7 things you should know about...

E-Books

Scenario

Kathryn is attending a conference highlighted by several leading scholars in 17th-century British literature. Her dissertation, which she hopes to defend at the end of the semester, talks at length about the works of Dryden and Milton, writers who are the focus of several sessions at the conference. She attends one session—by a relatively obscure name in the field—on the recommendation of her advisor. That session, it turns out, provides Kathryn with exciting new ideas that bear directly on her thesis. After the session, she asks the presenter about the material and where she can access it. The book won't be published for another eight months, he tells her, but he points her to an online version that is available now.

Back at home, Kathryn pores over the presenter's e-book, a task made considerably quicker because the text is searchable. Given the deadline for her dissertation, she has no time to spare. The e-book also offers her an annotation tool that proves invaluable. Using it, Kathryn makes notes to herself in the margins of the text, including hyperlinks both to other places in the text and to other resources on the Web.

Taking a cue from the e-book, Kathryn proposes creating an electronic version of her dissertation, and her advisor agrees. She obtains high-resolution images of early versions of Milton's works held by a library in Britain and includes them in her electronic dissertation. Some of Dryden's poems were set to music in the 17th century. Kathryn persuades members of an early music ensemble on campus to make digital recordings of several of them, which she also includes in the electronic version of her dissertation. She illustrates important points in her dissertation by linking to other multimedia examples included in the e-book from the conference.

1 What is it?

Fundamentally, an e-book is an electronic version of a text that can be read on a standard desktop or laptop screen, on a PDA or other portable device, or on dedicated e-book hardware. E-books can use many different file formats, though they all share certain characteristics: they are portable, transferable, and searchable. Electronic media can also incorporate other features, such as annotations, audio and video files, and hyperlinks. E-books can include commenting and chat tools that allow interaction among readers, and some let users add links to external resources. Some e-book projects are tied to proprietary software, while others provide e-books in formats such as HTML.

Different kinds of e-books serve a variety of purposes. In some cases, texts that are conventionally printed are also offered electronically, to increase access to readers who might not be able to obtain printed copies or to provide electronic features that enhance or complement the printed version. Other books are only available electronically, which avoids the printing, storage, and mailing costs of traditional publishing and may considerably reduce the time required to produce and distribute a text. Still other projects embrace e-books because the content is more suited to the medium—and the functions that digital texts allow—than to printed text.

2 Who's doing it?

E-books have been in use since the early 1990s, when developments in IT began to allow convenient and cost-effective production, storage, and dissemination of electronic texts. Both mass-market and academic publishers have turned to e-books, and several organizations—including Google, the Open Content Alliance, NetLibrary, and Questia—are building online libraries of electronic texts that, to varying degrees, target the needs of academics and researchers. Digital companions or alternatives to printed texts have become common on college campuses. At some institutions, in an effort to address rising costs of textbooks, certain courses only use e-books, which are sold at campus bookstores alongside printed texts. Moreover, forgoing the printing of a text allows a publisher to issue new editions of books on much shorter cycles, with some electronic textbooks updated annually.

Compared to printed texts, e-books demand a lower upfront financial commitment, and they often take advantage of online marketing tools, which are also often less expensive than traditional methods. As a result, publishers are more willing to take

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risks on niche-market books that would have little chance of being published in a traditional manner. Similarly, writers unable to sell their work to publishing houses can increasingly take advantage of e-book production techniques to self-publish.

How does it work?

E-books display text on a screen, allowing users to page through the content, search the text, and hyperlink to online resources or to other parts of the e-book, such as citations, other chapters, or an index. Many e-books integrate multimedia with the textual component. In one example, an e-book that discusses a piece of classical music includes an audio file of that music. Readers can listen to the music as they read about its characteristics and its composer. Other texts include still images or movie files relevant to the topic at hand, or tools such as a digital physics simulator, that help bring content alive. Further e-book functionality depends on the hardware and software used, with features available in different combinations for particular e-book products. These functions include printing, copying and pasting, annotating text (and in some cases sharing those notes with others), and reading e-books on portable devices.

Why is it significant?

E-books offer several key benefits, both to producers and consumers of texts, including shortened production cycles, distribution channels that permit wider circulation of more timely material, and new ways of representing content on a particular topic. Sound, movies, and simulations facilitate a deeper understanding of subject matter, while annotation features let users create customized versions of a text. Marked-up versions of texts give students an opportunity to demonstrate comprehension by highlighting patterns or themes they discern in a text, and e-book functionality applied to dissertations similarly provides scholars with a broad range of tools to express meaning. E-books offer new ways for readers to experience and interact with content. An e-book that abandons the notion of reading from front to back, for example, encourages readers to take an active, self-directed role in how they learn, letting them make individual decisions about which path they take through a text.

What are the downsides?

As with other forms of digital content, e-books raise questions about copyright, both for producers and consumers. Given the ease with which most kinds of electronic content can be duplicated and disseminated, copyright owners face growing hurdles in protecting their content from unauthorized reproduction. Academics who use e-books in their courses must carefully apply fair use principles. Collective writing or editing of a text, which some e-book tools allow, can introduce new issues of authorship and copyright ownership.

At times, the inclusion of richer media in an e-book is either clunky in its operation or is not well accepted by readers. Although audio and video have the potential to bring a subject alive, multimedia used for its own sake is more likely to annoy users. Moreover,

some of the more experimental e-book tools allow readers such latitude—to supplement, update, or even replace content—that the authority of the text comes into question. Producers of e-books must strive to achieve an appropriate balance between trusted content and flexibility. Finally, many people still prefer reading on paper. For those who enjoy lying on a sofa reading a novel, e-books can seem anathema to reading for pleasure.

Where is it going?

E-books have been slow to break the pattern of simply being digital copies of paper books with a few added features. As the use of electronic resources becomes more common, and as screen resolutions and other technologies improve, new generations of users may be more willing to trade traditional books for e-books, just as many students have largely abandoned paper and pen in favor of a laptop or a Tablet PC. New opportunities will emerge for cocreation and collaboration, among both authors and readers of e-books. Definitions of exactly what constitutes a book will continue to evolve, and publishers and authors will add new features and tools to electronic texts. Richer media, new ways of organization (or self-organization) and collaboration, and greater access to aspiring authors will accompany the ongoing evolution of e-books. Underlying this process will be the question of authority. By their nature, printed books imply a stringent review process, and e-books must ensure that reader trust is preserved.

What are the implications for teaching and learning?

Some proponents of e-books contend that an environment in which students are able not only to read a text but also to make notes—and perhaps even change the book itself—facilitates the teaching of composition, writing, and editing. Interactive exercises with e-books may increase student engagement and deepen their understanding of subject matter. E-books that make extensive use of multimedia components can increase student facility with a variety of ways of looking at certain concepts. To the extent that they can revise or create their own e-books, students have an opportunity to learn how to make appropriate decisions about the effective use of multimedia.

E-books also have the potential to extend greater amounts of content, particularly highly specialized content, to broader ranges of students. Because costs are low and distribution is simple, e-books can bring more, and more focused, content to classrooms. By the same token, students can increasingly take advantage of electronic means of producing and disseminating books, providing an avenue for exposure formerly reserved for senior experts and established authors.

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