

Read in a paperless world

e-books and e-zines, e-bookstores and iLibraries... yes, the digital era has transformed the way we read. **GEETA PADMANABHAN** tells us how

Sounds oxymoronic, but it has happened. Texas has announced the opening of the world's first "bookless library". Under project BiblioTech, the Bexar County-Texas public digital library will issue 100 e-readers on loan, let you browse, read and study on dozens of PCs. If you don't want to stir out in the Texas summer, you can access some 10,000 digital titles from home. In a county that has neither a bookstore nor a public library, digital books will reach 1.7m people.

Paperless iLibraries do exist — in academic sectors. University of Texas San Antonio (UTSA) has a bookless engineering college library. In Imperial College, London, over 98 per cent of journal collections are digital. Last year, the New York Public Library made 880,000 e-book loans. INDEST, a consortium of 38 institutions, offers subscribed online access to science/engineering/technology resources. Vidyanidhi (vidyanidhi.org.in) has archived over 50,000 Indian doctoral theses. Nalanda, IGNC, Indian Institute of Science - ETD, IIM-Kozhikode and Digital Library of India are all on this list.

Non-stop source

What about news? Local or global, the Internet is now our non-stop source. "When something happens, a passer-by/a participant takes photos, attaches comments and posts it instantly on his "wall", mails it off to his group," said publisher Badri Seshadri. "During student agitations, I got information that the media would never have carried." Anyone with a cellphone is now a producer, he pointed out. "I follow a bunch of journalists 24x7 on Twitter for news." All newspapers have e-editions, e-newspapers update news constantly, e-zines fill the gap between print and e-media. During Obama's acceptance speech, *The New York Times* ran the text



WHY PILE UP BOOKS? It's more convenient to store and read them all in an e-device such as a Kindle

and analysis together, online.

Hiring companies dig into Facebook, professionals log on to LinkedIn. You exchange, collate, analyse information in your online groups, make and read comments on-screen. After failing to find the Kindle version of *The Buddha and His Dhamma* by Ambedkar, "I discovered it on the Harvard University website," said Badri. "I copied the HTML version (edited by a scholar) into a single file. Using Caliber, a free software, I converted it into a Kindle file and mailed it to my Kindle account. It reached the account in Mobi format."

The sign-post is clear: reading is going digital. E-book sales are up, led by Amazon. They fill our e-readers, Kindle, smartphone apps. E-book seller Kobo has released AuraHD, a "high-definition" e-ink based device with a 17.2cm screen and 265-pixel-

.....
Kobo AuraHD is the closest experience to print-on-paper; the device's Freescale processor makes it the fastest at turning pages
.....

per-inch (ppi) resolution. (Kindle Paperwhite offers 212ppi on its 6-inch screen.) Kobo AuraHD is "the closest experience to print-on-paper, the device's Freescale processor makes it the fastest, at turning pages." The HD could prove popular with people who want to buy children's books and those with illustrations. Apple sells digital books on iBookstore. Amazon bought Goodreads, a book discovery and recommendation website. Readersfirst.org works to create good reader experience across all platforms and technologies.

Widens access

Digital reading material can be "tailored" — with large print, audio and translation. Downloading a book is immediate and mostly free. The e-format widens access, allows multiple-users, and protects valuable content from fires and attacks. Tablets like iPads are comfortable to read with, agrees Badri, though he finds reading on computer screens disconcerting. "Far too many distractions — mail, websites and social network," he said. "The content has to be short to hold attention. On the websites, the format, the position in which I read, everything is different." He reads English books on Kindle. "It's lightweight; Kindle editions are cheaper than printed

versions in India. A Kindle app syncs across iPhones, Android and computers." As for newspapers, reading *Slate* or *NYT* online is a much better option, even when you pay. No print, no junk.

Will physical books vanish? Suzanne Beecher, who runs an online book club, asked her thousands of readers: "Dear Reader, which do you prefer, a real book with pages you can dog-ear, or an e-reader?" Most said they preferred the dog-eared version. "There's something about holding a book in your hands and physically turning each page. My son, who is as much of a reader as I am, prefers books too," said one. "I love interesting book covers and reading all the information on the back and inside flaps. Not the same with an e-book," said another. Libraries have books that are important historical artefacts in themselves, many argued. Bibliophiles long for the smell of old paper, the history of the particular book they borrow. Moms still want to take toddlers to libraries to get their book fix. Publishers may want to limit the number of "loans" of an e-title, or the length of time e-access to a title will be permitted. While looking for a particular book in a library, haven't we discovered books on nearby shelves?

Bibliophile or technophile? Maybe the best of both worlds.