

Will the eBook finally replace paper?

Books & Reading

FOUR major hurdles have restricted the electronic book market: construction, cost, content and culture.

Why isn't there an iPod for electronic books (eBooks)? And where's the eBook equivalent of an iTunes store? Last week Sony launched two products that it hopes will address both issues. The Sony Reader is a paperback-sized device with a six-inch screen that can store about 80 eBooks, or hundreds on a plug-in memory card. The \$350 Reader is joined by a new online service, Connect, which offers more than 10,000 eBooks from publishers such as Simon & Schuster, Random House, Penguin, HarperCollins and Harlequin.

So is the eBook market finally coming of age? On the face of it, an eBook is an attractive proposition, not least because it can offer features difficult or impossible to find in a printed book, such as hyperlinks, multimedia content, cut and paste, high degrees of interactivity and updated content. It can be downloaded and read instantly, and publishers don't have to transport



huge volumes of books around the country and store them in warehouses. It can be read on a PC, a PDA, a smartphone or a dedicated device, like Sony's Reader.

But despite these benefits, even Bogaty admits that eBooks are still a cottage industry. Screen clarity

Paper remains the best medium for text reading, and until recently it has been hard to offer similar clarity on a screen. But the development of e-ink technology,

which uses millions of black and white microcapsules on a screen, from the E-ink Corporation has dramatically improved text on a screen. Sony's Reader uses e-ink and the company says its battery will last for up to 7,500 page turns.

So who's using eBooks? Leaving aside database-type products and technical manuals, the answer is a wide range of readers. "All major publishers have eBooks, and that includes front catalogue as well as back catalogue. Around 60 to 70% of the New York Times bestseller list is available in eBook form," says Bogaty. Romantic novel publisher Holding water

Textbooks are seen as a major growth market. Only 900 of the 150,000 titles MBS Direct handles are eBooks at present, but McKiernan says there's a lot of interest, not least in the distance learning market. "Students are very mobile and it's easier to store books on a laptop than carry them around." Most eBooks are the same price as the printed version or lower, in some cases 50% cheaper.

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