

Better read than dead: why books will endure

By adopting the methods of their online rivals, traditional publishers can ensure a bright future.

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Growth in e-book sales has slowed, particularly in America. Meanwhile, bookshop chains in several important western European markets are in trouble.

Technology will keep disrupting the market as established publishers such as Penguin Random House look to sell direct to the consumer from their own websites, more authors self-publish e-books, and surprising new players emerge, such as the supermarket Tesco with its Blinkbox digital book platform.

One reason that e-books seemed to have hit a plateau, is that early adopters and heavy readers have switched to digital and there are fewer exciting device launches.

What's more, newer devices such as Amazon's Kindle Fire and Kobo's Aura aren't just for books. They let users surf the web and use social media, video, games and other "snackable" content.

So the challenge for the books industry is to innovate and make better use of technology to compete with rival media – a theme that dominated a business breakfast roundtable, organised by the London Book Fair and the printing technology firm Ricoh.

Much of the discussion focused on how publishers should make better use of data to understand the digital behaviour of readers, develop a direct relationship with them, and sell to them in new ways. By doing so, they would in effect be copying methods used by the new tech giants.

Many are upbeat about how digital is opening up new ways of selling to and communicating with readers. "We have fantastic tools we've never had before," said Helen Kogan, managing director of the business books publisher Kogan Page.

The problem is that publishers do not have a monopoly on such tools. Self-publishing is a fast-growing trend that is challenging established publishers, if only by squeezing their market share.

Self-publishing has been a mixed blessing. It has led to a glut of cheap books and few such authors have gone on to win deals from publishers.

So far, virtually no big-name authors have moved in the other direction by ditching their publisher and deciding to self-publish so as to get a bigger share of royalties. However, that could change as one rumour at the London Book Fair was that Amazon has been wooing top authors' representatives in an effort to get them to publish directly with the online retailer.

Despite all the hype about digital, sales of physical books remain surprisingly resilient. Ebooks are still only about 20 per cent of the UK market, though Enders Analysis forecasts that this figure will rise to 35 per cent by 2016.

Kazuo Ishiguro's speech at the LBF in praise of Deborah Rogers, who founded her agency in 1967, was another reminder of why the books business has a special, enduring quality.

"She cares about books," he said. "She believes that good books are important to our lives."

Or as Ms Rogers put it: "In a world of tweets, blogs and content – which everyone knows is a word I will not accept – what survives sublimely is the book itself."

Her rallying cry should give hope to the publishing industry.

(540 words)