

Book Pirates: Tethered Technologies and their Domestication

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Abstract

This work is part of a larger study on the effects of ebooks in small language markets. The results presented here are a study of more sophisticated technology users and an attempt to capture: (1) their domestication of ebook readers and surrounding technologies, and (2) their attitudes towards their tethered ebook applications. The goal is to better understand the sophisticated users as representatives of the early adopters who shape wider social technology adoption, interpretation and understanding.

Keywords

piracy; ebooks; ebook readers; domestication; tethered technology

Introduction

In 561 AD, the first copyright dispute was settled in a battle near Benbulbin. Thousands of men lay dead in the field when the abbot Colmcille emerged as victor and claimed the right to his copy of the abbot Finian's manuscript. This conflict arose when Colmcille secretly copied the book when he was a guest at Finian's abbey. The latter claimed ownership in the copy and the dispute was taken to be settled by Diarmuid Uí Néill, high king of Ireland, whose judgment was: "To every cow its calf and to every book its copy." Colmcille, not satisfied with this decision, brought his troops to battle against the high king and emerged victorious from the field (Corrigan, 2007).

Bloody battles for the right to copy are exceptions to the norm, the goal of this paper is to understand the performances of resistance towards the experience of copy limitations in ebook technologies.

While most of history of the right to copy has been much less bloody technological developments, such as the printing press, and the introduction of copyright law (Statute of Anne 1710) have ensured that the discussion of rights and limitations has never died down (Johns, 2009). In recent decades, with the developments in digitalization, personal computing and Internet access, the copyright discussion has grown and widened to include ever-larger circles of interested parties. The debate on file sharing is intimately connected with our technical ability to copy and share.

Technical measures, Digital Rights Management (DRM), have been developed order to maintain control over the ability to copy. On the one hand DRM, in relation to copyrightable material, is a technical measure implemented to ensure adherence to legally established rights. The reader who buys a book does not acquire unlimited legal rights to make copies of the book. Therefore, adding DRM to ebooks ensures that users cannot use technology to go beyond their legally established rights. However, DRM can also restrict users from using their ebooks in ways that are both socially and legally acceptable if we were dealing with analogue books.

Thus, ebooks bought via Amazon can only be read on their Kindle ebook reader, they cannot easily be lent to others and they cannot be resold. These limitations are impractical to implement on analogue books. However, the implementation of DRM with the limitation of certain practices is redefining the nature of the book, and in extension the whole ecology of reading. Technology is re-shaping, and maybe regulating (Baym, 2010; Winner, 1985), an established social practice. The role of technology as regulator has naturally been problematized earlier (Winner, 1985; Latour, 1992; Norman, 1990).

As the digital delivery of software, films and music has been more widespread than books it is only natural that the DRM discussion is more established in relation to these products. With the growth of

the ebook market a level of discussion on the use of DRM has grown, however, there is a marked difference in the tone in these discussions. Signs of this are visible, inter alia, by quality publications arguing for the right to remove DRM, the users openness about their practices and the low level of legal action against ebook file sharing.

Theoretical Framework

While the earliest history of ebooks is much earlier, the use of devices as ebook readers began in earnest in the 1990s. The Sony Data Discman was released in 1992 and Apple launched its Newton personal digital assistant in 1993. Continued development resulted in probably the device most dedicated to the task of reading with the Rocket ebook reader, launched by NuvoMedia in 1998. While these early devices were far from mass-market successes they did have a reasonably dedicated following.

These early adopter should be important to the “domestication” (Haddon, 2003) of the ebook reader. Haddon suggests that people generally adopt new and exciting technology through a process of domestication, quickly taming what is strange and wild. The idea is that the exotic technology entails a dual process, partly a normalization of the technology and the adaption of everyday interaction. Through this process the widespread understanding of what technology is, and how it should be understood, is subtly changed.

Technological improvements have enabled the development of more practical ebook devices and market forces have lowered the costs to the consumer. These forces have made the ebook reader a commonplace device today.

The increased customer base and the use of DRM have created an interesting practice among users – the use of software to remove DRM limitations from what many consider to be “their” books. The latter may be seen as a reaction to the hobbled technology, or what Zittrain (2008) refers to as tethered appliances. These are devices, which are closed off to amateur tweaking and modification, available only to the manufacturer. While Zittrain mainly focuses on product development, the use of DRM in books limits new use practices with this technology.

Goals

In order to better understand the sophisticated ebook user, this study explores their technology use practices including their information collection and dissemination, their acquisition and consumption of ebooks and any technology adaptations they undertake. Additionally this work also aims to understand sophisticated users’ attitudes towards tethered ebook applications and the ways they adapt their usage to the inherent limitations. The overall goal is to better understand the sophisticated users as representatives of the early adopters who shape wider social technology adoption, interpretation and understanding. The empirical data in this work is based on media reports, mining discussion forums and interviews with sophisticated users. .

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