Conservatism in an Innovative Field.

Children’s Digital Books in Sweden

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Children’s literature is often described as edgy, innovative, creative and experimental. The same can be said for digital literature – it is new, investigative, pioneering and breaking boundaries. Thus, a possible conclusion would be that children’s digital literature should be in the forefront of creativity and experimentally testing opportunities. This case study of children’s books in Sweden instead shows that digital publishing to a large extent is reproductions of print books. The paper argues that the results can be explained by long-time structures in publishing of print books for children.

In order to map digital book publishing for children a case study was performed. The initial project was a full-scale study of all digital book publishing but as it turned out that available statistics and facts were sketchy at best. Instead a test case study was done in order to understand the basic nature of digital book publishing for children but also to provide enough knowledge for a later larger study.

The study was performed by gathering data from a number of sources: Bokinfo, the database for books on sale including e-books; online public library catalogues; Adlibris and Bokus, the national internet booksellers, audio and e-book streaming services (Storytel, Nextra and BookBeat); facilitators of apps as well as websites of five major Swedish children’s book publishers. The study was narrowed down to cover digital children’s books published in Swedish and focused on the years 2015–2018. Digital books in the study was defined as e-books, audiobooks in mp3-format, book apps, e-picture books in Epub3-format, and enhanced e-books.

Children’s books in Sweden has ever since the Second World War had a strong position. The publishing has been extensive and different publishers and authors have been able to produce a large number of books, internationally sold and nationally appreciated. Due to the elevated position of children’s publishing it has become a rich, constantly developing literature that has attracted many authors and illustrators [1–3]. Reliable statistics from the last 25 years gathered by the Swedish Children’s Book Institute have shown a continuing rise in the number of published print books for children and Young Adult and the number of titles has more than doubled from the late 1990s with 2 532 children’s books in print published in 2017 [4].

There are three principal forms of digital books for children: e-books including variations such as Epub3-format and enhanced e-books, audiobooks in mp3-format and apps. The three publication forms were mapped individually as well as overlapping. The first part included testing of different databases and their reliability. The online data retail system Bokinfo – which should be the most comprehensible – had only a small part of the accessible digital books. Publishers instead use different digital mediators such as Axiell Media and Publit. The two major internet bookstores – Adlibris
and Bokus – offered almost 6,300 titles and audiobooks 2,600 titles for children. While these numbers are still low in comparison with print publishing it is interesting to note that the production in 2018 was not that far behind the print production.

In order to track children’s book apps searches were made on different platforms and the conclusion is that although there is no definite figure the number is low. The searches gave a list of under 50 book apps for children in Swedish.

The number of audiobooks in mp3 format for streaming has already been accounted for. Two well-established streaming services – Storytel and Nextory – and another two newcomers – BookBeat and Bokus Play – together offer a variety audiobooks and e-books for children although most are the same as the sales through the internet bookstores.

The preliminary results of the study points towards severe gaps in the statistics of children’s digital books and digital publishing in general. A second set of results of the study is that despite the lack of exact statistics observations can be made on the nature of the digital children’s book market. It showed clearly that digital books for children are published by traditional publishers, it is all print-first and there is little in terms of enhanced e-books or uses of the technological capacity in digital publishing.

The results of this study showed a print-based publishing structure of digital books. I argue that this contradiction can be explained by five factors: publishing as a business, copyright, production, authors and audience.

Firstly, publishing as a business explains how children’s book publishing has its own narrative of aims and ideals. Many children’s book publishers will for example have strong ideals and ideas on the value of educating but also on the need for creativity and artistry. The publishing houses have great know-how in children’s literature that has little use for expensive technological developments. Previous tests of new technology have also proven to be costly, difficult and even hazardous.

The publishing system for print and digital is also a result of copyright. Almost all children’s books that are of interest are still in copyright which has become more and more of a business in Sweden [5]. When content has become the number one asset in digitally produced material children’s books are increasing in importance. One could argue that copyright is not a hinder to develop the already published work into a different medium but in the cases of books to book-like versions it has been.

A third element effecting children’s digital book publishing are production aspects and particularly technology and costs. Developing new kinds of digital books is, to put it mildly, extremely expensive and generally regarded as perilous. The copyright owners – authors and publishers – generally have small incentives for developing more advanced digital products than e-book and audiobook.

This is linked to the author position and most children’s books authors regard themselves as artists – text writers and illustrators – of books rather than of digital content. While many are willing to transform their content to a digital file few are interested in developing new kinds of hypertexts, multimodal literature or interactive books. This means that established authors and illustrators focus on print rather than on apps or digital publishing.

The fifth perspective on digital books for children is the audience. While the primary audience are children there is a secondary audience of parents, schools, and libraries.
Heated debates over digital and paper reading has visualized how precarious digital books for children are and there is no consensus on the pros or cons of reading books digitally [6]. The primary audience of children are indeed digital first, however, the secondary audience of parents, teachers, schools and libraries are more reluctant towards moving reading to digital platforms. Instead there is a strong argument that learning to read should be done via paper. A simplistic division between digital children and paper parents is not accurate. There is a complex relationship between children and adults involved in their book choice and reading development.

The study showed that children’s digital book publishing in Sweden is a print-based but there are a few examples of companies and ventures challenging the backlist and print-first dominance. There have been discussions on digital will create disintermediation and make publishers redundant [7] but so far there it two separate circuits; one serving traditional book-like digital publishing and one for digital-only online publishing. The fact that there are at least two separate circuits begs many questions of social and aesthetic hierarchies, the ontological status of online publishing and the interactions between these circuits.

A barrier breaker is technology-focused companies such as the streaming service company Storytel. Initially it was a subscription service distributing other publishers’ books but in recent years it has also become publisher of original literature. They have produced Storytel originals for children where the audio is the primary format, followed by an e-book version and sometimes later in print. While there is no doubt that literature for children is affected by digital change on a textual level as well as when it comes to distribution, communication, socializing and reading. Margret Mackey has in several articles pointed to the fact that the difference between reading a book, seeing the film or hanging out in a community is not that great if you are a child or adolescent [8, 9].

This paper has focused on a small part of the larger context of digital publishing and gives a hint to the slow process of digital change in a 500-year-old print based industry.

1 References

