

◀ Return to Full

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**HEADLINE:** An Idea Whose Time Has Come Back

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### **BODY:**

UNTIL recently, I thought electronic books were sharing a graveyard with eight-track tapes, Betamax video recorders and record players. Industry predictions five years ago that e-books would quickly replace paper never came to pass. I figured the digital book had failed because everyone shared my distaste for the first generation of clunky, book-sized devices designed for viewing them. And in fact Gemstar, the principal manufacturer of the electronic readers, stopped selling them last year.

But it turns out the e-book market has been changing course and, though still tiny, has been growing at double-digit rates. It is, in fact, the fastest-growing segment of the comparatively static publishing world. Between 2002 and 2003, the number of e-books sold rose 71 percent, according to the industry's trade association, the Open **eBook** Forum. The industry posted record sales in the first quarter of 2004, a 46 percent increase compared with the same period last year. Still, last year's sales of 1.4 million downloadable books are minuscule compared with the more than 2.2 billion books sold in the United States in 2003.

What made this growth possible is a phenomenon the pioneers in the electronic publishing industry didn't foresee: the explosion of cellphones and other hand-held devices with small screens capable of displaying text. About 80 percent of the downloadable books sold to individuals today are read on such devices, according to the two top online electronic retailers, eReader and Fictionwise.

E-book readers use cellphones, "smart" phones (which have Web capacity and miniature keyboards), Palm Pilots and other P.D.A.'s (personal digital assistants), and pocket P.C.'s, which are increasingly popular. In minutes, you can purchase and download a digital book suitable for a mobile device or a personal computer from one of several sites that specialize in e-books, as well as from Amazon.com.

Fans of cellphone reading tell me they quickly forget about the size of the screen once they get absorbed in a good plot; moreover, they can increase the type size to make it easier on the eyes. And the convenience is unbeatable. A friend of mine, who had forgotten to bring reading matter to the dentist, recently read Kitty Kelley's book "The Family: The Real Story of the Bush Dynasty" on his Treo smart phone, then text-messaged a particularly damning paragraph about the Bush family to my cell.

The ubiquity of both P.C.'s and hand-held devices permits some unanticipated uses. One advantage of reading e-books from a monitor at work is "the ability to appear like you're working, when in fact you are not," confesses a Dallas manager for an online retailer who told me he has read hundreds of science fiction and history books this way. When heading for the doctor's office, Janet Cargill, a 75-year-old retiree in Westbrook, Me., loads several romance novels into her hand-held Garmin G.P.S., or global positioning system, which she also relies on to give her voice-activated driving directions.

E-reading may be good for marriages, too. At night, the Palm's backlighted screen permits Miki M. Compson, a computer consultant in Severn, Md., to catch up on the latest James Patterson thriller in the car instead of criticizing her husband's driving. "For 30 years we've had fights in the car; now I can read my e-book and shut up," says Compson, who says she reads up to seven e-books a week on her Palm.

Both Cargill and Compson represent another surprising shift in the e-book market. Retailers say that the market, which used to be dominated by computer-savvy male readers of science fiction, has expanded in the past year or two to include a growing number of female readers. And while science fiction remains a top seller, female romance readers now compose one of the fastest-growing markets for digital books, perhaps because many are voracious readers who race through all the sequels in a series.

One such reader is Rebecca Kroll of Scotch Plains, N.J., a live-in caretaker for an autistic teenager, who says she burns through three or four books a day and purchases 50 to 100 a week, an expensive habit that she says costs her up to \$400 weekly. "Storage is a big issue with me," Kroll says. Before she discovered e-books a little over a year ago, 12,000 books crammed her apartment from floor to ceiling, leaving her desperate for more shelf space. Although Kroll says she was initially ill at ease with computers, she now does most of her reading on a laptop and stores thousands of romance and science fiction fantasy novels on two computer disks. Another advantage of the laptop, she says, is that it permits her to listen to e-books that are formatted with a text-to-speech option while she's cooking or knitting.

Kroll also likes the relative anonymity of purchasing e-books from Web sites that specialize in female-oriented erotica, some of them available only in electronic form. "It's a lot nicer, especially if you're embarrassed to go into a bookstore," she says.

E-books have a number of other advantages over print books: they are significantly cheaper -- sometimes by 20 to 50 percent. The best-selling "Da Vinci Code" is \$12.11 from eReader.com, compared with \$14.97 for the print version of the book on Amazon.com, not including shipping. A Palm Pilot can generally hold 10 or 15 books at once, a major convenience when traveling. At 2 a.m., a student with a book report due the next morning could download the assigned book instantaneously from the Web -- which may explain why George Orwell's "1984" (\$5.99) is the top seller at RosettaBooks, an e-book publisher that specializes in copyrighted 20th-century masterworks. My own introduction to e-books came as I was cramming for my book group's discussion of "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn." I went online to eReader.com and downloaded the Spark Notes, a competitor to Cliffs Notes published by Barnes & Noble. They appeared in an elegant large font on my desktop, and I was surprised at how easy it was to read an entire book in a single sitting, albeit a short one.

E-books are creeping into our world in other ways. Libraries, a potentially huge market, have started to purchase e-books that patrons can download at home. Digital books are a librarian's dream come true, because they don't take up shelf space, don't wear out and are automatically returned to the library on the due date. The New York Public Library introduced its first e-book collection on Nov. 1 with 3,000 titles. "We put it on the Web site and almost immediately in the middle of the night people started checking them out," a library spokeswoman said. The "Kama Sutra," the classic Indian sex manual, was one of the most popular books the first week. The White Plains Public Library, which started lending e-books in mid-August, reports more than more than 200 checkouts a month. Computer technology has been the most popular category, followed by

health and fitness and then romance.

But many avid readers -- and I'm one of them -- say they can't see curling up with a laptop or a P.D.A. in bed. (Fans counter that the backlight permits them to read without disturbing a sleeping spouse.) Most e-books from major publishers are encrypted to prevent printing out even a page. Random House, the largest publisher of electronic titles, does not permit any printing from its books; HarperCollins Publishers permits 10 percent of a book to be printed out. That limitation reduces the market to those who are comfortable reading long books on a screen.

Increasingly, e-booksellers are persuading publishers to release best sellers in digital form. This fall, eReader made Stephen King's best-selling "Dark Tower" available for download one minute after midnight on the day of its print release. But best-selling authors like John Grisham, Tom Clancy and J. K. Rowling are still not available electronically. The continuing reluctance of some publishers and prominent authors to grant electronic rights is a major obstacle to the market's growth, industry executives complain. And the number of new titles remains low. Random House leads the pack with 2,500 electronic titles among all its imprints, but that's still small compared with the 24,000 books in its print catalog.

Some authors fear e-book sales will cut into the sales of print copies. Others are worried that it will be easier to make pirate copies and distribute them, the way the free Internet music site Napster did before it was declared illegal by a federal court and shut down. Retailers counter that most pirating is actually done from print books, which are easy to scan quickly into a computer.

Already a culture war reminiscent of the one surrounding Napster is shaping up in the world of digital books. My college-age son is in the contingent that reads e-books almost exclusively from free Web sites because of the greater flexibility offered by their unencrypted books. Such sites usually offer plain-text format, which allows him to print as many pages as he needs, or to copy a long quotation from a book electronically and paste it into his term paper. Free sites, at least the legitimate ones, are limited to books for which the copyright has expired. Yet they are popular, especially among students assigned classic works. The University of Virginia library, which makes 1,800 titles available free from its Web site, has sent more than 8.5 million downloadable books to readers since it started the service in August 2000.

Some believe that all e-books should be free of software protection limits. Cory Doctorow, an advocate for less restrictive digital rights at the Electronic Frontier Foundation, made his first novel available free online. He argues that digital content's unique forms of adaptability -- to e-mail, computerized cut-and-paste and software translation engines -- are all areas where paper books lag. In his view, anyone who puts a software lock on an e-book is crazy.

The market's biggest hurdle right now may be that most people have never even seen an e-book -- at least not one with a price tag. Yet more people are reading more words from screens every day, which some would argue is equivalent to reading a digital book. The popularity of Apple's iTunes Web site for purchasing downloaded music indicates that "people are getting used to buying digital content without a physical copy," notes Theresa Horner, director of e-book operations and business development at HarperCollins. Now consumers just need the equivalent of an iPod for digital books, she says.

Still, the prospect of reading an e-book on a screen can seem tiring after a workday spent in front of a computer. A reading device easier on the eyes might attract more readers. One such prospect is Sony's Librie -- a lighter, thinner reading device than the Gemstar, with resolution close to that of this newspaper and a glare-free surface that can be read at any angle, even in bright light. It is currently available only in Japan. American consumers may see a product using the new technology in the next 18 to 24 months, says Darren Bischoff, senior marketing manager of the E Ink Corporation, the Cambridge, Mass., company that developed the technology known as electronic ink. Several companies are interested in developing a product for the United

States market, Bischoff says. It's unclear whether that will be a device only capable of reading downloaded books or a multifaceted device like a P.D.A.

Even with a technological breakthrough, I'd personally miss the feel of holding a "dead tree book," as the digital generation calls the paper version. Many of us aren't convinced that reading off a screen even approaches the sensual pleasure of turning crisp pages. Then again, I had to be dragged kicking and screaming from my I.B.M. electric typewriter, but I can't imagine relying on white-out now. And how did we all survive before Google?

For almost any objection raised by old-fashioned readers, there's already an electronic answer. You can electronically annotate notes in the margins, bookmark a page or look up a word in your downloaded dictionary. What is more, technology companies like E Ink are already developing a thin, flexible material for displaying print that could be rolled up like a newspaper or folded into a briefcase. That, of course, is for readers still nostalgic for papyrus.

#### E-Book Top Ten

1. Angels & Demons, Dan Brown, Pocket Books
2. The Da Vinci Code, Dan Brown, Doubleday
3. Hour Game, David Baldacci, Warner Books
4. Split Second, David Baldacci, Warner Books
5. A Lady of His Own, Stephanie Laurens, HarperCollins
6. Deception Point, Dan Brown, Pocket Books
7. The Big Bad Wolf, James Patterson, Time Warner
8. The Templar Revelation, Lynn Picknett and Clive Prince, Touchstone
9. Digital Fortress, Dan Brown, St. Martin's
10. Secrets of a Summer Night, Lisa Kleypas, HarperCollins

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**GRAPHIC:** Drawing (Drawing by Lou Beach)

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