple, effective global method for giving people everywhere access to the books they want to read.

THIS YEAR'S MODEL: THE US AMAZON EXPERIENCE

The doyen of current ebook distribution models is the Amazon Kindle arrangement for American consumers. The Kindle is connected to its own cell-phone network, which allows books to be ordered and downloaded wherever there is coverage. Amazon has a record of each Kindle's owner and their credit card details, and when a purchase is made that account is immediately debited. Outside the coverage area, content can be purchased and downloaded to a PC via the internet; it is then sent to the Kindle when it is attached to a USB port. Several Kindles can be registered to the same account and these can share content.

Over time, Amazon has broadened its distribution system to take in other platforms: you can read Kindle books on your computer now with their "Kindle for Mac" and "Kindle for PC" applications – although the latter is more correctly Kindle for Windows, since it does not support Linux. There is also a "Kindle for Blackberry" and a "Kindle for iPod", which allow Kindle books to be purchased with and downloaded on to these portable devices. Users with Kindle software installed on several devices can choose to have each new device open their ebook for reading at the place they left off on the previous one – a very friendly feature.

I already had an Amazon account, so I was able to download and install Kindle for PC via the Amazon website at <http://www.amazon.com>. It was quick to set up and I was soon able to trial it by "buying" some free ebooks (there are many of these on the site, largely taken from Project Gutenberg, see below, and they make up a large proportion of the "best sellers"). It was fairly quick, but not quite the "one-click" experience that Amazon advertises – I still had to log on to the website, open the webpage for the book that I wanted and select a device to which to send the book, even though I only had one device registered. The actual download then took place when the Kindle or the Kindle-analogue software was activated.

The Kindle store operates as a subset of the Amazon store, and I found it all too easy to be bounced out of it and on to another page relating to physical books or other products in which I was not at that time interested. There are reasonably large numbers of books available, and more are being added all the time. When I checked there were over 22,000 books in the Lifestyle and Home category, over 10,000 in Literary Fiction and over 16,500 in Mystery and Thrillers. Even allowing for some overlap, these are impressive numbers. Unfortunately, with large numbers of products, comprehensive and intelligent cataloguing becomes important, and this is an area where Amazon falls down badly. Here are their categories for "Mystery", for instance, showing the number of books in each:

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¹ Jermey J, "Everyone wants to be Steve: An Ebook Hardware Update" (2010) 24 OLC 80; Jermey J, "Ebook Software 2010" (2010) 24 OLC 139.

- Anthologies (12)
- British Detectives (601)
- Cat Sleuths (19)
- Hard-Boiled (893)
- Historical (15)
- Reference (44)
- Series (194)
- Sherlock Holmes (15)
- Women Sleuths (2,344)

The disparity in number of items is a problem, as is the apparently arbitrary assignment of categories: “Women Sleuths” but not “Men Sleuths”; “Cat Sleuths” but not “Dog Sleuths”; “Sherlock Holmes” but not “Hercule Poirot” (who appears in 50 Kindle ebooks currently in stock); and “Series”, which could mean almost anything. This inadequate cataloguing is the most disappointing aspect of the Amazon experience, although as we shall see they are not alone in this. Once located, the listed books can be sorted by price, popularity or customer review, although not by date of original publication or by title – more disappointing omissions. Size is shown in kilobytes rather than words or pages, also making it difficult to judge just what one is getting.

Finding a specific book or author via the Amazon search is easy, but browsing a genre under these conditions is a frustrating activity. Even this limited categorisation system has errors: a quick search soon turned up one fiction book that was classified as “Reference”. Attention to detail in these areas is what distinguishes bookshops from op shops. Surely some of the Kindle’s profits could go to hiring cataloguers.

Pricing in general is reasonable, although the conversion from Australian to US dollars needs to be taken into account. Most books hover around the US\$10 mark, with higher prices for more recent, bulkier or profusely illustrated works. In addition to free out-of-copyright classics sourced directly from Gutenberg there are also some annotated editions and anthologies listed by independent publishers at the minimum price of US\$2.99.

There have been some early complaints about American books not being available for purchase in Australia but when I checked on a couple of the items the issue seemed to have been resolved. Overall: nicely done; but the browsing system is a big disappointment.

SONY READER STORE

The main competitor to the Kindle is the Sony Reader, and Sony too has an online ebook store at <http://www.ebookstore.sony.com>. The layout and categorisation is similar to that of the Amazon site and it also seems to suffer from the same sloppy cataloguing – the Mystery category contained both children’s stories and thrillers, for instance. But – Amazon please note – there was an option to display 100 books at a time, making browsing a lot faster. There were a few free books but most were priced from US\$0.49 upwards. Many out-of-copyright books sourced from Project Gutenberg were priced at US\$3.99, one-third more than Amazon.

To purchase books one needs the Sony eReader application for Windows – Linux users miss out again – a hefty 21Mb download as opposed to 6Mb for Amazon. I downloaded this with some trepidation. The actual installation was slow and involved lots of choices, and when I was done it refused to start. Given that Sony already has a history of crashing PCs with their heavy-handed copy protection, I did not feel inclined to spend more time trying to make it work. Others’ experiences may vary.

FICTIONWISE

Fictionwise is now owned by Barnes and Noble, Amazon’s main American rival in selling traditional books. It operates through a website at <http://www.fictionwise.com>. The number of books it currently offers is far less than those offered by Amazon – the Mystery/Crime section of the site shows 1,809 items, for instance – but the books are available in a variety of formats for many different devices, including PCs, PDAs and mobile phones. Some, but not all, of the books are electronically

copy-protected. There was no attempt to subcategorise the books in the Mystery/Crime section but I was able to sort the items by original publication date, title or author – one up on Amazon. With only 25 items on display per page, however, would-be browsers are going to find themselves occupied for quite some time.

Prices are lower than on Amazon, and begin at US\$0.25 for single works, although most of these appear to be short stories, often by authors unpublished elsewhere. Unlike Amazon, Fictionwise indicates the word length of their books and even supplies an estimated reading time. As with Amazon, there are many free out-of-copyright books sourced from Project Gutenberg.

To purchase books from Fictionwise requires registration. A “trolley” of books can be ordered and then paid for collectively at a checkout page. Payment can be made via credit card or a PayPal account. Once a purchase is completed an email is sent and the books appear for download on one’s own Bookshelf page. This did not happen immediately, although the books were there when I checked back an hour later.

Overall I found the Fictionwise site poorly designed, with my browsing constantly interrupted by trips to book detail pages or the checkout; surely it would be possible to open these in separate windows or tabs while browsing continues underneath? In fact, the whole site has a clunky late-1990s feel to it and badly needs an overhaul. However, it provides a flexible and relatively easy way to dabble in the world of ebook distribution without endorsing digital rights management (DRM), installing new software or purchasing expensive new ebook hardware.

GOOGLE – THE ELEPHANT IN THE BOOKSTORE?

Google-watchers know that the search engine company has been planning an ebook distribution site for some time. Over the last few years, Google has been scanning library books and negotiating deals with authors and publishers, aiming to build up a core of ebooks for distribution. They recently announced that their online bookstore should be up and running by June or July 2010.

The Google Editions store will on-sell books from other publishers as well as from Google’s own stock of public-domain volumes. They will try to avoid DRM issues by storing purchased books online – “in the cloud” – and downloading them a chunk at a time as they are read. This assumes, of course, that all customers have regular and reliable internet access on all their reading devices, and pretty well excludes users of older PDAs and remote users with slow or non-existent internet connections. There will probably also be an option for books to be printed locally and sent out from a print-on-demand Espresso Book Machine site, run by Google’s partner On Demand Books.

Price setting remains a contentious issue; whether the price will be set by the publishers or by Google, or by negotiation between the two, is not yet known.

As a search engine company, Google can be expected to bring its wide expertise in retrieving information to the book searching field; but, with an initial core of 500,000 books to search through (about the size of a large public library), this will take some doing.

Google will also have a home-field advantage from potential customers sent to their site via Google web searches or the Google Book Search option, which already allows users to search some of the pages inside specified books.

APPLE IBOOKSTORE – AN EBOOK KILLER APP?

Although not specifically targeted at ebook users, the Apple iPad, like the iPhone, has ebook capabilities, and there is fierce competition between third parties to provide applications software – “apps” – which allow the iPad to display various kinds of ebooks. Among the reading apps currently available are Stanza (free) and Eucalyptus (commercial), which allow users to read ebooks from any source, while both Amazon and Barnes and Noble have plans to release reader apps that will connect users to their own bookstores. Apple themselves have announced that they will provide an iBookstore app that will connect up to their own ebook site. Like Amazon, Apple has done deals with several large publishers, and press releases suggest that it will use the open ePub format. As with Google and

Amazon, many free books will also be available from the site. Like the Kindle and the iPad itself, access to the Apple iBookstore will probably be limited to American customers for at least the first six months. Pricing details are not yet known.

PROJECT GUTENBERG

Although it acts as a source for copyright-free material for other distributors, the main role of Project Gutenberg (<http://www.gutenberg.org>) is to provide users with direct, unpaid access to as many works as possible. Beginning many years ago with a rather clumsy site and an insistence on format-free .TXT files, Gutenberg has improved enormously and now offers an elegant searchable interface and a fairly wide range of formats for most of its files, including Mobipocket, HTML and ePub. With branches in Australia (<http://www.gutenberg.net.au>) and Canada (<http://www.gutenberg.ca>), Gutenberg is set to remain an important source of ebooks for the foreseeable future.

OVERDRIVE

Meanwhile, larger libraries and library networks can obtain ebooks through a single source by signing up with a dedicated library distributor. The largest of these is OverDrive, which has recently broadened its digital reserve to include audiobooks, music files and video, as well as ebooks. OverDrive has attracted criticism in the past over their DRM protection system, which limits the hardware on which their books can be viewed, and more recently for their decision to withdraw support for Fictionwise books, leaving corporate customers stranded with purchased volumes that they had no way to read. But despite these PR issues, OverDrive firmly dominates the intermediary ebook distribution channel for library clients.

CONCLUSION

Although ebooks have been on their way for decades, they still seem to have taken distributors by surprise. Even Amazon, the market leader, uses cataloguing and search procedures on its website that would be regarded as inadequate in any local library, and while the move by Google and others towards providing access to a substantial fraction of all the books ever published is to be applauded, it remains to be seen how well search and categorisation procedures for this vast pool of information will be handled. We are still a long way from the comprehensive collections and ease of use offered by, say, iTunes.

For a long time the media has been focussing on ebook hardware. Perhaps once the glamour of the Kindle and the iPad has worn off, it will be able to turn more critical attention to the distribution of ebooks – because it certainly needs it. Will the public go along? Once they have satisfied their thirst for bestsellers and discovered how hard it is to find anything else, anything could happen.