

Kindelization: Are Books Obsolete?
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According to popular opinion, kindelization is inevitable. Soon, we are told, the book will be obsolete, and everything will be digital. Is this really happening?

It looked like full kindelization was in close sight last January (2011), when various websites and newspapers announced that kindle book sales were exceeding both hardcover and paperback book sales (e.g. Persenson, 2011). The reports, however, were based on Amazon sales. Amazon sells the Kindle, and is the place to go to order a kindle book, so their figures are an overestimate of ebook sales relative to books in general.

Sales of ebook readers and ebooks are up

As of June, 2011, 12% of adults in the US owned an ebook reader, up from 6% in November, 2010 (Purcell, 2010). Table one presents book and ebook sales figures from March 2010 to March 2011, which shows that ebook sales are also increasing substantially. (Note, however, that book sales in general are also increasing, with or without ebooks.)

<http://www.publishers.org/press/32/>

Table one: US Sales (in millions)

	March, 2010	Mar-11
Ebooks	28.1	69
Hardcover	91.2	96.6
Paperback	125.6	115.9
Adult mass market	54.5	55.2
Religious books	49.8	63.5
Univ. press hardcover	4.5	4.4
Univ. press softcover	2.5	2.6
total	356.1	407.1
total without ebooks	328	338.1

From: <http://www.publishers.org/press/32/>

Ebooks, while not coming close to beating out paperbacks and hardcovers, clearly have a larger share of the market in 2011 (17%) than they did in 2010 (8%)/ This change, however, appears to be due to ebooks cutting into the paperback book market; paperbacks were the only category of book sales to show a real decline.

Ebooks and school libraries

Data from Kenney (2011) gives the impression that ebooks are taking over school libraries. Kenney reported that 62% of high school libraries surveyed are currently using ebooks (31% overall), and 92% of high school librarians surveyed anticipated having ebooks in their collections five years from now (84% overall). But Kenney also reports that ebooks only

account for one-half of one percent of school library collections, and this is predicted to increase to only 7.8% in five years.

The problem with ebooks and ereaders

Popular opinion is partly right. Sales of ebooks and ebook readers are increasing rapidly. We are a long way, however, from complete kindelization. For the reading public, ebooks appear to be capturing some of the paperback book market, but certainly not all of it, and not the hard cover or tradebook market. Thus far ebooks make up only a tiny percentage of total school library collections.

The problem is the expense. Right now, only higher-income readers can afford ebook readers and ebooks. Kindles, for example, cost at least \$100 each, and ebooks cost about \$10, beyond the budget for those living in poverty.

The Pew Research Center (Purcell, 2011) reported that 24% of those earning more than \$75,000 per year owned ebook readers, up from 12% in November, 2010. In contrast, among those earning less than \$30,000 per year, four percent had ebook readers, the same percentage as in November, 2010. The increase in ebook sales is because more of those with higher incomes are buying them. Table 2 presents the data.

Table two: Percent of adults who own an ebook-reader:

household income	in Nov 2010	in June 2011
below 30,000	4	4
30,000 to 49,000	3	13
50,000 to 74,999	6	13
above 75,000	12	24

From: Purcell, 2011

The cost of ebook readers and ebooks makes them much less available to students from high-poverty families and under-funded school libraries. (Note that it is usually not possible to share ebooks.) Ebooks are allowing the print-rich to get even print-richer.

References

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