

## Introduction

When Jeff Bezos founded Amazon in 1994, he chose to sell books as a pragmatic business decision rather than from a sentimental attachment to print. Books can survive the rigors of the postal system and are easy to store in warehouses. Over the past two decades, Amazon has grown from a book-selling start-up to a technology giant valued at over \$1 trillion in February 2020, with Bezos named the richest man in the world since 2017 even after a divorce settlement in the region of \$40 billion.<sup>1</sup> Although Amazon has developed services far beyond the scope of publishing, books remain a core part of the company's brand in the popular imagination. Amazon solidified this connection with the launch of the Kindle in 2007, demonstrating the company's commitment to books even though up to 35 percent of sales came from "non-media" products in 2006.<sup>2</sup> After a half decade of stagnation for ebooks following the promise of the early 2000s, the Kindle was a necessary intervention and boosted the medium from a niche market to a stable revenue stream for publishers.

In the decade since the Kindle's launch, ebooks have come under sustained attack by traditional publishers.<sup>3</sup> Arnaud Nourry, the CEO of Hachette Book Group, rallied against ebooks during an interview in 2018, arguing that "the ebook is a stupid product. It is exactly the same as print, except it's electronic. There is no creativity, no enhancement, no real digital experience."<sup>4</sup> Nourry's statement reflects the commonly perceived rivalry between ebooks and print rather than how the two formats influence each other. Despite the Kindle's many limitations, and resistance from print-oriented publishing, Amazon's entry into ebook hardware

irrevocably changed publishing. The device had a dramatic impact on digital workflows by encouraging publishers to adopt new processes that enhanced the quality of all publications, both physical and digital, since readers would now expect an ebook edition.

Beyond pushing publishers to embrace digital forms, the Kindle empowered some previously marginalized readerships. The emergence of Kindle exclusives demonstrates the demand for genres not traditionally supported by publishers. Readers not catered to by print-oriented publishing's drive toward best sellers can now find an abundance of reading material. Ebooks also offer new physical accommodations: parents can hold a Kindle in one hand while attending to their child, but a print book may be preferable to read in bed. E-readers require less space than physical books for people who cannot build a large library. Readers with visual or motor impairments may benefit from the ability to change font size or use text-to-speech features, and the introduction of the OpenDyslexic font in 2015 catered to the needs of readers with learning differences. Despite these improvements, critics and publishers assume that digital publishing should integrate multimedia, virtual reality, and video game elements.

Nourry's comments reflect the antagonistic relationship between Amazon and the book trade stemming from ongoing concerns about Amazon's sales strategies. Discussions of ebooks are often polemics around "disruption" or the superior materiality and smell of print.<sup>5</sup> Publishers have developed a niche market for luxury hardcover editions in response to readers who remain committed to print. Digital evangelism is pitted against print Ludditism, emphasizing extreme positions rather than considering the two media as complementary. In this book, I move beyond this antagonism to assess the impact of publishers, and the book industry at large, ceding the development of ebooks to a company that exemplifies the excesses of late capitalism and surveillance culture. Through this lens, I analyze how the Kindle has been a boon for publishing while simultaneously limiting the opportunities for developing an inclusive and forward-thinking digital platform.

The name "Kindle" reflects the tensions that have plagued the platform. The name was met with negative reactions owing to potential links to Ray Bradbury's novel *Fahrenheit 451* and book burning. Bezos pleaded innocence, arguing the name was an attempt "to talk about the future of reading, but in a small, not braggadocio way," to spark the imagination through reading.<sup>6</sup> He hoped the Kindle would become synonymous with ebooks as a verb akin to googling: "When I'm stuck in the airport or on line, I can *Kindle* my newspaper, favorite blogs or half a dozen books I'm reading."<sup>7</sup> According to Brad Stone, a technology reporter for *Businessweek*, the

platform's development was driven by a desire "to thrive as a bookseller in a new digital age, [through owning] the e-book business in the same way that Apple controlled the music business."<sup>8</sup> After the iMac's success on Steve Jobs's return to Apple, the company noticed a growing market for digital music. To capitalize on this trend, Apple released iTunes in January 2001, with the iPod following nine months later. The combination legitimized digital music consumption at a time when Napster and other peer-to-peer networks dominated the public imagination. The iPod also removed barriers to entry through vertical integration of hardware, software, and services from purchasing music to listening on the go. This required substantial investment from Apple. Ebooks were in a similar position by 2007, with a loyal community of dedicated hobbyists but no single catalyst for broader uptake.

### The Kindle as Platform

To subvert the antagonistic comparison of digital reading with print, *Four Shades of Gray* tackles ebooks as *digital objects*, focusing on the Kindle as the largest platform. While other ebook platforms exist, none have been as transformative as Amazon's, owing to its unparalleled technical and social infrastructure. Nick Montfort and Ian Bogost proposed platform studies as a tool for the "serious and in-depth consideration of circuits, chips, peripherals, and how they are integrated and used" for creative computing.<sup>9</sup> For example, my title *Four Shades of Gray* refers to the limited color palette of the first-generation Kindle that Amazon used to guide the aesthetic of the device's screen savers, discussed in further detail in chapter 1. Platforms range from a video game console to an operating system or smartphone. Excavations of the Atari VCS 2600 or Adobe Flash are not mere technical excavations but considerations of the technology in its broader cultural and historical context. The Kindle was far from the first e-reader to market, but Amazon integrated a range of services and offered a large catalog of titles to create a more print-like experience than its rivals. As Montfort and Bogost argue, "A platform in its purest form is an *abstraction*, a particular standard or specification before any particular implementation of it."<sup>10</sup> A mature ebook standard could not just replicate the form of print but needed to capture the book's functionality and replicate the networks of its creation, distribution, and reception.

The Kindle must negotiate the inherent tensions between print and digital reading through existing simultaneously as a born-digital platform and a surrogate for print. Platform studies document the connections between computational architecture and creativity, but how does this work

when a platform is constrained by the norms and expectations of another medium? Audiences consume differently in print and digital form. For example, romance has enjoyed a resurgence digitally, while the full size of the market was never explored in print. Otherwise, the ebook acts conceptually a lot like its physical equivalent. Experimental forms of “electronic literature,” including Amaranth Borsuk and Brad Bouse’s *Between Page and Screen*, develop the expressive vocabulary of digital media. Borsuk and Bouse’s book is unreadable without the use of a webcam-enabled computer, as the pages feature hieroglyphics that display poems rendered in three dimensions in front of the reader once presented to a camera.<sup>11</sup> These playful experiments have a shorter shelf life than print: *Between Page and Screen* relied on Adobe’s Flash Player, which was rendered obsolete by Apple’s decision not to support the web browser plug-in for the iPhone. Further tensions persist between the long-established traditions of publishing, where many of the largest companies were founded before the 1930s (Penguin is a latecomer in 1935), and the meteoric rise of Silicon Valley as a hub for digital innovation in the latter half of the twentieth century. Throughout the book, I assess the consequences of the book trade’s ambivalence toward digital media and how Amazon filled this demand with a technology-first approach. While this decision was mutually convenient for both parties initially, the longer-term impacts are still unraveling over a decade after the Kindle’s launch.

The relationship between digital and print publishing challenges traditional notions of platforms as discrete entities. Tom Boellstorff and Braxton Soderman propose the term “transplatform” to describe the generative creativity encouraged by rivalries such as Intellivision and Atari or Sega versus Nintendo.<sup>12</sup> When placed in direct competition, technology companies innovate to outsell their rivals. The perceived antagonism between print and ebooks is a further example of a transplatform rivalry, but this is complicated by the internal cross-platform nature of the Kindle as a dedicated hardware range available for web browsers, personal computers, and mobile devices. The Kindle exists “in the weird liminal spaces that bridge one computational architecture to another.”<sup>13</sup> Thomas Apperley and Jussi Parikka argue that “the platform requires a degree of *stability and consistency* as a technical object.”<sup>14</sup> This is less clear here: What do we count as the Kindle platform? The dedicated e-readers? The content? The services?

The Kindle further complicates the notion of platforms through its position at the intersection of two often-conflicting definitions of digital platforms. This book is part of the Platform Studies series, which pioneered what Esther Weltevrede and Erik Borra term approaching “platforms as

architecture,” or analyses of the sociotechnical infrastructure of specific platforms and its influence on the production of creative content.<sup>15</sup> Since the publication of *Racing the Beam*, this technical approach to hardware’s materiality has been overtaken by Tarleton Gillespie’s more popular notion of “the politics of ‘platforms.’”<sup>16</sup> This definition of platform serves as the prefix for several neologisms, including “platform politics” and “platform capitalism,” which stem from the distinction between platforms, supposedly neutral sites for users to consume and share content, and publishers, the curators with direct responsibility for material they disseminate. The Kindle is a platform from the perspective of computational architecture, but within the broader Amazon ecosystem, it also functions as a political platform. By emphasizing the synergies between these two definitions in relation to the Kindle, I address the blind spots around how users engage with platforms in the architectural approaches and the technical limits of political economy analyses.

In an interview with the journalist Steven Levy to promote the Kindle, Bezos stated, “Books are the last bastion of analog. . . . Music and video have been digital for a long time, and short-form reading has been digitized, beginning with the early Web. But long-form reading really hasn’t.”<sup>17</sup> Resistance to extended reading on-screen dates back to at least the 1990s with publications such as Sven Birkerts’s *The Gutenberg Elegies*, which challenged electronic media’s ability to replicate the immersive experience of print.<sup>18</sup> The line of criticism has continued into the ebook era, with several studies documenting a gap in comprehension between students reading a text in print and digitally.<sup>19</sup> These projects often focus on reading to learn rather than as a leisurely pursuit, where accurate recall is less important. While the web revolutionized journalism, reference, and academic publishing, the strengths of trade publishers remained staples of print. The book trade predates other media industries, and practices from analog culture are deeply ingrained within the conventions of the industry. Since the advent of the personal computer, a *cultural* shift had occurred in publishing toward using digital tools to create and market print books. For example, the introduction of Standardized General Markup Language (SGML) in the 1980s allowed publishers to typeset digitally, a practice that became widespread by the early 2000s. Less attention was paid to the *media* shift of digitization, or converting books into digital publications. Print presented unique hurdles for digital consumption: five centuries’ worth of history to convert, the lack of an established format for reading, strong associations between the materiality of print and content. The problem was exacerbated by distracting speculative visions of digital publishing: Spotify for Books, blockchain for managing rights, data-driven

acquisitions. A large gap exists between publishers' desire to step into an entirely new paradigm (without the investment required) and focusing on a more organic evolution of the current strengths of digital publishing.

Ebook platforms are part of broader transformations of publishing in the early twenty-first century, especially in digital publishing.<sup>20</sup> For example, Matthew Kirschenbaum's "Book.Files" project reveals the challenges of publishers' reliance on digital asset management (DAM) for the preservation of contemporary book publishing.<sup>21</sup> *Four Shades of Gray* builds on this work to demonstrate the impact of the publishing industry ceding control of digital distribution to a technology company at the expense of the industry's own autonomy and the interests of readers. As a result, the market for ebooks has largely diverged from print, enabling new genres to thrive rather than supplementing existing revenue streams. Publishers' stronger embrace of audiobooks shows that the industry has the will to adapt to digital distribution, so why did they not prioritize ebooks?

Publishers and technology companies can be an uneasy mix. Obsolescence timescales differ substantially between the two. Publishers proudly market any Nobel Prize winners or *New York Times* Best Sellers on their lists decades after their initial publication date, while smartphones are called obsolete within a matter of years. Lisa Nakamura extends this logic, arguing that "older reading platforms like the first-generation Kindle may be worth studying because they were quickly obsolescent"<sup>22</sup> Her comments were published six years after the Kindle 1's launch but failed to account for the longevity of the hardware, which received its last update in March 2016 to ensure it remained compatible with changes in Amazon's wireless network.<sup>23</sup> The long-term support for hardware does not extend to services, however, as many functions available originally on the Kindle 1, and many later generations, are no longer available. The platform is constantly in flux, prioritizing short-term policy and experimentation rather than ensuring permanence and archival consistency.

The Kindle has stagnated, allowing for a moment of reflection on the state of the platform after its first decade. This book tackles the Kindle's impact from the perspective of *technology*, *texts*, and *uses*. By analyzing the interconnection between these three areas, I argue that Amazon's influence on publishing extends beyond "disruptive technology" to embedding itself in all aspects of the contemporary trade. This analysis can only be conducted through separating the publisher and technology company discourse from actual uses. The Kindle is a vast and complex platform with over five million ebooks, fifteen hardware launches, and forty million users.

A single book could never cover all facets of the platform, and my perspective is constrained to an Anglophone context, but I hope my work here will encourage further accounts of the Kindle's influence in other contexts. While individual chapters will primarily appeal to readers interested in computational culture, bibliography, or reception studies, the three themes clearly overlap. Amazon is first and foremost a technology company, and this context is vital to understanding the company's impact on a creative industry that prioritizes cultural influence and tradition over digital experimentation. Frederick Kilgour saw the "electronic book" as the "seventh punctuation" in the history of the book, an event on equal footing with clay tablets, the printing press, and offset printing.<sup>24</sup> It is still too early to judge the long-term impact of ebooks compared to these older technologies, but the shock waves of the Kindle continue to shape publishing.





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# Four Shades of Gray

## The Amazon Kindle Platform

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