

## **Creative Reading Charter**

### **Books and libraries in a connected world**

**by Jonathan Drori, director, Changing Media Ltd**

First-generation e-books are already selling. They will become ever more usable and practical but they, along with the internet, will alter our relationship with authors, publishers and libraries, and may even affect the way we think.

I revel in technology and as a former engineer I take pleasure in the ingenuity of the inventors who have brought us e-book readers and the clever systems that underpin them. But I have mixed feelings.

First, the positives.

Technology progresses quickly. Where e-paper is black and white and a little fuzzier than we'd like, it will become pin-sharp, and colourful if we want it to be. Batteries will last longer between charges - perhaps augmented by small solar panels. There's no reason that e-books should be limited to mimicking the usability of a paperback. Sound, moving pictures, interactive graphics, touch screens and network connections enabling downloading of books anytime and anywhere will be standard features.

If you can read, books are easy to navigate. E-books are less easy but that's partly because they will offer greater functionality such as being able to search within a book, or offer an automated reader to the visually-impaired, or a dictionary perhaps. The iPod generation will easily find and pay for the title they want, download it and manage subscriptions and passwords.

While many people already enjoy e-book fiction titles, accessing a virtual pile of books stored conveniently or downloading when needed, e-book fiction may take a while to catch on. For many readers of fiction, the relationship with the book as an object, and the desire to read it anywhere without worrying that it will be damaged or stolen, will prevent them from buying an e-book. Eventually though, e-books will surely kill the environmentally suspect market for paperbacks that are read once and thrown away.



But e-books have their drawbacks.

Have you noticed how frequently digital technology needs to be upgraded? As with other digital technologies, they'll need to be replaced and updated at least every couple of years. And it will be some time before e-books are properly resistant to water, sand, cake-mix and toddlers, and become cheap enough to leave as a territorial sign at a cafe table while you order a latte.

A conventional book is a store of memories. It's not just the book itself - dog-eared corners or the odd scribble in the margin, an address or shopping list written inside the end-piece- it's where we put it as well. We are exquisitely sensitive to positional information and the mere placing of a book on a shelf, let alone its colour or typeface can cause us to relive parts of them, consolidating our memories of what they contain and what we were doing when we read them. Books, not just their contents but the juxtapositions between them, inspire us. Look along a bookshelf and it's almost impossible not to have ideas, based on our memories and juxtapositions.

My biggest concern about e-books is about rights. A book can be lent, sold and re-sold. Books don't require special proprietary software or hardware to use - neither of which will be available forever, or possibly even just a few years. If I buy a book, it's mine and my heirs' forever. I can scribble in the margin, I can tear out pages if I like and most importantly, I can lend or give my own copy to friends or sell it to whomever I please. Then they can do the same. E-books will not necessarily come with these rights.

Anyone can make or publish a book, and anyone can read any book that has been made or published, assuming they can get hold of a physical copy. E-books suffer the very great disadvantage (at the moment at least) that they do not operate to open standards. I can't imagine an e-book reader lasting more than a few years of ordinary use. But even if the readers or their contents were somehow to survive a hundred years, the licence to use the e-book's software may not be indefinite and anyway, will Sony or Amazon even be around then?

Bearing in mind that copyright is something that governments grant to individuals for the good of society, rather than as a God-given right, how about only granting copyright if material is at the very least offered to a specified open technical standard? This absolutely doesn't mean it should be free or even unencrypted but it does mean that if a company goes under, or decides on a whim not to make readers any more, people will still be able to access the e-books they have bought. Who will be the final guarantors of access to e-books? Why, libraries of course. Oddly enough, if it becomes hard to lend books and there is a reduced market for second-hand copies, it's

possible that more people will turn to libraries. That's assuming they have lending rights of course.

As well as these pros and cons, the distribution of books to electronic readers may have a profound effect on our relationship with authors and publishers.

Publishers market books and authors, and they ensure timely and affordable distribution to readers. Authors who are well enough known could employ their own editor and sell e-books directly to the public, bypassing agents, publishers and even retailers as even some are already beginning to do even with paper books. Lower volumes might be compensated by higher margins. Some authors may band together and publish themselves under one umbrella, as groups of rock-bands are now considering. Or they may form relationships with completely new marketing and distribution organisations. Design, production and distribution will all be cheaper, and it won't mean chopping down trees, or negotiating with printers or holding warehouses full of cash tied up as stock. The capital required to be a distributor is set to tumble and publishers will face plenty of new competitors. Anyone who can employ a few people to nurture some authors and who owns an audience will do – retailers, phone companies, broadcasters and of course e-book manufacturers themselves. For this reason, one might expect publishers to be wary of open platforms and standards for e-publication.

So, technology will change and publishers, agents and even retailers might be replaced or even bypassed. But what will happen to the experience of reading itself?

For reference books, information and journals, the advantages of multimedia capability, instant download, search capability, portability and choice probably outweigh any potential disadvantages of lack of robustness and the likely difficulty in copying and sharing. Even used for reading alone, they probably stimulate our ability to skim for information. Aside from the reading experience, new technologies give people wonderful ways to collaborate and participate, to discover and to create. We need all this. I recognise the benefits and indeed have spent many years attempting to invent and worthwhile new ways to engage audiences using new technologies.

For me, creative reading is different. I'm not sure I want the distraction of an e-book that has access to many titles simultaneously. If it additionally has an internet connection and heaven-forbid, email, then I doubt I'd finish many e-books. Onscreen, context sensitive advertising will doubtless arrive soon and will provide yet further competition for my attention. Not everyone will want to afford to pay the likely premium to opt out.

The ability to concentrate and read deeply is very precious. To use our own imaginations in tandem with an author's requires time and space, and also practice to achieve. Our electronic world increasingly leads us to expect instant and continual highs.

While there is probably a market for an e-book with a tooled leather casing and slimmed down functionality with fewer distractions, I worry that it's easier for a young person to become a participant in the digital world, than it is to become a participant in the world that requires focus - easier to be distracted than not distracted. We need to ensure that citizens have a little *sitzfleisch* – the ability and the desire to concentrate and stick at something, where the gratification may be a slow burn rather than instant. I wonder whether the 'digital divide' is really as important as the 'attention divide'. Small wonder that teachers report such marked benefits when children learn to play chess.

Perhaps libraries have the opportunity to become temples to focus and concentration, quiet havens in a sea of media that compete for our attention, where we can choose to be alone yet part of a like-minded community.