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*Book Review:*

# Books on Screens: Players in the Swedish e-book market

*Books on Screens: Players in the Swedish e-Book markets, by Annika Bergström, Lars Höglund, Elena Maceviciute, Skans Kersi Nilsson, Birgitta Wallin, & Thomas D. Wilson (eds.), Nordicom (2017), 238 pages.*

*Books on Screens* is written by six researchers who have studied the players in the Swedish e-book market in the period from 2012 to 2016. Authors, publishers, vendors, libraries (public and academic), and readers are in quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews asked about their experiences, attitudes, and beliefs regarding e-books. In addition, the researchers present statistics on e-book use and sales in Sweden and in other countries. They also give accounts of the technology, of the spread of e-books in other countries, and of the players in the e-book market in Sweden and internationally. A chapter is also devoted to cultural policy and legal issues.

As remarked by the researchers, in USA, the e-book market has in a few years taken a 23% share of the total book market, and in UK, the share is 20 %. Despite a considerable growth, the share in Sweden is very low (about two percent), and the choice of theories in *Books on Screens* clearly indicates that the authors are eager to know why the Swedish e-book market is so small. The main theoretical contribution used in the project is Brian Winston's models and concepts in his book *Media Technology and Society* (1998). According to Winston, a new invention (such as the e-book) has to meet or create needs ("supervening social necessities") to succeed, but even if it potentially fills a social need, the invention will nevertheless be opposed by actors who fear that they will be negatively affected by the new technology ("the law of suppression of radical potential"). Competing social and economic interests will struggle and shape the use and the uptake – and ultimately the characteristics – of the new technology.

In addition to Winston, the Swedish researchers present Roger's diffusion theory, Davis' and Venkatesh' technology acceptance theory, Szulanski's stickiness theory, and Bourdieu's theory of struggle between actors in the cultural field. With a strong theoretical focus on diffusion, one could expect that the researchers would try to examine and explain the reason for the slow Swedish e-book diffusion with reference to negative attitudes and low interest among readers. They do not.

Publishers, however, do. In one of the project's surveys, a vast majority of publishers opine that readers' preference for printed books is the most important barrier to the development of the e-book market. A lack of e-book interest on the part of readers is also asserted by publishers in the qualitative interviews. This claim is rejected by the researchers. In the concluding remarks in the book, the authors claim, "the major publishers blame their lack of commitment to the e-book on the lack of demand from readers, but this argument falls when one considers the evidences."

The researchers point to USA, where the publishers, after a legal decision, re-established the agency-pricing model, which gave them the right to set the prices on e-books. A rise in prices on Amazon on e-books from leading publishers lead to a drop in sales of e-books from these publishers, but not for the total sale of e-books. On the contrary. It paved way for small publishers and independent (self-publishing) authors, and Amazon's e-book sales increased. This, for the researchers, shows that, at least in the US (and UK), there is a demand for e-books among readers, and they indirectly presume a similar demand in Sweden.

In showing a demand for e-books, the researchers could just as well have mentioned Amazon's initial introduction of e-books and the Kindle reader in 2007. For years, the e-book business in USA had been struggling with low sales, but due to their quality reading device (the Kindle), easy access, a wide range of titles, a huge customer base, and low prices, Amazon instantly created a market for e-books, resulting in rapidly increased sales, as well as possibilities for small publishers and independent authors.

The Amazon story clearly shows that e-books have met a latent consumer need or "supervening social necessities". The findings in *Books on Screens* also show that there is a general fear of Amazon in all parts of the dominant publishing industry in Sweden, and that most publishers' answer to the e-book challenge has been resistance. The authors of *Books on Screens* asserts that the major Swedish publishers, with their high-price policy and lack of promotion, have shown little interest in creating a market for e-books. Thus, the researchers "ascribe to the publishers the responsibility for the suppression of the radical potential of e-books", or as they say in the conclusion, "it seems that Winston's law of the suppression of radical potential is being invoked by the established publishing business, in order to maintain the profit levels they obtain from the printed books".

This conclusion is hardly surprising, as publishers' resistance to e-books have been observed in many countries, including USA and UK. Rather than being a conclusion, the researchers could have used the publishers' attitudes and suppressing behavior as a starting point (or at least an easily verifiable hypothesis) and then have examined the background and reasons for their attitudes and behavior. Taken the vertical integration of the book chain and the dominant position of publishers in the Swedish book business, such an enquiry would probably have deepened the understanding of the processes going on in the literary field after the introduction of the disruptive technologies of e-books and downloadable audiobooks. In *Books on Screens*, the researchers present an abundance of information and a wealth of findings on the e-book situation, many of which shed light on the attitudes and actions of the different players in the literary field, including the publishers.

In their analysis of the (lack of) e-book penetration, the researchers primarily – and instructively – use the concepts from Winston's theory of technological development and dissemination, but they also mention Bourdieu's theory of struggle between within cultural fields. The project would probably have benefitted from a more active use of Bourdieu's field theory, for instance in the way John Thompson does in *Books in the Digital Age* (2005). In the book, Thompson uses Bourdieu's concepts of social fields and capital forms as his theoretical basis for his analysis of the developments in the book industry in USA and UK. With a slight adjustment of his model, one can say that the position of a publishing firm within the publishing field is determined by the volume and composition of a firm's resources. These resources are the firm's *financial capital* (financial situation and earning ability), its *human capital* (competence of the employees), its *symbolic capital* (the publishing firm's recognition), and its *intellectual capital* (copyright portfolio).

Based on this model one can analyze the e-book market and struggles within the publishing field. For the dominant publishers, a developing e-book industry might change the volume and composition of the publishers'

recourses and potentially lower their position in the field. *Economically* few publishers have been interested in investing heavily in e-books, especially since less profitable e-books might draw the economy out of printed books. Further, *employees* in publishing firms are generally interested in culture; they have their competence in literature and the handling of traditional publishing chains, and they have little interest in being challenged by new actors in the field. To keep their *symbolic status*, it may also be profitable for traditional publishers to maintain the view that printed books have a higher cultural status than e-books.

Moreover, one of the publishing firm's most valuable assets is their right to exploit book content. *Control over copyrights* gives publishers power in relation to authors, readers, booksellers, and new actors who want to exploit the contents of books. A successful and diverse e-book market will probably diminish the traditional publishers control over rights.

The structure of the publishing field will vary from country to country, and the struggle between players will take different forms and follow different paths. In USA and UK, the advent of Amazon, first as a major online bookstore, and later as an e-book vendor, shook the American and British publishing industries and have changed all the players' positions in the field. Looking to Sweden and considering all the possible disturbances in the Swedish field of publishing, it makes very good sense for the major publishing firms to use their current position in the field (their high symbolic capital, their control over copyrights, and their vertical control over the publishing chain) to control the development of the e-book business. Whether their strategy will pay off in the end is of course an open question.

In *Books on Screens,* the researchers could have made more use of Bourdieu's theories in their analysis of the specifics of the struggle between agents in the Swedish publishing field. *Books on Screens* brings forth a wealth of empirical findings that could fruitfully have been analyzed in Thompson's schema, also in a way that could have explained many of the reported tensions between the many players in the book chain caused by recent developments. Overall, the *Books on Screens* project could have got more out of the empirical data, especially in the analytic phase.

In the chapter on readers and reading, the quantitative survey on e-book reading in Sweden is indeed informative. It shows that the share of Swedes who have read an e-book during the last 12 months had risen from 11% in 2013 to 18% in 2016, and that e-book reading increased with level of education, decreased with age, and was about the same for men and women in 2016. An interesting part of the interview presentation is also the (too) short descriptions of the e-book reading habits of five of the respondents (in the group of adults). In these case descriptions, the contextualization of the respondents reading give meaning to their attitudes and experiences.

The analysis of the rest of the qualitative interviews in the chapter, however, is more like a continuation of the statistical analysis, in which demographic variables are important. Many of the interviewees' answers on reading behaviors and attitudes are presented in the chapter, and the researchers try to describe attitudes and experiences of e-book reading in different age groups, which makes little sense given the great variety of reading habits and attitudes and the low number of respondents. In the group of young readers (19 to 29 years) there was eight respondents, six in the adult group (30 to 50 years), and 20 among those over 50 years of age (of whom 16 were in two group interviews among participants in reading circles)). These samples are far from being representative for theses age groups at a national level.

The researchers' analyses indicate that they are a bit too quantitatively oriented in their analyses of qualitative data. The researchers are preoccupied with attitudes towards and reasons for reading e-books, and the interviews of the players (not only the readers) bring many opinions and arguments for and against e-books. A more systematic qualitative analysis would probably have yielded a much deeper understanding of factors affecting attitudes and e-book use. In such an analysis, attitudes and reported reasons would have to be systematically identified, analyzed, and categorized, and in the case of reading, it seems reasonable to typify groups of factors, for instance cultural values, factors related to the acquisition of books and e-books, and

experiences of reading printed books and e-books on digital devices. Dimension could then be described within each group:

- Culture

  - Cultural values (related to printed books and tradition vs digital culture and innovation).
  - Habits of reading (printed books, digital formats)
  - Reading preferences (poetry, novels, genre books, non-fiction, academic)

- Acquiring of books/e-books
  - Accessibility (physical distance to bookstore or library vs online access to e-books)
  - Technological skills (high/low)
  - Interfaces (ease of finding, buying, downloading and opening e-books)
  - Prices (on e-books vs printed books, and prices on devices)

- Reading
  - Ergonomic and haptic factors (readability, navigation, feel in books vs devices)
  - Semiotic (pure text vs multimedia and multifunctionality, distractions)
  - Portability
  - Ease of use in different situations

This categorization is not complete, but done tentatively on basis of information given in *Books on Screens*. With the rich empirical data gathered in the project, more dimensions or factors could probably have been identified, and each factor been given a rich and explanatory description.

In addition, qualitative analyses would probably have given better questions to the quantitative part of the survey pertaining attitudes. In the presented survey, the respondents were asked about format preferences in different situations (printed books vs e-books) at a point in time (2013) when only 11% of the respondents had read an e-book the last year. Even if the "no opinion" shares of the answers are high (17% to 41%), it is not possible to meaningfully interpret the results when 89% of the respondents had not read an e-book the last year, and many respondents probably knew little about the technology.

In another part of the survey, the respondents should take standpoint to statements regarding printed books and e-books, but is it possible to disagree to this statement: "E-books can never replace the feeling of the pages in a printed book"? Respondents can obviously agree to this statement, and still prefer e-books to printed books. The researchers, however, uncritically interpret an agreement to the statement as a positive attitude towards printed books and a skepticism towards e-books. It would be like asking people if they agreed that "cars can never replace the feeling of the saddle on a horse", and then interpret an agreement to this statement as a preference for horses. A majority of readers, however, *was* probably sceptic to e-books in Sweden in 2013, but that is not a conclusion the researchers can draw from the answers to such questions. Preferably, the questions in the survey should have been formulated *after* a qualitative analysis of dimensions pertaining attitudes towards e-books.

Despite these shortcomings, *Books on Screens* does give valuable insights into developments in the Swedish publishing industry, not least into the special role of libraries in the spread of e-books in Sweden. The book documents how the introduction of e-books, despite its slow uptake, has challenged the book industry. It discusses important legal and political issues such as copyright and VAT, the players fear of international competition (Amazon), the success of audio-books, and the rise of subscription services such as Storytel.

Between the lines, one can almost feel that the authors expect that streaming (of audio books and e-books) is the disruptive technology that in the end will release the radical potential of e-books.

*Books on Screens* deserves to be read by the players in the Swedish book market.