

E-BOOKS AND E-PUBLISHING

The Future of Electronic Publishing

First published by [United Press International \(UPI\)](#)

By: Sam Vaknin

UNESCO's somewhat arbitrary definition of "book" is:

""Non-periodical printed publication of at least 49 pages excluding covers".

The emergence of electronic publishing was supposed to change all that. Yet a bloodbath of unusual proportions has taken place in the last few months. Time Warner's iPublish and MightyWords (partly owned by Barnes and Noble) were the last in a string of resounding failures which cast in doubt the business model underlying digital content. Everything seemed to have gone wrong: the dot.coms dot bombed, venture capital dried up, competing standards fractured an already fragile marketplace, the hardware (e-book readers) was clunky and awkward, the software unwieldy, the e-books badly written or already in the public domain.

Terrified by the inexorable process of disintermediation (the establishment of direct contact between author and readers, excluding publishers and bookstores) and by the ease with which digital content can be replicated - publishers resorted to draconian copyright protection measures (euphemistically known as "digital rights management"). This further alienated the few potential readers left. The opposite model of "viral" or "buzz" marketing (by encouraging the dissemination of free copies of the promoted book) was only marginally more successful.

Moreover, e-publishing's delivery platform, the Internet, has been transformed beyond recognition since March 2000.

From an open, somewhat anarchic, web of networked computers - it has evolved into a territorial, commercial, corporate extension of "brick and mortar" giants, subject to government regulation. It is less friendly towards independent (small) publishers, the backbone of e-publishing. Increasingly, it is expropriated by publishing and media behemoths. It is treated as a medium for cross promotion, supply chain management, and customer relations management. It offers only some minor synergies with non-cyberspace, real world, franchises and media properties. The likes of Disney and Bertelsmann have swung a full circle from considering the Internet to be the next big thing in New Media delivery - to frantic efforts to contain the red ink it oozed all over their otherwise impeccable balance sheets.

But were the now silent pundits right all the same? Is the future of publishing (and other media industries) inextricably intertwined with the Internet?