eBooks

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This past month, Amazon introduced several new Kindle models. Of course, the Kindle was the first connected eBook Reader, but these days, all of the talk is about tablet computers, so the coverage of the launch focused on the tablet-features of the devices (which are impressive at the prices Amazon is offering them). But, the reason Amazon can price the Kindles so aggressively is because Kindle owners buy profitable content – mostly eBooks.

Which brings me back to my topic – how should we, in the ministry, think about eBooks? Do they have unique characteristics that can benefit the ministry? Are there challenges that we should carefully consider before leveraging the technology?

What are eBooks?

When I speak of eBooks, I'm referring to books in electronic form. I'm speaking about the content itself, not the physical device used to read them. The Kindle is an eBook reader (and so much more), but the eBooks themselves are the files that get loaded onto a Kindle (or other eBook Reader) for us to read.

Although eBooks have been around at least since the 1960s, the mass market became aware of eBooks with the launch of the Kindle in 2007. When the iPad launched in 2010, a major component of the launch was an agreement with five of the six largest publishers and an app called iBooks, quickly making the iPad the best selling portable eBook reader. Barnes and Noble has also introduced a popular line of eBook readers under the Nook brand.

However, each of these companies have also made their eBook reader software available for other platforms. I have a Kindle. I also have Kindle software installed on my smartphone and Android tablet. I could also have it on my PC or my Mac if I thought I might read books with those devices. Nook software is similarly

available for all of those platforms, while iBooks is, not surprisingly, only available on Apple systems.

There likely are three factors that have driven the eBook from niche to mainstream:

1. Technology: Moore's Law and display technology have enabled a form factor and battery life that works well for book readers, while the maturity of the Internet economy has solved previous eBook distribution challenges.
2. Distribution: Amazon created a distribution model that protects author's intellectual property and enables publishers to make money. Others have followed Amazon's lead.
3. Content: Therefore, publishers are willing to bring large amounts of content to market that people actually want to read. While in the past, eBook content was largely comprised of old titles that had fallen into the public domain, today, virtually all best sellers and new releases are available in eBook form.

What are the ministry opportunities?

If your ministry produces content, then publishing that content in eBook format may increase the reach and impact of your ministry. It's not that hard to get your content into Amazon's Kindle store, Apple's iBookstore, Barnes & Noble's Nook store, and others. As an electronic product, the costs of production and distribution are very low, allowing your content to be priced very attractively (even free) without burdening your ministry with massive costs. Because of these distribution and cost benefits, your ministry might even be able to make some money through ePublishing.

But, of course, what makes eBook content attractive to readers is what really matters – since that is what can help your ministry make the biggest impact.

Perhaps an opportunity I'm working through can help clarify what I mean. While vacationing, I recently had a conversation with a family member. That family member had questions about heaven that I could answer based on my basic understanding of scripture, but I want that family member to really dig into the reality of heaven – most importantly why they should want to go there and how to get there. While I can (and have) share the gospel, God has also provided great books as a further means for this loved one to hear the truth from God's Word. I pray that the Holy Spirit would open his eyes, mind, and heart to hear that truth and respond to the gospel.

In doing my research, I've narrowed down my choice to two books, Heaven by Randy Alcorn, and The Glory of Heaven by John MacArthur. Both are thick, heavy hardback books. I'm about to do some business travel – 3 cities, 5 flights, in 2 days. I don't really want to lug around two heavy books as I evaluate which is best to send to my loved one. Thankfully, both

are available in Kindle form, so I've bought the Kindle versions (for a fraction of the price of the hardbacks) and loaded them onto my tablet.

My relative also has a Kindle, and he's about to have surgery that will have him in rehab for a few weeks. Although he's an avid reader, I know he doesn't want to lug a bunch of heavy books with him to the rehab facility. Thankfully, Amazon makes it easy for me to send him a gift copy of whichever book I think will be most effective. That gives me a few more days to make my decision (since the electronic copy will arrive instantaneously) and arrives in a format that he's likely to take with him precisely when he's going to be doing a lot of reading.

Sounds great, so what's the problem?

There are some minor challenges with eBook readers that are common to all mobile technology – sometimes the batteries die; you can't use them during airplane takeoff and landing; you can't read them while taking a bath; and rain is even more catastrophic than it is for paper. But the real issue for ministries considering publishing eBook content is the fragmentation problem. There is no single standard format for publishing eBooks, and there's no single distribution channel for selling them.

Adobe's PDF format will work on most platforms, but isn't optimized for book content. An Open eBook format was developed in the late

1990s, which evolved into the open EPUB format. The Google Books initiative uses EPUB, which is also supported by many platforms, including Apple's iBooks and the Nook. Apple also has their own format – IBA, while the Kindle requires proprietary Amazon formats AZW or KF8. Thankfully, there is both software and commercial services available for converting content into these formats. It is also easy to find companies that will help get your product into a variety of distribution channels, although you should carefully consider which channels are most important for your ministry and which services are most financially attractive for reaching those channels.

It is my hope and prayer that these articles on the power and danger of technology will encourage you in your ministry and your daily walk with Christ. From the printing press to eBooks, from mainframes to tablets and smartphones, and from the Internet to social networks and mobility, new technologies continue to advance our ability to know God and to serve Him, wherever we go.

Russ McGuire is an executive for a Fortune 100 company and the founder/co-founder of three technology start-ups. His latest entrepreneurial venture is Hschooler.net (http://hschooler. net), a social network for Christian families (especially homeschoolers) which is being built and run by seven young men under Russ' direction.