

Webb's web

The future of reading

Well, you might say that everyone reads material from the internet (except people with vision impairment who 'listen' to it through screen readers), but what I'm really looking at here is the act of reading from the net instead of reading from a book or magazine.

(If you wanted to range more widely, you could also venture into some very interesting issues like how watching news video instead of reading news text is the way that we're moving – and has been since TV entered our lives. But meaty subjects like those can wait for another day.)

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any particular change to my lifestyle or working habits (taking up a regular commute, for instance) would make me think seriously about my options.

And as for e-book readers like Kindle or the iPhone or the Apple iTab – well they work for some, but not for me at present. Part of that is about ease of reading, but it's also about the content.

As an example of the importance of content, I heard Mark Davis from the University of Melbourne Book Industry Study (<http://newsroom.melbourne.edu/news/n-233>) being interviewed on ABC radio and he said they found that book sales are increasing despite the onrush of new technological solutions. He cited the example of cookbooks, which would work better in the kitchen than their electronic versions. (On the other hand, a tech guru has written that a wireless-enabled Tablet or Netbook could be attached to the fridge door to display recipes, shopping lists, and other useful information. I guess you could scan the kids' pre-school drawings and add them to the screen wallpaper – the possibilities are endless.)

But other aspects of content really depend on availability. In my case, I read mostly non-fiction and I find that much of what I want is not available in electronic formats – that sort of material will be there some day, but not yet. And it's even harder if your choice of reading is older material which isn't quite worth digitising yet.

Even if you can find that sort of book in electronic form, the readability issue is quite obvious in the case of reference works and those with a mix of text and graphics; the sort where you'll want to flip back and forwards through the pages. And the difference in usability is even more marked when you're reading large format books with full-page illustrations or diagrams or maps. That's when the limitations of a small-screen device become really obvious. Which is why the reading devices on offer won't meet all the needs of all the population.

It all depends on who you are, what you want to read, and what technology you have available. For me, I'm still not comfortable reading any more than a short article on a screen. Give me paper – a newspaper, a book, or a magazine – and I'm happy. A slab of text on a desktop or laptop screen is much less attractive. I know this is a personal preference and

But it's always poor practice to base important decisions on the current state of technology. The Apple iTab, released late in January is a good example. After plenty of speculation – some quite wide of the mark – we now know a lot more about it than before. There are the usual complaints about what's not in this first version (eg a camera, no USB ports, no Flash support), but that doesn't really detract from the product as a tablet device. It will develop further.

And it's now clear that Apple will be getting content (books, articles, news) in a way that's as revolutionary as iTunes was for the music industry. Imagine a simplified way of paying for just the snippets or chapters of a book instead of the whole work. Imagine also an online citation to a journal article that has a hot link to a service where you can buy the few pages of that citation immediately for a couple of dollars and have it downloaded to your tablet or laptop or your desktop computer. And then think of what this would mean to the services that libraries of all types are currently providing to their users.

And talking of paying for services, the dilemma for news publishers isn't going away. The *New York Times* is the latest to join Mr Murdoch's attempts to monetise (ugh!) their content, relying on a metering method that grants readers access to a certain number of free items each month and then requires them to pay after that. It's a model that seems to be working well with the *Financial Times* so far, but the obvious advantage that newspapers like those have – their very desirable brand – is not one that others can readily count on. And that's where the Apple revolution may have a big impact on the newspaper world, especially the smaller players, in the same way that iTunes has enabled small record labels to make more of a living.

Further on the *NYT's* metering method, Stephen Bartholomeusz writing in the *Business Spectator* (one of the best free online papers around) has pointed out one benefit of that model: that it can be tweaked at will. If you want to attract new users or allow special deals for a period, just increase the number of free views for a while. You can always lower it later.

Reading has a future – in printed or electronic form. There's a trend to do it more online, but paper isn't going to fold any time soon.

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Currently reading *1812: Napoleon's Invasion of Russia* by Paul Britten Austin

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