The battle to define the future of the book in the digital world

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Abstract

Commercial publishing interests are presenting the future of the book in the digital world through the promotion of e-book reading appliances and software. Implicit in this is a very complex and problematic agenda that re-establishes the book as a digital cultural artifact within a context of intellectual property rights management enforced by hardware and software systems. With the convergence of different types of content into a common digital bit-stream, developments in industries such as music are establishing precedents that may define our view of digital books. At the same time we find scholars exploring the ways in which the digital medium can enhance the traditional communication functions of the printed work, moving far beyond literal translations of the pages of printed books into the digital world. This paper examines competing visions for the future of the book in the digital environment, with particular attention to questions about the social implications of controls over intellectual property, such as continuity of cultural memory.

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The future of humanity is bound to the future of science and hinges on how successfully we harness technological advances to address our challenges. If we are to use science to solve our problems while avoiding its dystopian risks, we must think rationally, globally, collectively, and optimistically about the long term. Advances in biotechnology, cybertechnology, robotics, and artificial intelligence—if pursued and applied wisely—could empower us to boost the developing and developed world and overcome the threats humanity faces on Earth, from climate change to nuclear war. At the same time, if Defining Digital Books and E-book Readers. Imprecise and inconsistent terminology has been a major source of confusion in the hype over e-books, and an obstacle to disentangling the issues involved. It is essential to distinguish between the idea of a digital book and a book-reading appliance. In a very real sense, presenting an e-book reader as a sort of substitute for a printed book underestimates and trivializes the future. One set of questions that e-book readers raise is about the future character and operation of personal digital libraries, and their relationship to commercial and non-commercial digital libraries and digital bookstores.