



Books are thriving despite the internet

Victor Keegan



Books are one of the oldest industries, yet they have been hardly affected by the digital revolution. Publishers just go on commissioning and editing them in their own sweet time as if nothing had happened. In an age when your blog could be out of date in minutes, publishers seem happy to leave months, even years, between the manuscript being presented and going on sale. The curious thing is that it doesn't seem to be doing them any harm at all. UK book sales have risen in volume every year for the past five years, including a 6% increase last year. No wonder book publishers are not baying about illegal downloads like the film and music industries.

There may even be a link between digitisation and the onward march of books. The pain of reading on screen may be increasing the joy of enjoying books in their centuries-old format. I recently read an entire volume on my laptop: an excruciating experience. It involved holding the machine at different angles to prevent my neck from creaking while trying to manipulate the two keys needed to move to the next screen and regularly having to press another key to rekindle the backlight. Never again. It is an altogether better experience to read books on a dedicated device such as Sony's e-reader, Amazon's Kindle or the more versatile Linux-based iLiad. They can be read easily in bright sunlight, the print size can be increased and you can download a new tome when you have finished an old one. But they are too expensive and have been slow to catch on in the UK. Unlike publishing, book distribution has been revolutionised by Amazon and abebooks.com, one of the sites that

sells old books and has given a lifeline to secondhand bookshops that can now trade on the internet. It has also greatly reduced the chances of coming across an unexpected bargain because bookshop managers can see what others are charging online.

Books have also been slow to form Facebook-style communities, even though what you read is often the biggest thing you have in common with others. This is now changing, but is still a bit of a minority sport. When I last wrote about it a year ago, librarything.com was the market leader with only 200,000 members while goodreads.com had only 125,000. Goodreads has now moved decisively ahead of librarything and shelfari with more than a million members according to alexa.com. This is huge growth compared with a year ago but small beer compared with the number of people reading books. Some 51% of Goodreads members are in the US with only 3% in the UK and, curiously, 17% in Iran. These sites are really good even if you only use their basic function of cataloging the books you are reading complete with ratings: you simply type in the first few words of the title and everything is pulled up including a cover picture from a database. You can also see what your friends are reading or form local groups.

You don't have to read a book to enjoy it: you can have it read to you. The market leader by an unhealthy distance is audible.com, now owned by Amazon. When I last inquired, it had more than 90% of the market, which may help to explain why its prices are so high in a digital age when the cost of producing extra copies is almost zero. Khaled Hosseini's excellent *A Thousand Splendid Suns* costs \$28 at audible, far more than for a paperback. It badly needs fresh competition of the kind that silksoundbooks.com provides, where you can download Julie Christie reading *Madame Bovary* (admittedly out of copyright) for £7.95. If that is too much then you can download a text-only version of out-of-copyright books at the venerable gutenberg.org, which now claims 3m downloads a month. The current best seller (or rather non-seller) is volume one of *The Outline of Science* by J Arthur Thomson, followed by the first volume of the *Manual of Surgery*. Who said the internet was all about dumbing down?

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