

Why Kindle is not the answer

 By [Wesley Lynch](#)

7 Jun 2013

Even though the story of e-books, for the most part, is the story of Amazon's Kindle - which overcame the increasingly high cost of print book production and distribution by digitising the value chain - it is not, for various reasons, the answer in an academic context.

Academic lag

Amazon's business model (as well as the Apple and Android store models) requires each consumer to have a buying relationship with the retailer, including ownership of a credit card. This is not realistic in many cases, for example in the vast majority of schools, and seeks to bypass the time-honoured bulk procurement practices of institutions.

The Kindle distribution method was also not designed to accommodate bulk downloads, nor is it optimised to minimise the bandwidth and cost overhead on African educational institutions.

As a result, publishers, academic retailers and institutions of learning have not embraced existing digital distribution platforms, instead sticking with tried-and-trusted bulk procurement of physical books.

Finding solutions

To forward-thinking role players in educational publishing it is clear that a digital transition must happen, whether via intermediaries like Apple, Amazon or physical retailers, or directly from publishers.

The good news is that there are platforms that overcome the abovementioned limitations. They do not require retail intermediaries as technology partners and they do not ask students to ink a commercial agreement or possess a credit card.

Web-based bulk distribution modules currently in operation allow publishers (or retailers) to offer group entitlements to institutions, with the institution in turn distributing individual entitlements to students.

As closely as is possible in the virtual world, this model mimics real-world book procurement practices, where institutions take mass delivery of textbooks and distribute them to students.

It is further possible to make cached copies of a downloaded text. Students with individual entitlements download texts internally from the institution's secure vault - a tactic that dramatically reduces the bandwidth and cost overhead.

New format, same practices

Even affluent settings can benefit. While it is easy enough to make iPads available to private school students, institutions are uncomfortable with force-fitting a single-product distribution model onto a bulk context.

But a distribution platform that models itself on accepted mass procurement and distribution practices can fill the digital academic content vacuum.

And it need not be a scaled-down experience; in fact, the new models make it possible to offer an emerging world audience the full enhanced experience of modern e-books, complete with embedded video, audio, and online functionality such as search, research and knowledge sharing.

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