

Despite slow start, ebooks gain ground in Europe

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Visitors try out mobile devices to read books during the 63rd Frankfurt Book Fair in Frankfurt, western Germany, October 12, 2011. Electronic books, which have sparked excited chatter for several years in the publishing world, are now gaining momentum among European readers, despite a late start compared to the US, industry insiders say.

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The digital share of the book market in [European countries](#) still lags behind the United States but publishers at the [Frankfurt Book Fair](#) were upbeat about their recent uptake and future prospects.

Ebook [reading devices](#) only become available later in some European

countries and ebook prices in others have been too high to entice readers away from their traditional bound [rivals](#), they said.

Juergen Boos, the director of the five-day annual fair, has also suggested that a general attachment in Europe to the [physical presence](#) of the printed book and its value as a cultural object is holding the ebook back.

"It's not to do with the range, the ebooks are there... it's more a [social phenomenon](#)," he said referring to Germany, ahead of the fair's opening in this western German city.

Ebook sales in Germany have doubled this year but still only account for two percent of the overall book market, compared to 20 percent in the US, Gottfried Honnefelder, president of the German Booksellers' and Publishers' Association, told reporters here.

Britain, where Amazon launched its Kindle [ebook reader](#) in 2010, is further down the digital road, with consumer ebook sales making up about 13 percent of combined print and ebook sales in the first half of 2012, according to The Publishers Association.

"The penetration of ereading devices in the UK is very strong," its chief executive Richard Mollet told AFP adding that British consumers were already digitally savvy from widely used online banking and online shopping.

"Ecommerce has come to Britain in a big way. The British consumer seems to have an affinity to [digital technology](#) and devices," he said.

"It's not because they love the physical book less, it's just because they are able to embrace digital more," he added.

Academic books is one field in Germany to have embraced the ebook

earlier, driven by demands from libraries for titles to be digitised, and is not far behind the US market, an academic publisher said here.

"The US might be, say one year ahead, maybe two, I can't say exactly, but it's not like it's a bright day in the US and dark night on the continent of Europe," Karlheinz Hoefner, sales director of Oldenbourg Verlag said, referring to academic publishing.

The company, founded in 1858 and based in Munich and Berlin, has been producing ebooks for four years, he said, and "not just the odd title somewhere in the system but ebooks in rather critical mass."

But print academic books still roughly account for 80 percent of their titles, he said.

In the Netherlands, ebooks are also expected to double to three percent of the market in 2012, a trend predicted to continue next year, said Erik-Jan Bulthuis from distributing company cb.

"So I think the market share is going very fast at the moment," he said.

Language had played a part in ebook development compared to the US, with a potential market of only 20-25 million Dutch speakers globally, and 17,000 titles in Dutch currently available, he said.

One reason why ebooks have been more eagerly embraced in the US is that many Americans live in areas without a local book shop nearby, Kornelia Holzhausen, head of digital media at Germany's Piper Verlag publishers said.

Germany also has a policy of fixed prices for books, considering them to be a "cultural good", meaning ebooks could not be marketed as price aggressively as in Britain or the US, she said.

"Amazon does not have the possibility in the German market to use price as a tool which may be one of the reasons as well why the market is not exploding as fast," she said.

Ebooks are however about 20 to 30 percent cheaper than printed books in Germany, she said adding she expected the ebook share of the market to have jumped to five percent by the end of the year.

She said that while she did not believe ebooks would ever hold the complete [market](#), they were proving much more popular in some genres than others and would continue to generate revenue, meaning publishers had to embrace them.

"I think it's something that is here to stay," she said.

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