# 09 Futurology

A look into the future of electronic art and design publishing is of course as tentative as any futurologists take on what will be. Lets start at the basis. Art books describe, show, analyze and collect works of art. These works can be made of everything, but more often than not they deal with tactile objects, paintings, drawings, sculptures, etc. In many books these works are reproduced and discussed. But books themselves are often also an artistic medium and thus an art form, where the mutual interaction between texts and tactile objects is integrated. Technological developments have always had their influence on artists’ books and artistic and experimental handling of publishing. In the 20s and 30s of the twentieth century collages became popular. Texts, newspaper clippings, photographs and other expressions, mostly on a paper substrate, were put together to obtain a new artwork. In the 80s and 90s artists and writers used networked media as yet other modes of expression: CD-ROMs, web pages, etc. In the 21st century electronic environment we transcend these analogue and digital techniques into a new substrate: the ubiquitous, full-color, high-quality pixel screen. An enormous range of novel opportunities for creative expression opens up, both expanding on and moving beyond the experiments of the past.

With the new technological feats the act of gluing, dissecting and endlessly reorganizing enables writers, artists and publishers to create new works that – reminiscent of the collage – allows them to express themselves differently in different technological environments. In this guide we have named this the ‘modularization’ of electronic publishing, which is also tailored to respond to the readers' wish at the moment of consumption. Personalized, individually curated, or ‘collaged’ content is possible both on the side of the producer and of the receiver. Electronic publications can thus offer customized reading experiences, by presenting a multitude of options from which you take your pick. Not only content-wise; the user can also make a choice between (prepared) combinations of hardware, platforms and content, both online and offline. Is it possible then to say something general about the future of e-publishing? Below, we try to discern some actual trends, although as we have seen over the past years the predictive power of fashion and hype is limited. [![Bloglink](images/dpt\_blog\_verwijzing.png)](http://digitalpublishingtoolkit.org/?p=921 "Link to blog post: Book review. The end of ebooks. 20 visionaries on the future of digital reading. ")

## Technology

The technology used to read, write and publish seems dependent on genre. This goes for both hardware and software. To give an example: text books can be read on all sorts of devices, whether simple e-ink readers or your mobile phone, while these might have high demand for search functions; but full-color tablets would be more suited for art catalogues and artists books. When thinking about the future we have to take such intrinsic demands and limitations into account. Reading novels or other linear texts on e-readers is already a big success. Publishers report an ever increasing sales of ebooks, that might eventually surpass the sales of paper publications.[^books] How these books are read remains an open question worthy of consideration. Are these works read in a linear way or rather browsed? Are they read from A to Z or just kept in a personal electronic library? Are PDF-versions of books and articles read from screen or first printed on paper? And how much content is merely consumed by bots and search engines? The stats won't tell us.

Also we see saturation in the market of e-reading devices. Early birds on the e-reader front who produced cheap, black-and-white e-ink readers like Sony, are ending their efforts to win over the market. This might be a result of the popularity of tablets and the increasingly large screen sizes of smartphones. Reading from a large smartphone is quite feasible and you have your phone right with you most of the time anyway. Whereas the big consumer electronics companies thus stop developing e-readers in a market that is already mature, further advances are left to intermediates like Kobo.com. That is to say, hardware improvements are more or less on a plateau level and the real challenge will be in the usage of ebooks, which means in reading applications and software for what is called social reading. Browsing, annotating, sharing and quoting are options that, with further software developments, could help ebooks transcend paper books.

Technological developments in high quality screen production are well underway. Examples are color e-paper screens, flexible screens and the continuing improvement of screen resolution into Ultra High resolution (4k). However, recent research shows that students still prefer paper to screens in the process of preparing for tests.[^stoop] In the field of educational texts we already see a new mixture arising, where paper textbooks and electronic materials such as image, audio, and film collections and interactive tests are written and developed in close parallel. Where paper publications are used for reading complex texts, (portable) electronic devices will be used simultaneously for the purpose of search and meta-tagging, to comment on the content and debate the larger discourse. These are all developments that can be transported to areas outside of education.

Print-on-demand (POD) publications form another interesting development. Especially since the maturing of the Web, the growth of POD is huge. Apparently this special category of networked publishing fills an important gap that traditional \**and*\* electronic publishing leave open. Some works or publishing projects are simply not suited for either of these and can still come to life through POD.[^vanc]

Advantages and disadvantages of all these formats should be viewed along two major lines: the affordability and portability of an extensive digital library is a huge gain, but comes at the price of dependence on electricity and letting go of the visual-tactile advantages of paper books. Related to this is the hype of the cloud – where you store all your data on a remote server (which is hardly as ephemeral as the word cloud denotes) – something that also relies on the availability of electricity and a dense and fast internet infrastructure as well as the consistency of the host's services and platforms. Who will guarantee that ‘the cloud’ with all your books will be maintained, kept open and accessible throughout the years, let alone unfiltered or not subject to surveillance?

## Reading and book culture

When it comes to the culture of reading and books, we see a shift towards subscription models instead of ownership of separate books. For decades, since books became affordable for a larger public through paperbacks and pocketbooks, book culture largely consisted of the trade of books. Individuals bought their books from the bookstore, which was a middleman between the reader and the publisher. As in the music and film industry (with Spotify and Netflix respectively) the book industry looks more and more at subscription models. In the US for example Oyster Books offers a ‘streaming service’ for books.[^oyster] Such streaming services have an important implication: the content as well as the software needed for consuming that content becomes unstable, meaning out of the control of the user and hence subject to changes or even loss. You don’t keep the books directly on your own hard drive anymore, but need an application to access them on a remote server – both the application and the server might disappear overnight. In that sense financial pressures that now chase the industry in the direction of cheaper ebooks might result in more dependency for the user.

On the level of commerce we also have to realize that the increasing, advertisement driven, use of statistics, such as on Facebook and user reviews on Amazon, will highly influence consumers in their choices. This mode of valuing books could skyrocket in the event of a widely embraced subscription model, where user statistics, ‘Big Data’, will be abundant and at the heart of the business model.

A major point in the present day discussion is the question of literacy. Nicolas Carr scared the world with his book *\*The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains\** and on many internet forums and in many journals and magazines the discussions about multi-tasking, the use of tablets in (primary) schools and the loss of reading skills amongst young people are vivid. Will we master the technology or become slaves? We simply don't know yet. On one hand, reading long texts is a competency that might be negatively influenced by electronic publishing. On the other hand, millions and millions of people from an illiterate background in non-Western countries get better reading and writing skills than before through the use of mobile phones and tablets. In other regions, such as the Islamic world, there is a strong oral tradition, which now claims its visibility and importance with video messages. An increasing mixture of various medial productions is made possible. The accent within that mixture is more and more on short texts and the integration of short videos and images. Other ways of dealing with texts allow a more interactive relationship between reader and book. Not only in the sense of adding audio and video, but also giving the reader the choice of entry into the text, offering an individual reader path for each person.

Will long, complex texts and printed books become fashionable again in a more mature technological environment? It might well be possible that in the course of time users adjust to new technological ways of reading and find no problems in digesting long and complex texts from the screen of their smartphone. The culture of books is also a culture of habit and of education, which might adapt to the new circumstances eventually.

## The future of publishing culture?

Given the great number of increasingly more powerful software, writers and artist will try and disseminate their works more and more by self-publishing. However, at a certain point of overproduction, new intermediates, that is to say, publishers will play a role again.

For the publishers this means that they should work on becoming an aggregator then the one time off producer. Sale platforms like Amazon become so large that they disable themselves to become coherent sources. Here the expertise of publishers can help them play an important role as intermediate, curator, a mark of quality.

Publishing always had in essence an editorial kernel. With the advent of many self-publishing options on the one side, and the gigantic monopolies forming on the other, the 'art' and craftsmanship of publishing will re-establish itself in prioritizing content, in its multimedia clothing, as linchpin between the creative artist and writer and the receptive reader.

Our Toolkit intends to be a helpful step in this direction.

[^doris]: This saying, by written by the Jay Livingston and Ray Evans became world famous when Doris Day sang it the song in the Hitchcock film *\*The Man Who Knew Too Much \**(1956), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=azxoVRTwlNg.

[^books]: Digital sales outstrip bricks and mortar in US, http://www.thebookseller.com/news/digital-sales-outstrip-bricks-and-mortar-us.

[^vanc]: Take for example the 528 pages (10,8 x 17,48 cm) thick anthology *\*What will be / Ce qui sera / Lo que será Almanac\** of the international surrealist movement, with more than 170 contributors from 25 countries. Essays, poems, images, manifestoes, a debate on surrealist editions, chronology of 50 years of surrealism 1964-2014. Downloading such a book is problematic because you need a complete structured index and advanced search option. Printing it locally is almost impossible given the small fixed page size. Buying it at lulu.com gives you a POD on standard glossy paper, which is certainly not in line with the surrealist tradition.

[^stoop]: Judith Stoop, Paulien Kreutzer, and Joost Kircz. 'Reading and Learning from Screens versus Print: a study in changing habits. Part 1 – reading long information rich texts'. *\*New Library World\**. Vol. 114, Issue 7/8, pp. 284-300, 2013. Copy of final accepted draft: http://www.kra.nl/Website/Artikelen/NLW-Reading-Learning-part1-acceptedversion.pdf. Part 2 – comparing different text structures on paper and on screen. *\*New Library World\**. Vol. 114, Issue 9/10, pp. 371-383, 2013. Copy of final accepted draft: http://www.kra.nl/Website/Artikelen/NLW-Reading-Learning-part2-acceptedversion.pdf.

[^oyster] Oyster Books: https://www.oysterbooks.com.