Conservatism in an Innovative Field.

Children's Digital Books in Sweden

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Abstract.
The study intention is to understand the nature of digital publishing for children in Sweden and showed, among other things, that digital publishing to a large extent is reproductions of print books. The paper argues that results of the case study can be explained by long-time structures in publishing of print books for children but also that there are barrier breakers.

In order to map digital book publishing for children data was gathered from a number of sources and covered digital children's books published in Swedish 2015–2018. The preliminary results of the study points towards severe gaps in the statistics of children's digital books and digital publishing in general. Despite the lack of exact statistics observations can be made on the nature of the digital children's book market in terms of publishing formats, development, publishers and distribution.

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. These five are linked but provide different perspectives and explanations.

Keywords: Children's book, E-books, Audiobooks.

1   Introduction

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 has been suggested in several studies of digital publishing for children, for example by Junko Yokota in an article on the traits in digital stories for children where it appears to be the natural evolution of children's literature [1]. 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 results of the case study can be explained by long-time structures in publishing of print books for children but also that there are barrier breakers.

1.1 Mapping Children's Digital Books

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 performed 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 full study requires not only a gathering of data but also interviews and contacts with all major producers of children's books, book distributors and digital publishing as there is no complete information on the extent of this production.

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, Nextory and BookBeat); facilitators of apps as well as websites of five major Swedish children's book publishers. Searches of web based digital literature for children in Swedish was also performed. The study was narrowed down to cover digital children's books published in Swedish and focused on the years 2015–2018 as there was little published before that time period.

Digital books in the study was eventually defined as e-books, audiobooks in mp3-format, book apps, e-picture books in Epub3-format, and enhanced e-books. It does not include games with a fiction-like narrative, games based on books, or literature published on open websites. The distinction between digital books and digital literature had to be defined to understand different literary contexts. Digital book is a term for a digitally published work and a closed unit that is distributed and borrowed or sold as a 'book'. Digital literature is a broader concept that both includes digital books and a wide variety of digital publishing of literature, for example literature on self-publishing sites such as Wattpad and the Swedish Poeter.se, fanfiction and on authors websites [2].

A legitimate objection is that object 'book' as a starting point will limit the study and that the results would have been different if the research had had a wider scope. Another objection is that it is problematic to use print-based ideas of literature to understand digital change. The reason for the limitations was that I wanted to understand what was accessible to children through retail, libraries, schools, streaming services and published by established producers of children's literature. These books are sanctioned by different institutions but they also will be the most visible, discoverable and widespread. The initial project's intention was to include all published literary works for children but apart from methodological difficulties in tracking literature published on open websites it is also clear that there is plenty of literature published *by* children and teenagers on many websites but it is uncommon with children's books published *for* children. This obviously requires a more in-depth discussion, but the methodological issues combined with a main focus on literature that has a 'published' status and circulation warrants the chosen limitations.

1.2 Children's Book Publishing in Sweden

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. The status of Swedish children's book publishing goes back to what is generally described as the breakthrough of children's book publishing in 1945 and the following years termed 'the golden age of children's literature'. The foundation of a new publishing house for children's literature, Rabén & Sjögren in 1942, and three influential authors – Astrid Lindgren, Lennart Hellsing and Tove Jansson – are still the backbone in the story of children's literature in the country. Due to the elevated position of children's publishing it has become a rich, constantly developing literature that has attracted many authors and illustrators [3–5]. The international sales and translations of Swedish children's literature has been successful and together with the 21st century Nordic Noir crime fiction they stand for most of the international rights sales. A national as well as an international strong market have provided a solid base for further and increasing publications leading up 2017 figure of 2 532 published children's print books.

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 in all the number of titles has more than doubled from the late 1990s. This rise continues and only between 2016 and 2017 the number of published titles for children increased by five per cent. The 2 532 children's books in print can be compared with approximately 2 036 books of adult fiction or 9 344 books for adults in Swedish the same year [6, 7].

Sweden has high scores in many digital charts measuring internet saturation, readiness to embrace new technology and high degree of innovation, but despite this interest in new technology digital publishing and sales has been a slow development [8]. Only after 2015 there has been any major production of e-books and even if the production has grown the sales of single e-books is almost non-existent. Instead the market has been made up by library loans (for free) and in more recent years subscription streaming services. The digital books for children follow the same pattern as other digital publishing and sales. The first e-book for children was published in Sweden already in 2000, however most digital publishing has been produced after 2014.

2 Counting Children's Digital Books

The study gathered information on digital books for children, formats, distributors and producers as there is no official statistics encompassing digital publications. The first part of the study focused on gathering information from different sources on published titles, accessible titles and publication year. A first set of information was collected early 2018 and a second set of searches was performed in early 2019.

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 the least dependable figures that included only a small part of accessible e-books and audiobooks. Publishers instead use different digital mediators such as Axiell Media and Publit. The national library system for public libraries had a wider array of 3 631 e-books and another 808 streamed audio books in early 2019. However, this covers only the digital books that the libraries have chosen to offer not the full range and their statistics was not useful either.

The two major internet bookstores – Adlibris and Bokus – showed almost identical figures which indicates that these are almost all books accessible for sale in early 2019. Whilst the internet bookstores offered the most comprehensive information it is still not complete. There are titles identified on the streaming services that could not be accessed in any other system, for example Epub3 picture books such as Pija Lindenbaum's *Bridget and the Moose Brothers* [*Gittan och älgbrorsorna,* 2003]. Another factor that one should bear in mind is that there will be digital books published earlier that are no longer for sale. The number of e-books on offer in Adlibris and Bokus for children in February 2019 were almost 6 300 titles and audiobooks 2 600 titles. 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 on a website for children's app reviews, Pappas appar [Daddy's apps]. Surftablets and apps are an integrated part of many young children's lives in Sweden and the access for children to surf tablets is high. Among children under one year of age half have this access in their home and among children 5–8 years old 80% of all children have access to a surf tablet and many also have their own [9]. Both the youngest children and older ones use apps regularly and among children 6–7 years old 86% use a surftablet every week [8].

Tracking the number of apps, identifying them as books rather than games was far more difficult but one conclusion that could be drawn 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 ISBN central at the Royal Library recommends that book apps should have an ISBN but not one single app for children found in the study used the book tracking code. There were surprisingly few apps that included a literary text and most of these had been produced in the early 2010s and by now in disuse. The publishers seem to think it too expensive and requiring too much knowledge. Instead the apps found were mostly games based on literary characters such as Astrid Lindgren's Pippi Longstocking or Sven Nordqvist's Findus and Pettson.

The book apps were almost all classics and produced by outside companies and not the original publisher, for example Anna-Clara Tidholm's *Knock, knock, knock!* [*Knacka på!*, 1992] and *Freddy Fixer builds a car* [*Mulle Meck bygger en bil*, 1993] by Jens Ahlbom and Georg Johansson. Exceptions to this pattern are classics produced by organizations such as an app based on the artist Ivar Arosenius and his classic picture

book "The Cat's Journey" [*Kattresan*, 1909] which is created by the archive managing the estate. All in all, though, the book apps for children in Sweden are stunningly few.

The number of audiobooks in mp3 format for streaming has already been accounted for above. The success of pay-per-month streaming services for audiobooks and to some extent e-books in Sweden after 2015 have rapidly changed the business model for digital book production. 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. On the whole most audiobooks are chapter books for the age 9–12 but there are great successes in audio also for teenagers as well as very young children, for example Carl- Johan Forssén Ehrlin's picturebook *The Rabbitt Who Wants to Fall Asleep* (2015).

A noteworthy aspect of audiobooks for children is how quickly the streaming services has propelled a reproduction of audiobook backlist and a fast expansion of e-books as well. One publisher in particular stands out that is the Danish company Saga Egmont producing large quantities of e-books and audiobooks for the Swedish market. In 2018 alone they published 208 audiobooks and 634 e-books. There is no other Swedish publisher that comes near this figure and Egmont published under several imprints (Egmont Publishing, Saga Egmont and so on) but together they dominate digital publishing for children. Almost half of all the e-books published in 2018 came from one of the Egmont brands and in terms of audio they also dominate as they publish more than double the number of titles than their next competitor, Bonnier Audio. Egmont's audiobook and e-book production are all backlist and most has been published previously by other publishing houses. Egmont thus disrupts the traditional business model for publishing in which the rights to publish has remained with the original producer. As a consequence, the large publishers have had to readjust their digital production strategies particularly in terms of speed, backlist and fussing over authors who might be attractive to other publishers.

3   Gaps and Structures in the Digital Children's Book Market

The preliminary results of the study points towards severe gaps in the statistics of children's digital books and digital publishing in general. This in turn affected the set-up of this test project as its aim became to identify possible sources of information but also where gaps and problems in the information was visible. In order to map the nature of the field a full-scale multi-method study has to be performed and these will require not only multiple statistical sources that are combined and compared but also interviews with key companies and people. It will also have to be a wider study including different open websites for digital literature, such as Wattpad, Poeter.se and fan fiction sites with a focus on books that are published for children to read.

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. Instead the examples of more advanced use of digital technology for children tend to be exceptions and often produced by authors in outside sources and not part of any book circulation such as bookstores, libraries or schools. The one exception is books for learning but as these are rarely for private consumption or a part of the general market these were not a part of the study. It would probably be useful to compare digital learning material with the digital publishing for the general market in terms of exchange, reading habits and parents mixing of the different arenas. Learning is partly turning into a consumer market where publishers like Stabenfeldt target parents wanting their children to develop cognitive and reading skills by offering digital and print content combined.

Notably most of the digital books for children is print-first and almost always a blueprint copy of the original. In the case of audio books obviously there was sound and voice added which does change the character and experience of 'reading' but still follows the original work closely and without other additions. Furthermore, there is simultaneous production of new titles in digital formats of most books for children 9–12 and 13+ and some e-picturebooks although it is clear that the large children's book publishers do not focus on this publishing. For example, the catalogue of the largest publisher, Rabén & Sjögren, for autumn 2018 does not include one single mention of an e-book or audiobook version [10]. All titles have a description of the print publishing format but there is no indication to other versions despite that almost all books exist in en e-book version and several also as audiobook.

Most of the production of e-books and even to some extent audiobooks are backlist titles. It is not possible to track the original publishing date of the titles but it should be noted that in children's book publishing in general backlist and classics are not only a staple goods but an essential part of the business in all the established publishing houses for children's books. Bestseller lists always include older titles, for example the top 20 most sold books for children in 2018 included 5 titles published before 2016 [11]. In digital book publishing the backlist is even more important and most titles published are new productions of already published works. In many cases these are titles published pre-2000 and since long out of print. It is easily accessible titles, cheap to publish and where the authors are simply happy to have them in circulation again. All in all, it means that the digital book publishing for children in many ways is not only traditional in terms of print-focused but also made up of old material.

3.1 The Structure of Children's Digital Books Publishing

Katherine Hayles has argued in *Between page and s*creen (2012) that literature always carries genres and convention when it moves between media:

> When literature leaps from one medium to another – from orality to writing, from manuscript codex to printed book, from mechanically generated print to electronic textuality

> – it does not leave behind the accumulated knowledge embedded in genres, poetic conventions, narrative structures, figurative tropes, and so forth. Rather, this knowledge is carried forward into the new medium, typically by trying to replicate the earlier medium's effects within the medium's specificities. [12]

Although I agree with her argument, the underlying basis of this analysis is that literature does change to a large extent when it moves between media, but this study has shown that in the majority of the digital books for children there is very little change. It could even be argued that the publishers strive to make the changes as invisible as possible and to disguise the digital as print. While programs like Storyspace and app technique have affected the digital first and digital only it has had no or little impact on the majority of digital publishing for children.

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. These five are linked but provide different perspectives and explanations.

Firstly, publishing as a business explains the backstory to children's book publishing with its own narrative of their aim 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. Swedish children's book publishing has long been based in print and the majority of titles are produced by a small group of publishers. The two major publishers of children's books, Bonnier Carlsen and Rabén & Sjögren, are parts of larger corporate structures but there are also a number of mid-sized and small well-established children's book publishers. Jointly these are all companies firmly based in print publishing and while they might produce e-books and occasional audiobooks they have no interest in developing digital narratives or testing new technologies. These companies 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 British publisher Dorling Kindersley almost went bankrupt in the 1990s trying to be the first publisher in digital for children and many Swedish companies testing CD-ROMs, apps and enhanced e-books have returned to what they know best. New ventures do exist but mostly these also has print publications as their principle aim.

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 [13]. The copyright is owned by the author and depending on contract partly or fully shared with the publisher. There is nothing untoward in this system but it makes children's book content expensive. On the other hand, those companies that has made use of children's books and characters have seen the advantages. Many children's books have been part of a transmediation into film, tv, puzzles, board games and educational material. Examples are the already mentioned Pippi Longstocking and others such as Gösta Knutsson's *Pelle No-Tail* [*Pelle Svanslös*] and recent years enormous success of Martin Widmarck's series about the children detectives Lasse and Maja. Copyright in these cases seem to have not been an obstacle, but on the other hand the mediations have been to completely other media and nothing resembling the original books. Many children's stories are well-established brands, market tested, with a

great pre-set narrative. 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 there is a different situation when the transfer is from book to a book-like product.

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. While the technology is available the costs are high and the prospective incomes low. The copyright owners – authors and publishers – generally have small incentives for developing more advanced digital products than e-book and audiobook. The business model has so far only been based on print and while that is changing with the streaming services it has not changed the literature that is distributed through these channels. The fear of making bad judgments when it comes to new technology also makes publishers reluctant towards anything too technologically advanced.

This is linked to the author position as copyright owners. 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. This is evidently their prerogative as artists and possibly also where their strongest skills, experience and knowledge lies. It might be a new generation of authors and illustrators or possibly a different group altogether that embrace digital literature and its technological potential.

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 in many countries 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 [14]. The primary audience of children are indeed digital first and as was shown in the introduction to this article most young children in Sweden have access to and are used to digital tools. 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 often repeated that learning to read should be done via paper. However, 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 choices, reading situations and ideas of how reading can and will develop positively. In an article on digital reading Adriaan van der Weel observes that there is a continuing preference for paper books also with young children when the debate is on print versus digital. The results will however be different if an analysis addresses reading as a whole [15]. There is a love for paper books as well as digital reading devices among adults as well as children.

4   Market Disruptors & Barrier Breakers

A question looming in the background of this paper is whether or not e-books is a disruptive technology? Economist Richard J. Gilbert has argued that Amazon's aggressive e-book launch has shown the capacity to quickly change business models in the book market [16]. However, later development indicates that while things have changed it has been a slow process and the structure is still reliant on the established publishing system and the way the market has been organised for a long time.

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. A few of these were mentioned initially as they were not included in the study and that is particularly the case with digital-first and digital-only self-publishing on sites such as Wattpad, Poeter.se and Sockerdricka. There have been discussions on digital will create disintermediation and make publishers redundant [16] 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. These will clearly have to be addressed in detail in a larger study.

Barrier breakers are technology-focused companies working with augmented reality, hypertexts, electronic literature, artistic performative projects, multimodal and interactive. One example in the field is the recent success of 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 produce Storytel originals for children where the audio is the primary format, followed by an e-book version and sometimes later in print. The launch of Storytel Kids originals in 2017 included only 6 titles published in episodes but already in 2018 they produced 35 titles. When digital-first is the production mode it changes not only the text but also the manner of dissemination and the audience's habits. The success of Storytel is an example of technological company that breaks barriers in the book market in producing literature in small portions. Their way of publishing brings back the 19th century serial in combination with contemporary tv-series on streaming services.

Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin persuasive argument that *remediation* defines any media change is still valid: "we can identify a spectrum of different ways in which digital media remediate their predecessors, a spectrum depending on the degree of perceived competition or rivalry between new media and the old" [17]. I think there is a strong rivalry between print and digital books and that the e-book is the one barrier breaker that appear harmless to many publishers as it imitates the print version. However, the digital book has characteristics that differ from a print book. It is in constant flow and can be changed instantly. Speed is also an important feature in terms of production and access. A digital book is easily copied despite all attempts by producers to prevent it. On more positive note it can be shared on lists and forums. Shareability, the idea of literature as free from business models and temporal aspects are promoting change within the book market. Disruption of the traditional models forces publishers to change production modes. The actions, strategies and media usage of children's book

authors, publishers and other producers are always a part of the larger book market and many reflect overall changes. But it is not a mirror, children's literature in Sweden has for a long time had a special position within both general society as well as educational and cultural policies. Furthermore, in 2012 poor results in reading among children in the comparative PISA-report in combination with a government report that promoted a sharp target with improved reading among children [18]. This spurred efforts, money and focus on children's literature that cannot be compared with any similar development in adult literature.

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. Still the difference in terms of 'books' is slight in the sense that literature is part of a greater system of stories, reading and culture. Margret Mackey has in several articles pointed to the fact that the distinction between reading a book, seeing the film or hanging out in a community is not that great if you are a child or adolescent [19, 20]. While this paper has focused on a small part of the larger context of digital publishing it gives a hint to the slow process of digital change in a 500-year-old print based industry.

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