

The golden age of the Kindle is over unless we see substantial innovations in color electronic paper, but Amazon and Lab126's impact on digital publishing has been substantial. While Amazon's development of the Kindle has slowed since the initial enthusiasm from 2007 to 2011, the platform remains synonymous with "ebooks" in Anglophone markets. Its consistent approach to hardware has been instrumental in defining ebooks. Except for occasional major hardware specification upgrades between generations, the Kindle evolved incrementally without substantially affecting the older generations. As a result, the underlying computational architecture and format standards remain an unwieldy mix of contemporary technology and 1990s anachronisms. This mix has not hindered the platform, however, as the competing demands of backward compatibility and innovation have limited the Kindle to replicating the affordances of print rather than attempting to compete with other media. To succeed, the ebook needed to excel in comparison to print while also conforming to a strict set of expectations. Every new format change has attempted to push beyond the initial formula, but the constraints of electronic paper, and the larger unwillingness of legacy publishers, have led to a technological plateau where ebooks are good enough to supplement print.

While the Kindle platform has remained relatively consistent over the last decade, more substantial change has occurred since the late 2010s. In late 2016, the International Digital Publishing Forum (IDPF), custodians of the EPUB specification, merged with the World Wide Web Consortium to form the Publishing@W3C group. When the group initially formed,

it produced a flurry of activity around creating a successor to EPUB: the Packaged Web Publication (PWP), a document that sits between a website available off-line and an ebook. The new format would take a step closer to the “interactive electronic book” promised by hypertext scholars in the 1990s that challenged the dominant paradigm of scarcity in the ebook trade. Unfortunately, this excitement never materialized into a coherent specification, as early progress fizzled into a conceptual cul-de-sac when attempting to define the boundaries between books, publications, and websites. This stasis has reinforced Amazon’s tight grip on the ebook market, as the Kindle’s competitors have not created a feasible alternative that completely revises the current paradigm. Without such an intervention, neither side is likely to invest in improving infrastructure.

Amazon has resisted the constant challenges of the publishing industry on either side of the Atlantic over the last two decades. The Kindle remains the de facto ebook reader as rivals including Kobo and Nook flounder. Despite solidifying this position, Amazon’s interest in hardware lies elsewhere with the launch of Alexa and the Fire range. Books are no longer central to Amazon’s media interests, and this is reflected in its hardware. Movies and audiobooks now drive hardware decisions rather than attempting to re-create the fidelity of print. Within publishing, Amazon has been demonized for the Kindle, but the recent rise of Audible has been more broadly welcomed despite forming a similar threat. In fact, since Audible often acquires audio rights, the service is arguably more monopolistic than the Kindle. Audible’s success comes from a mutual understanding that both Amazon and publishers benefit from investment. Print and its digital surrogates remain legacy publishers’ strengths, though they are more willing to collaborate on new media. The arrival of Alexa and devices such as the Echo Show emphasize the “talking book” over ebooks, which merit only a minimal reference on the help pages for the Echo Show.

Prophecies of the electronic book were more radical than the Kindle. The rhetoric of hypertext fiction in the early 1990s embodied by titles such as J. Yellowlees Douglas’s *The End of Books—or Books without End?* primed users for a revolutionized form of reading that would extend beyond the book to take full advantage of the affordances of digital media.<sup>1</sup> Ted Nelson predicted a digital revolution through microtransactions, reusable content, and interconnected books, but legacy publishing has resisted change to replicate a print model digitally. A pragmatic model triumphed over the mythical digital revolution, with new workflows taking precedence over changing the reading experience. Ebooks are stuck in the rut of technological conservatism that ensures there will always be a market for e-readers

and ebooks, but this is unlikely to challenge the dominance of print within genres that have not yet moved online.

It is too early to tell whether the longer-term aims of Publishing@W<sub>3</sub>C will represent a significant challenge to Amazon's dominance of the ebook marketplace, but the merger of the IDPF and W<sub>3</sub>C represents an opportunity to reconsider the scope of digital publications. The Publishing@W<sub>3</sub>C working group's mission statement is as ambitious as Lab126's aims for digitization: "to enable all publications—with all their specificities and traditions—to become first-class entities on the Web."<sup>2</sup> The mission statement does not explicitly mention books as privileged, but the ideology suggests a move toward a uniform body of "first-class entities on the Web" that would render books identical to magazines or other forms of publications within the boundaries of web-based standards. While the first push to implement these aims through the Packaged Web Publication specification resulted in failure, the group's ambitions demonstrate the challenges faced by any rivals to the current Kindle paradigm.

A rival specification will only pose a significant challenge to Amazon's dominance with the Kindle if the new specification also accounts for the infrastructural demands of an ebook platform. Amazon managed these challenges through a complex, vertically integrated infrastructure: users can buy dedicated hardware that allows them to purchase, consume, and discuss the books entirely within the confines of the software. Other reading systems are derivative of dedicated e-readers and offer similar options to varying degrees. The web has the infrastructure to compete with Amazon on equal terms, but this comes with challenges for accessibility and discoverability: how will users find ebooks if access is decentralized? Not all of Amazon's infrastructural experiments are successful, but Amazon has invested where other technology companies and publishers were wary. Despite a near-continuous battle with the publishing industry—initially with regard to physical books, but more recently with digital editions—Amazon's investment in the Kindle developed ebooks from a niche product to a requirement for any new title.

The Kindle's lasting influence will be on publishing and social reading rather than on shaping broader media technological trends, a fate ensured by the dominance of smartphones and tablets in the 2010s. The Kindle 1 was a landmark device in the replication of print on-screen, but the emergence of smartphones and tablets ensured a larger shift in mobile computing beyond e-readers. Even the novelty of the Kindle 1 is contentious. The first-generation launch popularized electronic paper after the Sony PRS-500, the first device launched outside Japan to feature

electronic paper, failed to meet sales expectations. Beyond bringing this technology to a wider audience, the hardware has remained relatively consistent; any upgrade has been iterative rather than a true innovation. Nonetheless, Amazon developed ebooks from a product to a service to finally become part of the publishing infrastructure. Initially this took the form of “Look Inside” and other services that used a manipulable digital text as its foundations. An early focus on hardware to encourage adoption beyond technologically savvy ebook readers ensured the sustainability of the format once Amazon’s hardware ambitions expanded. Once a market developed, Amazon could maintain the infrastructure and remain the dominant ebook brand. Amazon was not interested in what device readers were using to consume on, just as long as their primary ebook platform was Kindle rather than the competition. Nonetheless, the original Kindle hardware configurations continue to shape what is possible to read on any software.

The endless skirmishes between Amazon and the book trade will continue as long as the company sells books. Despite this pushback, the Kindle was instrumental in generating a wider acceptance of the use of digital publications and workflows. Since Amazon understood the importance of scale and was able to use its substantial preexisting infrastructure, the company overcame both publishers’ and consumers’ hesitance to engage with the Kindle to make ebooks a success story. Early predictions of ebooks replacing print have faded away, to be replaced with more nuanced distinctions between the two media. Readers choose to consume different genres in print and digital form, leading to a divergent marketplace. Genres such as romance, erotica, and YA have flourished in this new market, while print-oriented publishers have doubled down on the materiality of “bookishness” by creating luxury and high-cost editions.<sup>3</sup> As a result, the average sale price of books has increased by 11 percent between 2007 and 2017 in the United Kingdom, while the total volume has decreased by 20 percent, leading to an overall contraction of the print book market of 11 percent. Conversely, digital publications have failed to overcome the perception of disposability, hence the rise of genre fiction and the relative lack of literary fiction published successfully through the Kindle platform. The new market dynamics of the Kindle and the associated growth of genres often ignored by print-oriented publishers reflect the divergence seen in Netflix, which has witnessed the rise of feature-length documentaries.<sup>4</sup>

The publishing industry remains resilient due to the addition of digital and audio sales, ensuring growth in recent years, but despite the supposed resurgence in print sales for sectors of the market, Angus Phillips argues

that in Great Britain, despite year-on-year growth in the book trade, this has been uncoupled from economic growth as measured by gross domestic product, demonstrating an underperformance of the industry.<sup>5</sup> The quandary is mirrored by struggles in other traditional creative industries, including print journalism, film, and music, as they face the new challenges of digital consumption. The Kindle and similar ebook platforms remain a space for experimentation, and schemes such as subscriptions will continue to reshape industry business models. Digital publishing start-ups have attempted to reshape various aspects of the publishing industry, but up to a third fail within a decade of launching, and more are acquired by larger businesses for the staff rather than the product, as happened in the case of Readmill when it was acquired by Dropbox.<sup>6</sup>

The Kindle has transformed from hardware to a diffuse network of reading systems. This shift in strategy hid the technological obsolescence of the dedicated e-reading devices that were only of interest to a subset of the potential audience for ebooks. As the Publishing@W3C working group and Amazon's Kindle Cloud Reader continue to erode the distinction between ebooks and the web, digital publishing will lose its position as a discrete form. The Kindle will thus represent a transitional moment when the publishing industry was able to continue working in the older model of production and reception. While Amazon continues to invest in the platform as a pseudomonopoly, the digital book will remain similar to print; but with the challenge of more diverse formats, and of funding such production, publishers' symbiotic relationship with Amazon is likely to continue.

Amazon is removing the Kindle name from various parts of its infrastructure. The Kindle Fire became the Fire in 2014, and the Kindle app was changed to "Books" in the 5.6 update to Fire OS. Adoption of "Kindling" as a verb never took off, and mobile reading takes many different forms rather than focusing on dedicated e-readers. Nonetheless, ebooks are now a viable medium, albeit with a different market from traditional print publications. A decade after its launch, the Kindle is established as a medium less derivative of print, with its own trends and audience, but nonetheless tied to the successes and failures of its predecessor. Amazon's continual diversification to become an essential part of technological infrastructure in emerging markets will pull the company farther from its origins as an online book retailer, but it remains the custodian for the future of the ebook. The Kindle may well be extinguished, but it fired up both legacy publishers and technology companies to consider the place of the book within the complex media ecology of the early twenty-first century.



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# Four Shades of Gray

## The Amazon Kindle Platform

By: Simon Peter Rowberry

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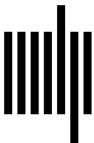
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