E-books Are an Environmentally Friendly Option

What Is the Impact of Digitizing Books?, 2013

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The production of both electronic and print books yields carbon emissions that threaten the environment. However, transporting printed books uses more carbon-producing energy. Moreover, publishers destroy unsold print books and many others end up in landfills. Thus, environmentally conscious citizens who are also avid readers should consider the e-reader. Unfortunately, some consumers replace their e-readers with the latest model before the older models reach the end of their useful life. If improperly disposed of, these readers produce toxic waste that pollutes waterways. Nevertheless, for those readers who keep their e-readers for many years, e-books are a sensible environmental alternative.

The e-mail from Multnomah County Library finally arrived, informing me it was finally my turn for the book I'd awaited for months. Turns out, I couldn't wait that long to read "The Paris Wife," Paula McLain's absorbing tale of Ernest Hemingway's plain Jane first wife. I'd downloaded it on my shiny new iPad 2 months earlier.

The American Academy of Publishers projects that e-books will account for 25 percent of all book sales in a few years, and 75 percent by 2025. A new Pew Research report says about 12 percent of Americans own some kind of e-reader. Already, insanely expensive textbooks are being phased out, replaced by online-only versions. The New York Times now has a bestseller list just for e-books.

What's it mean for the environment, and the sustainably conscious book-lover?

The answer is as layered as anything William Faulkner ever dreamed up.

It takes purchasing about 40 to 50 new paperbound books to equal the cost of fossil fuels, mineral consumption and water use of a single e-reader.

Manufacturing Requirements

Traditional books require deforestation, though the industry has made significant strides in producing books from recycled materials and soy-based inks. Minerals and other materials needed to produce an iPad, Kindle or Nook are more problematic. Raz Godelnik, the chief executive of EcoLibris, a nonprofit that focuses on sustainability in publishing, says some of the minerals needed to make electronic gadgets come from ravaged regions like the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and profits have gone into local civil war efforts, giving e-readers a significant social toll.

Production of both types of books causes carbon emissions, though books require more energy for transporting from publisher to bookstore.
Daniel Goleman, a behavioral researcher, has calculated that overall, it takes purchasing about 40 to 50 new paperbound books to equal the cost of fossil fuels, mineral consumption and water use of a single e-reader. Consider global warming contributions, and that number goes up to about 100 books, Goleman figures.

Verdict: If you're a serious reader, the electronic reader is the way to go, so long as you hang onto it for a few years.

The Versatility Question

Let's say you buy a book, read it and love it. Then what? You can pass it on to a friend, keep it on your shelf to read again someday, donate it, or try to sell it back to one of Portland's many used-book stores.

My new iPad stores a whole bunch of books in my virtual library, and I use it to read The New York Times, The New Yorker and People magazine. I can get rid of my dead-tree subscriptions to these publications, pay digitally to read them and not miss a beat. The iPad is also a phone book, a music player, a calendar and a photo album.

Verdict: The iPad wins this one hands down.

The Cost of Print and E-Books

The price of e-readers has dropped steadily. Kindles are now available for as little as $114, or less than buying six hardcover books brand-new. Multi-use iPads are much more expensive, starting at a splurge-but-not-out-of-the-question $499.

Of course, you can get all the books you want—eventually—for free at your local library. Once you've gotten your reader, plenty of classic books are available for free as well.

Given the lack of overhead, individual e-books cost less than their new hardback versions. The nearly 800-page tome by local author Jean Auel, "Land of the Painted Caves," lists for $30, but it's available as an e-book for $12.99.

Verdict: Books, for those who rely on the library. If you're a voracious reader who absolutely has to dive into the new Jonathan Franzen the day it comes out, get an e-reader.

Weighing the Waste Options

Plenty of books do end up in landfills. And a staggering 30 percent or so of new books will, on average, fail to sell and be shipped back to their publisher's warehouse to be destroyed. On the other
hand, Apple cranked out the iPad 2 a mere year after introducing its prototype iPad, and new versions of the Kindle and Nook have emerged quickly. Plenty of consumers are happy to chuck their old electronic device for the newer, glitzier version, and that can mean growing amounts of e-waste.

E-recycling is getting easier. But old computers and e-readers can wind up overseas, being stripped for metal parts, exposing toxins and polluting waterways.

Verdict: A toss-up, for now.

Local Impact

The e-book revolution is a big part of why so many local bookstores have closed their doors in recent years.

But e-books are extraordinarily democratizing. Maybe your next-door neighbor is a secret genius, but has never been able to get a big-name publisher to look her way. There's limitless room in the e-bookstores of the world for authors of all stripes. And the returns can be decent. While a published author may see returns of 15 percent to 20 percent on a traditional book, e-books can net authors up to 70 percent returns.

For those who always want a new book at their bedside, and who plan to hang onto their device for a few years, an e-reader looks like a reasonable environmental choice.

Powell's Books is trying to satisfy both sides of the coin, says Darin Sennett, director of strategic projects. Shoppers can now download e-books via the Powell's website thanks to a partnership with Google e-books. In a few months, he says, shoppers will be able to buy either a paper or electronic edition of the book they've chosen, on the spot.

Powell's can compete with the big-name e-book sellers, he says, because of its curated choices and customer service.

E-Readers Can Benefit the Reader and the Environment

The most environmentally friendly bookworms are those who walk or bike to their local library to get their book fix. But e-readers have more people reading, because of the immediacy and accessibility of the medium. And that can only be a good thing.

For those who always want a new book at their bedside, and who plan to hang onto their device for a few years, an e-reader looks like a reasonable environmental choice.

Further Readings
Books


**Periodicals and Internet Sources**

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