

From Reader to E-Reader

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Are you considering making the switch from reader to ereader? Blink reports on the experiences and reflections of a newly converted ereader.

Goodbye to UPS

I buy quite a few books from abroad. Both new and used books find their way into my shopping basket from a variety of countries and bookstores as I usually become aware of a book I want to buy when browsing the Internet and rarely when browsing a physical shop. Therefore, I decide that my next gadget is going to be an ebook reader. The choice is simple: the combination of user-friendliness, assortment and accessibility points towards Amazon's Kindle.

My Kindle arrives two days after it has been shipped. It travels from Kentucky via Cologne and Malmo to Denmark. It travels 7,000 kilometres in two days and arrives at my address in the easily recognizable brown van from UPS. That is ten days less than it typically takes to get a book delivered from Amazon.com in the US to Hans Christian Andersen's – and yours truly's – town of Odense, Denmark. As I close my door, I think to myself that because of the very parcel which my always friendly UPS man has just delivered, it will probably be a long time before I see him again. That is, if my Kindle is as good as Amazon promises. I tear open the box, which is the size of a thick book in A5 format. There is my Kindle, in a soft cardboard insert. I take it out and push the switch at the top right. It switches on and writes: "Hi Patrick".

The next minute I have downloaded a 20-page sample of a book that Amazon recommends for me – a recommendation I choose to ignore after skimming through a few pages. Instead, I find a book in Kindle Store about how to write sitcoms and buy it. 20 seconds later it is on my Kindle and I start reading.

A new generation of gadgets

My Kindle is not very attractive to look at. It looks slightly clumsy and dated but it is functional and userfriendly in a way that surprises me. I belong to a generation that grew up with the Commodore 64 – and thus the first tape and disk drives – and with automatic answering machines and Video 2000 players. My generation is not used to being wooed by gadgets. On the contrary, electronics, especially the digital kind, had a high entrance barrier when I was a teenager. One had to adopt the machine's way of thinking and accept its mood swings. One minute it would say: "Use me!", and the next minute it would crash while one was trying to use it. A Kindle is not like that. It takes its starting point as the lowest common denominator. A Kindle has a user interface that never screams: "Operating system!" or "Blue screen!" Instead, it speaks to – and with – the consumer's impulses. Right from the start, I operate my Kindle intuitively, and even if my life depended on it, I would have no idea where the user's guide is – or if my Kindle came with a user's guide at all. The Kindle is navigated using six navigation controls and a small joystick which is a bit like a built-in mouse. However, I have yet to learn how to control my impulse shopping – with the

built-in mobile data connection, it is a very short step from thought to action. As my Kindle knows it belongs to me, it also knows my preferred credit card right from the start and there is nothing whatsoever to stop me from buying and downloading books on the spur of the moment from an online store which is open 24/7, with approximately 390,000 titles available so far in Europe (592,000 in the US). The advantages are very tangible. There is no waiting and an ebook does not have to make a long, CO₂-expensive journey from the UK or the US.

“Well, have you read any books on that Kindle thing?” asks a slightly sceptical, and slightly jealous, friend who drops by for coffee a couple of days later. And the answer is yes; in fact, I have read more than I normally do. I always have my Kindle with me – when I am out during the day and when reading in bed at night. Since I am the kind of person who reads more than one book at a time, it is great that it remembers the last page I was on and also stores my notes, which I normally scribble down on loose pieces of paper. But most importantly, my Kindle has made me read more because I have all my books with me wherever I go. So no matter which of my books is relevant in a particular situation – or which of my books I feel like reading – it will be there. Which of course means that it will more often be relevant to read. My Kindle has a good memory and is a great companion for me, who typically buys four or five books per month on my Kindle. Not one short story, novel or book of poems has found its way into the digital memory, which holds 1,500 books. But this is quite typical of my usual reading pattern as I read two or three novels a year at the most.

1.7 Kilos of Paper

So far, my only problem has been how to find the right way to hold my Kindle, especially when I am lying down. After a couple of days I decide to put my Kindle away for a bit and continue where I left off in the latest nondigital book I have bought: Walter Isaacson's Einstein biography. However, as it has more than 700 pages and weighs 1.7 kilos, I soon find myself longing to hold my Kindle instead as my arms are trembling by now.

The switch has happened: I am no longer just a reader, but an ereader. I don't mind at all not having a book to put on a shelf – to collect dust – when I have finished reading it, but I

know there are others who find it almost heartbreaking. However, my unromantic life as an ereader goes both ways: I am very much aware that the Kindle is my first – but not my last – ebook reader, and I am beginning to envy those who have a Nook, the ebook reader from Barnes & Noble. The Nook can add a number of social dimensions to reading as, in addition to the mobile network, it connects to Wi-Fi. Barnes & Noble is basically a chain of physical stores, and it is taking full advantage of this fact with the Nook. Thus, if you go into a Barnes & Noble store and you have your Nook with you, you will be greeted with information about special discounts and you will be able to browse that specific store using your Nook. Also, Barnes & Noble offers a feature which enables you to lend books to friends by sending them by wireless to any phone or computer with the free Barnes & Noble eReader software downloaded on it. In addition, you can expand the memory of your Nook to hold up to 17,500 books. There is no doubt that the Nook is a more social product whose purpose is in the real rather than the digital world. However, the fact that I live 800 kilometres, as the crow flies, from the nearest Barnes & Noble soon dampens my envy – and I have my Kindle and 390,000 books right here in my hands.

Mobile Book Reader

After some weeks I discover the real truth about Kindle: it is not a gadget – it is the bridge between having your library and your reading pattern anchored in the physical world or in the virtual world. With the introduction of Kindle's software for both iPhone, PC and Mac, it is easy to switch devices, reading a bit on my computer, a bit on my phone and a bit on my Kindle. Each platform knows my entire library and the last page I was on in each of my books. As an old friend of mine always says, it is availability that creates the need – and Amazon knows that: its virtual shelves are brimming with books, and now Amazon is offering me access everywhere I look.

This fact is hard on my Kindle. Suddenly it lies on my desk for days. I forget to charge it, and before long it is not part of my reality any longer – why carry a heavier gadget with me when my mobile phone has the same features? In less than three months, my Kindle evolves from a physical product into a digital concept – and the chrysalis from which the butterfly emerges is my Kindle gadget, which is left lying empty on my desk. But there are

also other serpents in paradise. Thus, I am green with envy when Apple launches its iPad. As is usually the case when Apple launches a new product, the iPad is well thought-out – and just gorgeous. The iPad is a sports car in a world of Russian tanks, and the first time I hold an iPad in my hand, I know that this is going to be my next gadget of love.

It has a touch screen, and this is what makes it so different. What do you do with people you love? You caress them, and this is exactly how you operate an iPad: gently, softly and calmly. Therefore, Apple can afford to be up against many self-imposed odds: Apple's books are about one-third more expensive than Amazon's because Apple is heavily married to the publishers, while Amazon has tried to put pressure on publishers regarding pricing. In fact, for a long period of time Amazon sold its ebooks for less than it had paid for them in order to force prices down. In addition, Apple does not have nearly as many books as Kindle, but on the other hand, the publishers are more in love with iPad – for the very reason that books for iPad are more expensive. Therefore, the six big American publishers are threatening to stop supplying books for Kindle if Amazon does not raise its prices, and then the assortment will probably change quickly. And then there is the screen. The iPad's screen is backlit, while the Kindle's screen does not use backlighting but works by darkening certain areas and using the light that falls on the screen to display the page, the same way a paper book works.

iPad

Apple could sell the iPad embedded in concrete that you would have to chop away yourself – I would still buy it. But that is irrelevant, because we are not facing a war between Kindle and iPad. This is not about two gadgets – or two types of gadget, each with its benefits and drawbacks. This is a shift from a cultural heritage that started with stone tablets and is now published on thin paper – to one which started with the graphical user interface and the mouse in the sixties in California and is published in our heads, behind our eyes. We know the latter will win – because it is understood in the same place where the reading experience takes place: in our imagination. We don't read an ebook, we create it in our heads, in the same way as we create every single creak, face or smile we read about in a paper book. The physical experience is easy to explain: the experience of reading a book is best on a Kindle, while magazines and newspapers – where of course pictures and layout play an

important role – look greatest on an iPad. But this is by no means the central point now. The platforms are not – and have never been – the experience, because regardless of whether you read your next book on your mobile, your Kindle, your tablet, your computer or even your watch, it is the words you read and the way your brain unfolds them that make all the difference.

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