To George Orwell: It's the Kindle Baby, it's the Kindle!

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Technology Review by Jeffrey Barlow

Introduction:

The Kindle, Amazon.Com’s electronic text reader, is, we believe, a disruptive technology that will have immense consequences on reading and the technologies currently bound to it [1]. The Kindle is far from new [2]. It was substantially updated, however in February of 2009 and is rapidly building, not only a huge market, but also ancillary industries around it. Here, we discuss our own experience with it, using George Orwell’s two works, Confessions of a Book Reviewer and 1984, as our jumping off point for two sequential reviews. This one, very positive in tone, will be followed by a more cautionary essay in our June posting of Interface.

The Impact of the Kindle at the Berglund Center:

One of the great pleasures and urgent necessities of working at the Berglund Center for Internet Studies at Pacific University Oregon is somehow keeping abreast of innovative digital technologies. Usually these arrive with plenty of advance notice. It is the nature of the intensely competitive digital economy that each player is obliged to continuously snuffle after the “Next Big Thing” lest, like Microsoft, they see a Google-like competitor zoom around, over, under, and through them. Consequently, the trumpets heralding new developments sometimes amount to far more than the substance of the thing itself.

At the Berglund Center, we are almost totally staffed by undergraduates and are limited in what we can pay, not only by our budget but also by University practices. We try to compensate by giving the staff a chance to work with the best technologies and programs that we can afford. Also, we are all, unashamedly, geeks.

Our offices often come to a halt to examine a new high-definition digital video cam, or the newest Mac computer, or perhaps the latest iteration of the iPhone. In my ten-plus years at the
Berglund Center, however, no new technology has caused quite so much excitement as an Amazon Kindle, the firm’s electronic book reader [3].

The excitement I felt when first playing with the Kindle was similar to my own first glimpse into the World Wide Web through the Mozilla browser. We think that yet again, the future has arrived. But so, of course, have the second thoughts that sneak along behind any such transformative technology’s triumphal procession.

To me, the Kindle seems almost the anti-Big Deal of digital technology. Amazon has wisely put far more effort into developing the Kindle and to providing texts formatted for it than advertising it, a reversal of common practices for many new technologies [4]. I knew it was available, had seen it reviewed, knew of some of the issues it has raised, but had not seen one. Neither had any of the staff nor colleagues on the Pacific University campus to whom I showed it in my own enthusiasm.

Field Testing the Kindle in Reading for Review:

In order to learn to use the Kindle, I decided that I would download rather than purchase in hard copy several works for review. I chose two quite different ones; first, Cohan’s House of Cards: A Tale of Hubris and Wretched Excess on Wall Street reviewed at http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/2009/04/article.php?id=65 in this posting of Interface.

The second, to be reviewed in June, is quite different: Arthur Phillips’ The Song Is You: A Novel which might be described as a mordantly romantic tale of an aging man who lives primarily in music and is accompanied everywhere he goes by his iPod, while in a sense stalking and being stalked electronically by a much younger woman, a rising popular singer. These works present very different challenges to the reader, and it seemed to me that reading them on the Kindle would be instructive in distinctive ways.

I begin here with the Kindle and Cohan’s House of Cards. Book reviewing is a key activity for me as Director of the Center. As dauntingly complex as the current problems in the world economy are, and as unfamiliar with the subject of the work as I am, I knew, from other reviews, that this was probably the place to begin.

In reviewing books, I am always aware of George Orwell’s wonderful 1946 essay, “Confessions of a Book Reviewer,” in which he described one of his assignments [5]:

Half hidden among the pile of papers is a bulky parcel containing five volumes which his editor has sent with a note suggesting that they “ought to go well together”. They arrived four days ago, but for 48 hours the reviewer was prevented by moral paralysis from opening the parcel. Yesterday in a resolute moment he ripped the string off it and found the five volumes to be PALESTINE AT THE CROSS ROADS, SCIENTIFIC DAIRY FARMING, A SHORT HISTORY OF EUROPEAN DEMOCRACY (this one is 680 pages and weighs four pounds), TRIBAL CUSTOMS IN PORTUGUESE EAST AFRICA, and a novel, IT’S NICER LYING DOWN,
probably included by mistake. His review—800 words, say—has got to be “in” by midday tomorrow.

Three of these books deal with subjects of which he is so ignorant that he will have to read at least 50 pages if he is to avoid making some howler which will betray him not merely to the author (who of course knows all about the habits of book reviewers), but even to the general reader.

House of Cards, like Orwell’s assignment, A Short History of European Democracy, is a mammoth work of almost 500 pages and richly detailed. Orwell would never have been able to understand it from any 250 pages, let alone merely fifty. Much of the vocabulary is new to me, as it is to most Americans following the economic collapse of such firms as Bear Sterns. Only the highly specialized readers would be completely comfortable with such concepts as ‘derivatives’ [6].

Had I been reading a hard copy of the book, I would have been working with it to one side and the computer at the center of my desk, my eyes flying back and forth looking up such terms. The index would have been of limited help because almost any complex work fails to have an adequate index— such addendums discourage the broad audiences that publishers seek.

The Kindle, however, has a built in dictionary, continually live, which automatically gives me, in an unobtrusive footer, a general definition of every term I pause the cursor before. The dictionary is multilayered so that, if I am not happy with the first definition, a click of the cursor takes me into far more detailed definitions and examples. The Kindle also has a universal search function so that if I want to see every single use of the word “derivative” in Cohan—which no index could hope to list—I again can do so with a couple of clicks of the cursor.

If I am not happy with Cohan’s definitions—rarely the case as he was himself a practitioner in the field about which he writes—the Kindle lets me go out on the web wirelessly (and without cost) and view sites such as those I cited in my review. Moreover, I can quickly highlight these definitions or any other section of text, and copy them to a file which I can then easily move to my computer. When writing, I can then cut and paste effortlessly, also a big savings in time and effort [7].

While these elaborate features of the Kindle, combining the book and the World Wide Web, might have fascinated Orwell, it has additional attractions to even the casual reader. One of these is certainly cost of use. While the $370.00 cost of the machine and a very nice, protective as well as decorative, leather case is clearly daunting, many works can be downloaded for little or no cost from the WWW. Cohan’s work is listed at $27.95 at the publisher’s site. Amazon provides instantaneous download of the electronic version—and that of almost any other best seller, including usually the entire list from The New York Times for $9.95. Even on the basis of
cost alone, the Kindle will amortize itself with the purchase of about twenty such books, hopefully well under two years’ purchases for most reading families.

Electronic download, which can be accomplished wirelessly or downloaded to a computer and later moved to the Kindle via a mini-USB cord, is free. The apparatus charges quickly and a full charge has lasted me for at least 12 hours on each occasion that I have so tested it—Amazon claims four days, depending on wireless usage. It can also be recharged from a laptop via the USB cord. This means that most devices used to extend a laptop’s running time should also work for the Kindle in the event of truly unusual demands.

The instantaneous download (3G on Kindle2) has other advantages as well, of course—it saves either mailing or travel costs. The reader can also download the first chapter of many Kindle books before purchasing. In looking for works to review via Kindle, I downloaded several and rejected them before settling upon Cohan’s and Phillips’ works. And while I am not certain of this, it is my belief that such works could also be downloaded from abroad, so I need never again lug a carton of books to China for my annual month-long period of work there.

**My Initial Concern: Is it truly like a book?**

My first concern had been simply the physical experience of reading. Reading has shaped not only my mind and my career, like any other academic, but in my case, my body as well. My eyesight is terrible and requires ideal conditions for reading. Even my hands have been shaped by reading—they naturally relax to a book-holding grip.

The Kindle has required no adjustments in my reading style. It is lighter at 10.2 ounces than all but the smallest hard-back and as light as many paperbacks. I can also choose from a number of different font sizes and I find myself beginning with a small font and, as my eyes tire, rather than putting the work down, I crank up the font size and finish more refreshed.

The Kindle screen looks amazingly like paper, and performs even better. It refreshes as fast as you can hit “next page” and the “ink” stays on that page even if you turn the appliance off; when you wake it, you are right where you were. It is visible even in bright sunlight. Under reduced lighting conditions it is no more demanding than a book, save that you may have to position the light so as to reduce glare. You can place endless bookmarks, and in addition to cutting and pasting, you can make your own notes on the keyboard and link them to the place in the text which inspired their creation.

Like my eyes and hands, my back has also been shaped by a lifetime of reading. I am as likely to have a book bag slung over my left shoulder as to be carrying my house keys. With the Kindle, I can, should I wish to do so, carry well more than one thousand complete volumes with no noticeable gain in weight.

My daughter, Clare, studies in China now, and often requests that both academic texts and popular books be mailed to her. While we have not yet done so, we can purchase a Kindle and
fully load it for less than the cost of air mailing even one large box of books to Beijing. Doubtless Chinese customs will be somewhat puzzled by the arrival of a Kindle from our household, and Clare is likely to spend several hours at Customs, but I think it will be worth it to her, and she may be able to write her own piece for Interface: “China and the Kindle”.

Any works a user purchases through Amazon.com remain on a personal web site so they can be downloaded indefinitely. I downloaded a small free program for my iPhone, and I can load my current Kindle reading from that site into it as well at no additional cost.

And while I cannot recommend serious reading on the iPhone, it is comforting to have an emergency book with me in the event that I am stranded or delayed. And when I do read on the iPhone, it communicates wirelessly to the Amazon site, and when I go back to the Kindle it inquires if I want to take up the work where I finished on the iPhone; spooky, but cool!

The Kindle is also an Internet appliance of a limited sort. You can browse the web and download email, but these functions are certainly far less satisfactory for me than using my trusty MacBook Pro. The Kindle will also perform many additional functions, from reading texts aloud to you, to loading your own documents. To better understand these, it is best to visit Amazon’s rather breathlessly celebratory WWW site [8].

**Downsides to the Kindle:**

There are, of course, some downsides to the Kindle. We purchased the second iteration quite by accident as we were in that large number who ordered the first one, which soon could not be produced in sufficient volume to meet demand. In the period we were waiting, the Kindle was revamped, becoming Kindle2, and we reordered.

I cannot discuss any shortcomings of the first Kindle, but for me, some improvements can still be made [9]. The cursor toggle, one of those small niblets that sticks up and can be pushed to any side to produce corresponding actions, must be pushed down rather firmly for most uses, and occasionally I do not hit it hard enough and must get a better grip on the apparatus to make it function. Occasionally, if I get impatient cutting and pasting or inserting notes, it will lock up momentarily but in reading the two books I finished, I have never had to reboot it, though I can do so if I must.

I would also want to insure my Kindle against breakage, theft or loss, but assume it is covered by the usual “floater” personal policy which protects my computers and phones as well, though I intend to check to see if this is the case.

**Conclusion: What about 1984?**

Clearly, I am an enthusiastic convert. But I think it impossible to invoke George Orwell’s advice to book reviewers as I have done here, without also remembering his more famous work, 1984. Might the Kindle do to content what the WWW has? At present, commercially published books,
 unlike WWW content, are closely edited and in a sense controlled. It is possible to write and format your own works for the Kindle, and many people are doing so. An entire industry is rising around Kindle publishing. This inevitably raises some issues that might well be discussed in reviewing Phillips’ *The Song Is You: A Novel* in the May posting of *Interface*, and I promise to do so.

Note

To see the notes which I downloaded from the Kindle while writing this review, see *MyClippings.txt*

End Notes:

[1] The Kindle has been disruptive for Amazon.Com in that its sales are given credit for an incredible 18% jump in revenues during the first quarter of this year. See: David Neal, “Kindle ignites big sales gain at Amazon” Online retail giant has seen revenues climb by 18 per cent Vunet, http://www.vnunet.com/vnunet/news/2241064/amazon-posts-sales-gains This gain might well be compared to Microsoft’s revenues in the same period, the first quarterly decline in its history. See: ASHLEE VANCE, “Microsoft Profit Falls for First Time in 23 Years” The New York Times, April 23, 2009 at:


[4] This balance may be shifting; Kindle ads suddenly seem to be everywhere.

[5] See it at: http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks03/0300011h.html#part37

[6] For the wide range of confusion on these, see some of the sources found at:
http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&client=firefox-a&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&hs=Bcy&ei=rr_sSfyXNJ-atAPhpkXsAQ&sa=X&oi=spell&resnum=0&ct=result&cd=1&q=financial+derivatives&spell=1 At the poles of the discussion, start with Thomas F. Siems,” 10 Myths About Financial Derivatives” at the Cato Institute: http://www.cato.org/pubs/pas/pa-283.html an impassioned plea for hands-off policies which permit unregulated investments in derivatives, then move to Linda Davies “Gambling on Derivatives. Hedging Risk or Courting Disaster?” at http://projects.exeter.ac.uk/RDavies/arian/scandals/derivatives.html which leads off with a quotation by Warren Buffet: “We view them as time bombs both for the parties that deal in them and the economic system … In our view … derivatives are financial weapons of mass destruction, carrying dangers that, while now latent, are potentially lethal.”
[7] I have added the Kindle clippings files for both books to the end of this review so that the reader may see for him–or herself what such a process might look like. It is clear that I downloaded way too much text, but printing it out and reviewing it before writing was an immense help to focusing upon those parts I wished to discuss in detail.


[9] To its credit Amazon.com includes at its Kindle WWW site both positive and negative reviews of Kindle and Kindle2. Many of the negative ones are by users who preferred the first iteration to the second, but there are also seriously disgruntled users who feel that they have been victims of production faults that should have been corrected as well as of design flaws. See: http://www.amazon.com/Kindle-Amazons-Wireless-Reading-Generation/product-reviews/B00154JDAI/ref= dp_top_cm_cr_acr_txt?ie=UTF8&showViewpoints=1

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2 THOUGHTS ON “TO GEORGE ORWELL: IT’S THE KINDLE BABY, IT’S THE KINDLE!”

Editor
on May 1, 2009 at 3:19 PM said:

Poster Name: Jeffrey Barlow
Message: It is odd to be commenting on my own piece, but it enables me to draw readers’ attention to a just-announced new version of the Kindle, the DX, which may better meet their needs. The new one is larger so as to permit a better format for journals, periodicals such as news magazines, and text books. See an explanation of it at: http://www.amazon.com/Kindle-DX-Amazons-Wireless-Generation/dp/B0015TCML0/ref=amb_link_84256931_1?pf_rd_m=ATVPDKIKX0DER&pf_rd_s=special-offers-3&pf_rd_r=0DW66QYDT96VHEN82YCY&pf_rd_t=201&pf_rd_p=476069551&pf_rd_i=B00154JDAI

Jeffrey Barlow

cork board ideas
on February 5, 2014 at 2:00 PM said:

There’s certainly a lot to learn about this topic. I love all of the points you have made.