

# Reading in the Electronic Age

Adrian Shaughnessy

01.11.10

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I scoffed when the evangelists of e-readers – the Kindle owners, the iPad zealots – told me that it was better to read text on a smart electronic devices rather than on weighty chunks of paper, glue and ink. My response was to preach the sanctity of the book, and to ask if any of these digital reading gadgets had passed my “Public Transport Test”?

The PTT is a sure-fire way of telling when a piece of personal-use technology has reached a tipping point. You don’t need to be a statistician or professional pollster to run this test: all you need is a pair of eyes and to be a frequent user of buses, trains and subways.

I remember when, years ago, it suddenly seemed that everyone I sat next to on a bus or a train was listening to a Walkman. A decade or so later it was hand-held CD players, quickly followed by mobile phones, which in turn were followed by numberless people with white wires trailing out of their ears. Here was all the evidence needed to prove that portable cassette and CD players, mobile phones and iPods had become ubiquitous.

So what happens if we apply the PTT to e-readers? Are significant numbers of people using these devices as they make their daily commutes? Up until late summer 2010 it was unusual to see one. But suddenly, as autumn set in, I saw them everywhere. Yes, the majority of public transport commuters were still reading paperbacks, hardbacks and magazines, but there was an undeniable surge in the number of people with their faces lit by the glow of a screen held in the palm of their hands. Here was the proof that hand-held reading devices had arrived.

Hard cold facts backed up my unscientific sampling. In July 2010, Jeff Bezos, Amazon’s founder said: “Amazon.com customers now purchase more Kindle books than hardcover books, astonishing when you consider that we’ve been selling hardcover books for 15 years, and Kindle books for 33 months.” According to statistics collected by the International Digital Publishing Forum, wholesale revenue from e-book sales jumped to over \$90 million in the first quarter of 2010, doubling since third quarter of 2009. Another investigation noted that: “It’s no surprise that e-reader users read more and buy more books than those without the literary device, but a new survey reveals that more than half of e-reader users read more than they did before owning one.” Apple sold three million iPads within the three months of launching their “magical tablet.” And I was one of the three million.

This new generation of reading devices has done what computer monitors, laptops and mobile phones had failed to do: they have made the physical activity of reading on a screen as pleasurable and ergonomically satisfying as reading a printed book. Despite the acreage of writing that exists online, reading text on a monitor is not a comfortable experience; laptop screens are not much better – despite their name, they require a table, a chair and a rigid posture; and mobile phone screens are just too small. These are the reasons why CD-Rom failed to replace the book: for all the interactivity and multi-media capabilities they offered, CD-Roms simply couldn’t compete with the sheer readability of a book. With the new reading devices however, we can for the first time, read screen-based text while lying down or while cramped on a crowded train.

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Let it's not just a question of comfortable reading. There are more mundane forces at work. One writer noted that he had moved over to e-reading because of the excess baggage charges levied by budget airlines when he and his family lugged armfuls of books on their annual holiday. There is also the question of instant downloads: it is now possible to download entire books in seconds. In the realms of work and study this is a boon. And when we factor in the low cost of downloads, as well as the widespread availability of non-copyright material, we see that e-reading has too many advantages to be easily ignored.

I've already made a major shift in my reading habits. Within a few days of acquiring my iPad I concluded that continuous text – novels, long essays, academic texts, etc – were actually better suited, or at least as well suited, to onscreen consumption. The question surrounding magazines is less clear: but one thing is for sure, it's no good doing what many magazines are doing and decanting content from the printed page into the new screen-based e-readers. This doesn't work. What is needed, as the creators of the iPad version of Wired magazine have proved, is a wholesale root and branch reconfiguration: every aspect of a magazines topology – it's navigation, editorial, construction and its appearance – requires rethinking. The e-reader is a new medium and content needs to be custom made to work in this new setting. At the time of writing, the iPad version of Wired magazine – a downloadable app – is the most successful reconfiguration. Others will follow.

Yet, despite having joined the e-reader evangelical movement, I don't think we are witnessing the death of the book. In future, books will have to work harder to justify their existence. Electronic media has already replaced many types of printed matter: when did you last use a telephone directory, for example? From now on, printed books will have to learn to co-exist with e-books in the same way that they once had to learn to live with TV. It's a battle that all print media, especially newspapers, are currently fighting, and the outcome is still unknown. But I see no reason why happy co-existence will not be possible, even desirable.

There will always be a place for beautifully bound volumes with superior printing and production, fine typography, good imagery, and thorough editorial and textual content. Would you want to give an e-book voucher to a literature lover as a Christmas gift? You might, but it wouldn't be half as meaningful as a printed and bound book smelling of ink and oozing the ageless magic of the printed word.

**Adrian Shaughnessy is a graphic designer and writer based in London. He co-founded the design studio Intro in 1989. In 2003 he left to pursue a career as an independent art director and writer. He has written, edited and designed numerous books including *How to be a Graphic Designer Without Losing Your Soul*. He writes for all the leading design magazines, and is a contributor to *Design Observer*, the world's most widely read design blog. He was founding editor of *Varoom* magazine from 2006-09, and hosts a radio show called *Graphic Design on the Radio* for Resonance FM. He is a frequent lecturer and has been interviewed on radio and TV.**

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