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Evolution of the E-book: When Is a Book Not a Book?

Online, the definition of a "book" grows to include blogs, research papers, and many other forms of writing

By [Mathew Ingram](#)

The line between what we call a "book" and something that's just a really long chunk of published text—what you might call the "not quite a book" category—continues to blur in the electronic publishing world. In one of the latest examples, Borders ([BGP](#)) has [joined forces with a service called Bookbrewer](#) to provide a simple service that allows bloggers or anyone else with an idea to publish what is effectively an e-book and get it distributed through all the major e-book platforms. In a similar move, Amazon ([AMZN](#)) this week launched its [Kindle Singles program](#), which is also designed for publishing less-than-book-length writing online.

The Bookbrewer service allows writers to upload their content—which can be any length—set their own suggested price (within the boundaries set by such e-book retailers as Amazon, Apple ([AAPL](#)), and Borders itself), then publish an e-book in the open ePub format that can be downloaded for the iPad, the Kindle, the Kobo, or any other e-reader. The service has two tiers. One costs \$89.99 and gives authors an ISBN, the universal book-tracking number used in the publishing industry. The advanced, \$199.99 package also gives authors a master ePub file they can share or upload wherever they wish.

Amazon says that its Kindle Singles, which was [launched earlier this week](#), is designed for pieces between 10,000 and 30,000 words—or between 30 and 90 printed pages (about twice the length of an article in *The New Yorker* or several chapters of a book). The company said it's looking for submissions from outside the traditional publishing industry, including from "—serious writers, thinkers, scientists, business leaders, historians, politicians, and publishers." It's not clear what the Singles will cost or how much of that revenue will make its way to the author.

GUTENBERG REVOLUTION 2.0

When introduction of the iPad was first rumored, I suggested the [tablet could become a platform](#) for authors of all kinds to find a larger market for their works—not just authors of traditional books (many of whom love the e-book revolution [for a variety of reasons](#)), but also bloggers and other thinkers with interesting ideas, academics with valuable research papers, or anyone with something he or she might feel deserves a larger audience. In some ways, it's like the early days of the Gutenberg revolution, when authors published short manuscripts and "chapbooks," and everything in between.

The advent of tablets and e-bookstores dramatically lowers the barrier to entry for these kinds of writers, who would previously have had to find an agent and a publisher willing to take them on (or self-publish via the Web or a blog) and would have had to pay them a handsome share of any revenue as well. Now, through services such as Bookbrewer and Kindle Singles, they can reach what is potentially a much larger audience—and maybe even make some money. Amazon and other e-book publishers pay authors as much as 70 percent of the revenue their books generate. The e-book market as a whole continues to grow rapidly; the latest figures from the Association of American Publishers show

that sales climbed 172 percent in August.

As Om has pointed out before, the book as we know it is undergoing a [fundamental transformation](#), just as so many other forms of content are. People still read traditional printed books, and many will likely continue to do so—but even more interesting is how the definition of what a "book" is becomes so fluid online. So is the book dead? Yes. Long live the book.

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