The battle to define the future of the book in the digital world

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Abstract

Commercial publishing interests are presenting the future of the book in the digital world through the promotion of e-book reading appliances and software. Implicit in this is a very complex and problematic agenda that re-establishes the book as a digital cultural artifact within a context of intellectual property rights management enforced by hardware and software systems. With the convergence of different types of content into a common digital bit-stream, developments in industries such as music are establishing precedents that may define our view of digital books. At the same time we find scholars exploring the ways in which the digital medium can enhance the traditional communication functions of the printed work, moving far beyond literal translations of the pages of printed books into the digital world. This paper examines competing visions for the future of the book in the digital environment, with particular attention to questions about the social implications of controls over intellectual property, such as continuity of cultural memory.

Books have provenance. Your favorite books define you, and digital versions don't seem to impart connections that are quite as deep. Queenan again: Books as physical objects matter to me, because they evoke the past. This piece of the experience doesn't translate to the electronic format. Someday in the distant future, maybe David Eggers' Kindle will be sold by Bauman Rare Books on Madison Avenue, but it's unlikely that digital books will ever be personal artifacts the way that their physical counterparts can be. "I think print and paper has a lasting value that people appreciate. Pixels are too temporary," said Praveen Madan, an entrepreneur on the Kepler's 2020 team, via email. The resulting Books on the Fly campaign, which kicked off initially at Manhattan Regional Airport, involves the public scanning a QR code which are placed on cards sporadically throughout the airport. This then sends the user to the Kansas State Library's eLending service. Non-members are redirected to Project Gutenberg's mobile-optimized site, where they are invited to download books that have passed into the public domain. These are just some of the initiatives currently underway that involve libraries around the world. We're very much in a transition period – it's clear the desire to preserve digital books and E-book Readers. Imprecise and inconsistent terminology has been a major source of confusion in the hype over e-books, and an obstacle to disentangling the issues involved. It is essential to distinguish between the idea of a digital book and a book-reading appliance. In a very real sense, presenting an e-book reader as a sort of substitute for a printed book underestimates and trivializes the future. One set of questions that e-book readers raise is about the future character and operation of personal digital libraries, and their relationship to commercial and non-commercial digital libraries and digital bookstores.