

The Kindle™ and the indexer

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Pierke Bosschieter reports on her experiences, as reader and professional indexer, as she sought refuge from her overflowing bookcases in first the BeBook One and then Kindle. The verdict is mixed.

The eBook: the story so far

Coming from nowhere and going places

The eBook has come fast from nowhere in the last couple of years, and this trend seems set to continue.¹ The recent introduction of Apple's iPad, marketed as an eReader, and the impending launch of the Google Editions Book Store.² are bound to exercise a major influence on the eBook market.

What do you need?

What do you need when you want to read an eBook? No more than an eReader device or eReader software and an eBook file. With the appropriate software every desktop computer, laptop, handheld or mobile phone can function as an eReader device. But in my opinion, at present only the dedicated eReaders like the Nook (Barnes and Noble), the Sony eReader and the Kindle (Amazon), with their unique paper-like e-Ink screens, can begin to make reading an eBook as pleasurable as reading a paperback. However, mobile phones, netbooks and eReaders that can switch between LCD and e-Ink screens are being developed, and so-called 'apps' will then make non-reading devices more eBook-friendly. In future, it should be possible to read eBooks on lots of devices with pleasure.

Chaos reigns

But there's certainly one drawback at present even with dedicated eReaders. There are at least two dozen different eBook formats, and new formats are being developed all the time. And some formats require a specific eReader device or software program. For example, Kindle eBooks require either the Kindle eReader or the Kindle desktop application. The Microsoft LIT format requires the Microsoft Reader program. And some formats come with DRM (digital rights management) restrictions that prevent you from reading eBooks on other devices or in other programs, or sharing eBooks with other people.

The most widely used eBook formats at present are AZW, MOBI (also called PRC), LRF (also called BBeB), IMP and EPUB. Amazon.com created the AZW format with the launch of the Kindle eBook reader. It is based on the Mobipocket (MOBI) standard, which in turn is based on the Open eBook standard using XHTML. The Iliad and Cybook eReaders have native support for MOBI. Sony LRF (or BBeB) is a proprietary format supported by all Sony Reader devices, and IMP is exclusively used by eBookwise devices.

EPUB is a free and open eBook standard created by the International Digital Publishing Forum (IDPF at www.idpf.org), based on a variety of other technologies and standards like Open eBook and XHTML. EPUB is slowly developing into a universal eBook format (rather like the MP3 format in music). It was given a real boost when Apple chose it for its iPad, and Barnes and Noble is converting its entire eBook library to EPUB. Sony devices can read it, as can iPods and iPhones using Stanza (eReader software). So things are looking up.

The 'odd man out' in eBook formats is the PDF. The PDF format was created by Adobe for individuals and corporations who needed to publish documents for distribution in electronic form. The whole point was to protect the format of the document, so text reflow to fit screen width or size was not an option, a major disadvantage when it comes to eBooks. As a result, viewing a PDF on the smaller screens of eReaders, handhelds and mobile phones is not very practicable. Adobe has addressed this by adding a re-flow facility to its Acrobat Reader software, and the PDF format is supported by a lot of eReader devices, including the Kindle, the Nook, the iPad and the Sony Reader. However, for the new Adobe software to work the document must be marked for reflowing at creation, which means that existing PDF documents will not benefit unless they are tagged and resaved, and this cannot be done if the file is password protected.

The eBook and the reader

BeBook One

What attracted me to eBooks in the first place was lack of space. Since I am an avid reader, all the flat surfaces in my house are occupied by books, and becoming an indexer has increased the problem, so when the first reasonably priced eReader, the BeBook One, became available in the Netherlands, I was willing to give it a try. My BeBook has a 6 inch e-Ink screen and native support for 23 file formats, besides handling MOBI DRM protected files (now EPUB DRM, an indication of the growing popularity of the EPUB format).

When reading EPUB files or reflowable PDF files on the BeBook, you can change the font size from minute to huge, while keeping drawings and pictures at their original size. The text can be reflowed, so words wrap from one line to the next if the size of the text is altered. Readers with failing eyesight will find this resizing option a real boon. I can blow the font up to ½ cm on my BeBook and I'm sure that more recent eReaders have even better possibilities. The EPUB

Table I

Book	Print version	AZW	EPUB	MOBI
<i>I 492</i> – Felipe Fernandez-Armesto	index		index€	
<i>97 orchard: an edible history of five immigrant families in one New York tenement</i> – Jane Ziegelman	index	index€	index€	
<i>Citizens of London</i> – Lynn Olson	index	no index		
<i>Gandhi and Churchill</i> – Arthur Herman	index	no index		
<i>How to do everything with Microsoft Office Life</i> – Greg Holden	index			index†
<i>Human smoke</i> – Nicolas Carter	index	no index		
<i>The imperial cruise</i> – James Bradley	index		no index	
<i>In the footsteps of Churchill</i> – Richard Holmes	index	index*		
<i>Indexing books</i> – Nancy Mulvany	index	Index*		
<i>The indexing companion</i> – Glenda Browne and Jon Jerney	index	index ^		
<i>Lincoln's men</i> – Daniel Mark Epstein	index			index€
<i>On food and cooking</i> – Harold McGee	Index	index ^		
<i>Nourishing traditions</i> – Sally Fallon	index		no index	
<i>Rising tide</i> – John M. Barry	index	no index		
<i>The ssters who would be queen</i> – Leanda de Lys	index	no index		
<i>Theodore Roosevelt a strenuous life</i> – Kathleen Dalton	index	no index		
<i>Three emperors</i> – Miranda Carter	index	index# no index#		
<i>Winston Churchill's war leadership</i> – Martin Gilbert	index	no index		
<i>Winter world</i> – Bernd Heinrich	index			index€

Notes

€ These indexes are a simply a list of 'searchable terms' without links. The introduction reads: 'The pagination of this electronic edition does not match the edition from which it was created. To locate a specific passage, please use the search feature of your e-book reader', or 'Entries in this index, carried over verbatim from the print edition of this title, are unlikely to correspond to the pagination of any given e-book reader. However, entries in this index, and other terms, may be easily located by using the search feature of your e-book reader.'

† Only the text of the index from the printed version without page references and not linked. (The 'Dummies' eBooks I have seen also have such indexes.)

* Index without links, but with page references that are meaningless in Kindle.

^ Fully functional indexes with links.

The \$13.79 Kindle edition has no index; the \$23.78 edition has an index in which all the page references are linked. The difference in price is not explained.

file is broken down into chapters which are easily accessible from the menu. It has a zoom function, you can bookmark a page, and you can change the page to landscape view. The search function that works with an onscreen mobile phone-type keyboard is impracticable, and there's no facility for highlighting text or making notes. In short, BeBook is a budget-priced eReader, very functional for reading novels but with few frills.

Kindle DX

As my non-fiction reading is mostly in English I waited impatiently for the Kindle to become available in Europe. I decided on the Kindle DX, with a 9.7 inch screen, hoping it would make reading PDF files more enjoyable. The price of Kindle eBooks is very attractive for someone who has to pay large shipping costs, and push-of-a-button delivery compares more than favourably with waiting weeks for a snail-mail book to materialize.

The Kindle DX screen is twice the size of the BeBook. This makes reading PDF a lot easier, but only if the original font size is large enough, as Kindle can't as yet modify the PDF font sizes.³ By contrast, books in the native Kindle AZW format are a pleasure to read. You can change the font size and switch from portrait to landscape. The built-in keyboard makes searching and making notes very simple. Text can be highlighted and pages bookmarked. Some files have text-to-speech enabled, with a voice that isn't too painful to listen to.

In contrast to the PDF format, AZW works with not pages but locations. For example Nancy Mulvany's *Indexing Books* has 3,737 locations rather than the 320 pages of the print version. More about this shortly.

Indexes in eBooks

As a non-fiction reader and indexer, I was of course interested in the indexes to eBooks and their usability. A random look at some of my eBooks produced the information given in Table 1.

This quick survey suggests (surprise, surprise) that most publishers think an orthodox index unnecessary in an eBook, the assumption being that an eReader search function can do the job, a view that isn't being challenged. For example, I've never come across a discussion on the subject on any of the eBook forums to which I belong, such as Mobile Read (<http://www.mobilerread.com/>). Even if I weren't an indexer, but just a reader with an above average interest, for example in history, I would find the lack of indexes very annoying. Do other readers not share my preference? The problem is compounded since there's almost no way of finding out in advance whether or not an eBook has a useful (or indeed usable) index. This fact isn't advertised on the Amazon website, as with the text-to-speech enabled eBooks. Yes, you can download a sample of the book to your eReader, and the table of contents may mention an index, but this gives no clue to its suitability for eBook use. For example, after buying Browne and Jermy's *The indexing companion*, which has a linked index, I presumed that Nancy Mulvany's book would be the same. The sample stated it had an index, but this turned out to be the index to the printed version, with page references that are useless on the Kindle.

eBooks and the practising indexer

The indexing task

The Kindle DX handles PDF files well, and Kindle pagination corresponds with the PDF file subject to the caveat that your file needs to start at page 1. So I use it for reading the indexing assignment away from my desk – a comfortable armchair can make a welcome break. The promised option for changing font size should make things better still, and I might well find the Kindle preferable to my laptop as a second screen while I work on an index at my desk. But at present it is impossible to highlight words or make notes in the PDF file, so it has its limitations for working on the move.

Emptying the bookcase

As I said earlier, my initial idea was to use the Kindle as a bookcase for my reference books and indexing manuals, but I find navigating through lots of books on the Kindle more cumbersome than getting a book from the shelf and consulting the index, not least when the Kindle index isn't tailored for eBook purposes.

The verdict

I have found simply reading a book on an eReader, be it BeBook or Kindle, a pleasant experience. The BeBook has a black casing, which personally I find more pleasant than the white of the Kindle. Both are highly portable, and both need very little power, as only the 'turning of a page' uses energy. They each weigh less than the average book they replace. I've used the Kindle service to convert Word documents to AZW for private and business use. This service is free, quick and the result looks good. (It will also convert PDF to AZW, but here the end product looks awful.) But even as a reader I'm not going to be satisfied until eBooks have decent, usable indexes. So a nice gadget but . . .

For indexing purposes, the Kindle can be a useful supplement, but at present serious limitations in handling PDF files make it for me, as a professional indexer, no more than an expensive optional extra.

Notes

- 1 http://www.idpf.org/doc_library/industrystats.htm
- 2 According to Google, the service will sell online access to millions of books. This means you can read an entire book from any Internet-connected computer, simply by logging in to your Book Search account, and it will remain on your electronic bookshelf, so you can come back and access it whenever you want in the future,
- 3 The firmware update was announced in April 2010, but my Kindle has not updated yet.

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