

Comparing electronic short books from the USA and the UK to South Africa

Can they be successful in the South African trade book sector?

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to investigate the electronic short books phenomenon from the USA and the UK which has spilled over to South Africa. By looking at the benefits these short books have for readers and authors, and the possible reasons for their success, the aim is to determine whether or not these books can be as successful a venture in South Africa as it has been elsewhere.

Design/methodology/approach – Information about electronic short books, or e-singles, is gathered from various sources, including press releases and sales results. Information is gathered to determine the receptiveness to electronic short books of the South African trade book reading market, the way South African publishers are presenting e-singles to the market and what the future for e-singles may be.

Findings – The findings of this paper make it clear that e-singles have found a gap in the market, providing various benefits to authors and readers, which may have contributed to their success. In South Africa, the success of e-singles faces unique obstacles, like a weaker reading culture and a poor awareness of e-books. Publishers need to make a bigger effort to become visible in the eyes of their readers and need to think about better distribution strategies.

Research limitations/implications – With comparisons, accuracy is dependent on information provided by organizations (on their Web sites).

Originality/value – This paper offers information about a new publishing trend – only a few months in South Africa. It offers a look into the state of the trade book industry in South Africa, how e-singles may function in it and what publishers of e-singles may do to ensure more success. It predicts the future of e-singles in South Africa based on its unique situation, pointing out what obstacles there may be to their uptake.

Keywords South Africa, e-singles, Electronic short books, Trade book sector

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The arrival of digital texts has made the world easier for writers. Before, the length of their works determined how it would be published, whether in a magazine or a book and they had to adapt their works for the various formats of publication. Now, if a writer has something to say, no matter what the length, it can be made available on the Internet, in an article, a blog or even a short digital book. In January 2011, Amazon launched Kindle Singles: they asked a variety of people, including scientists and politicians, to create short books for Kindle readers. A Kindle Single allows a writer to develop and

investigate a certain idea in a format longer than a magazine article but shorter than a traditional printed book.

These short books range between 5,000 and 30,000 words and, because they are published digitally, can be downloaded onto e-readers or smartphones, which tends to make them cheaper than a printed book. Kindle Singles have been very successful, with writers such as Ann Patchett, Stephen King and Jane Hirshfield writing for Amazon. Some Singles even reach Amazon's top seller list for all books sold on Amazon. The success has spurred others to also enter the short book market, following a similar business model to Amazon. Barnes and Noble's short book series is called Nook Snaps, for download onto the Nook e-reader, which launched in December 2011. Apple has a short book series called Quick Reads (bought via the iBookstore) which was launched in September 2011. According to paidContent, 3.5 million Kindle Singles were sold in the USA as of September 2012 (Owen, 2012). Some South African publishers have also launched their own series of digital short books aimed at the local market.

Digital short books are, thus, defined as short stories published in digital format about almost any subject matter. Digital short books, also known as e-singles or shorts, are a new type of e-book that means quick writing, quick reading and quick publication. These e-singles fit in well with a society becoming more accustomed to the online era of immediate gratification. Short books have potentially found a gap in the market that has opened up due to the changing ways in which people read, but it remains to be seen if e-singles can reach a similar market successfully in South Africa.

Aims and methodology

The main research question investigated for this article is whether digital short books – quite a new phenomenon – can be successful in South Africa. South Africa has a different profile than the USA and the UK where e-singles have been successful. To answer this research question, the article examines digital short books in terms of their success so far and the benefits they offer to readers, writers and publishers. The e-book seller Amazon is compared to South African companies Tafelberg Kort/Tafelberg Short Books and Mampoe Shorts in terms of pricing, accessibility, subject matter and author royalties.

Currently, e-singles in South Africa are aimed at the general reader and are not focused on either schoolbook or academic publishing. South Africa's trade book reading market (where books are sold for purposes of leisure reading) and the unique set of circumstances influencing it is then investigated to determine whether digital short books can grow and go on to be successful. An examination of the South African trade book market briefly investigates reading culture, poverty, lack of Internet access and lack of access to books in terms of language. Libraries are investigated as a provider of access to e-books at low or no cost.

The launch of digital short books

Amazon was the forerunner in the launch of e-singles. It seems that Kindle Singles were launched in 2011 with the hopes, as Morris (2012) writes in her article for the Chicago Sun-Times, that they “would promote essays and short stories, provide an answer to supposedly shrinking attention spans or even save long-form journalism from the brink”. Sales of Kindle Singles seem to indicate that a gap in the reading market has, indeed, been found. Readers are meant to finish short books on a couple of train rides to

work, and this has been one of the most appealing factors of Kindle Singles to people with busy lives, as can be demonstrated by the well documented sales in the USA.

The new short book phenomenon has also taken root in South Africa, according to Erika Oosthuysen from Tafelberg, an imprint of NB publishers (Van der Merwe, 2012). Tafelberg released their first series of digital short books called Tafelberg Kort/Tafelberg Short Books late in 2012. She describes these short books as short and stimulating analyses of current South African issues (Van der Merwe, 2012). Tafelberg asked local authors to write short books with the aim of linking Tafelberg to current issues and burning questions in the South African context. Another South African short books initiative is Mampoer Shorts, created by a group of writers and journalists. According to their Web site (www.mampoer.co.za), their short books provide a new reading experience: books that are:

[...] short enough to read in a sitting, long enough to tell the whole story [...] shorter than a novel, longer than a magazine article [...] long enough to satisfy, short enough to grip your attention (Mampoer Shorts, 2012).

In 2013, e-singles from Amazon have been available for just over two years, although many other organizations have made e-singles available since the launch of Kindle Singles. E-singles are still a new concept, especially in South Africa, where local content has become available as digital short books even more recently. Amazon has reported much success in the sales of their Kindle Singles so far, although some singles have done better than others. This raises questions about the kind of content that is more suitable for digital short books. This shows that writers and publishers are still experimenting with this idea of an e-single, finding out what works and what does not. The same is true for South African authors and, as it is an even newer business model in this country, less information is available about whether the short books already launched are successful or not.

Buying and accessing digital short books

An appealing factor of e-singles is their price: in the USA, Kindle Singles range from \$0.99-\$4.99 (R8.53-R25.77), and in the UK, the price ranges from £0.99 to £1.99 (R13.63-R27.39), a fraction of the price of traditional print books. These short books are being sold by various companies including traditional publishers, magazines, newspapers and independent start-ups such as Byliner Originals and Atavist. Amazon's Kindle Singles is the largest seller with the most titles, the leader in the e-single market. An e-reader is not necessary to read e-books. Amazon (Kindle), Barnes and Noble (Nook) and Google have made it relatively easy to read books on other devices. E-books can be read on a computer, iPhone or Android device by downloading the appropriate apps. Readers do, however, need to open an account with Amazon or Barnes and Noble to buy an e-book and have it delivered to their reading device.

Currently, all Tafelberg's short books are priced at R35 on their Web site (www.tafelberg.com/shortbooks). Mampoer Shorts, while offering local content, has books for sale in US dollars, costing \$2.99 (R25.77) a book. One possibility for this pricing scheme is that they want to reach an international market, as short books have done so well in the USA; however, this seems to distance them from the South African market where surely the authors and stories are better known and are of particular interest. The buying and downloading procedure on the Mampoer site seems to be

simple and easy, as payments can be made using a debit or credit card or with a Paypal account. The e-book is available in various formats (e-pub, mobi and PDF), depending on the device used for reading the book and can even be printed out if the PDF option is selected. On the other hand, Tafelberg provides no information on how the payment and downloading procedure is supposed to happen. After some investigation, it was found that Tafelberg Shorts can be bought from the Kalahari.com site as an e-book at R25.95, almost R10 cheaper than advertised by Tafelberg and more in line with international prices. E-books from Kalahari are compatible with Kindle, Digibook, Verso, RK Book and Pocketbook 306. The books are also available on Kobo, an e-book store (www.kobobooks.co.za), for R28.69. According to their Web site, their e-books are compatible with any open standard device. Leserskring/Leisure Books has also started a new Web site where it sells only e-books (www.eboeke.leserskring.com), on which Tafelberg Shorts are available at R31.85 for club members and R35 for non-club members. They recommend that buyers register on Adobe and download Adobe Digital Editions to read the e-books and warn that any e-books bought on their site will not be compatible with the Amazon Kindle.

Comparatively, Tafelberg's advertised R35 per book is more expensive than overseas markets, although it is available at more competitive prices at Kalahari and Kobo. Mampoer Shorts are at the higher end of the international pricing norm. While some readers believe that books price themselves out of the market if the books are more than \$0.99 (R8.53), most Kindle Singles are priced at \$1.99 (R17.50) (Owen, 2012). Because e-singles are, generally, cheaper than traditional print books, it means that more have to be sold to make a significant amount of money. Considering that the reading market in South Africa is different to that of the markets in the USA and the UK, and the relative newness of the e-single concept, the books may have to be more expensive than abroad to continue being successful. However, in Tafelberg's case, these e-singles are being produced as a new section of an existing company as an extra revenue stream which may allow for riskier pricing than a company wholly dependent on selling e-singles, like Mampoer Shorts.

The writing and selling of digital short books

Amazon has very specific rules for the publication selection of digital short books: the work has to be original and not previously published in other formats or publications and, thus, no reworked titles. Short books are chosen by their Kindle Single editor, go through an editing process and have their covers designed. Most Kindle Singles are exclusive to Amazon, but some come from traditional publishers like Random House and are sold across platforms (Owen, 2012); however, singles that are exclusive to Amazon reap additional benefits, including plenty of online promotion on the Amazon Web site. Other companies sell reworked titles or parts of existing books as short books, an example being Tafelberg, whose first series of short books is still reworked versions of longer works.

Tafelberg has short books written in both English and Afrikaans, while Mampoer offers English only. Tafelberg currently has 12 titles, with authors including Max du Preez, Jan-Jan Joubert and Xolela Mangcu. Mampoer currently has 16 titles available, with three upcoming titles advertised on the Web site, and authors, including Mandy Weiner and Fred de Vries, who also has an e-single with Tafelberg as well. It is hoped that these e-singles will also open up the market for new up-and-coming authors, though

currently titles which are written are by the more well-known authors. Phakama Mbonambi, a publisher of print literary journal *Words Etc*, said he understood Mampoer's strategy of using big names to draw in audiences and then, hopefully, gradually introducing lesser-known writers:

I'd hope that young black voices will naturally gravitate towards Mampoer if the experiment works and if they have compelling stories to tell. But, yes, at some point it would be interesting to see the kind of risk they take with younger writers, with opening doors. Young voices are sorely needed right now, if only to get different perspectives on our society – different and interesting stories. (Meadon, 2012)

As digital short books are still in the experimental phase in South Africa, it is assumed that most companies starting to publish short books will follow a similar strategy, building exposure before taking risks with lesser-known authors.

Writing short books for Amazon has been financially advantageous in many cases for the authors. This means that, once a book becomes popular, there is money to be made in digital short books, as in the case of Mishka Shubaly, whose book "The Long Run" became the Number 9 Kindle Single bestseller in March 2012 (Morris, 2012). Other familiar names under the top-ten all-time Kindle Single bestsellers include Lee Child, Stephen King, David Baldacci and Jodi Picoult. For Kindle Singles, Amazon allows independent writers to earn 70 per cent royalties on every Kindle Single they sell while retaining the rights to their work (Amazon.co.uk, 2012). While short books give authors the opportunity to explore certain topics without length restrictions, it also allows them to explore more unusual topics they might have had trouble getting published at other companies (Morris, 2012). Also, because it does not take as long to publish, an in-depth story about a topic that is still current in the news is possible. Kindle Singles editor David Blum claims that magazines publish fewer and fewer of these longer-form stories and short books are filling the gap that is opening up (Morris, 2012). In a press release by Amazon, Sam Leith explains that Kindle Singles (and any other digital short book) is a very exciting possibility for writers:

There have been relatively few outlets in recent years for even established names to publish long essays or short stories in a stand-alone format at a price that makes sense [...] now anyone can do so, with an immediacy that's very attractive (Amazon.co.uk, 2012).

According to their blog, Mampoer gives authors 30 per cent royalties per sale. It is unclear what royalties Tafelberg offers its authors. While 30 per cent royalties does not sound like much, authors claim that the opportunity to be part of this new experiment is motivation enough (Meadon, 2012).

An important part of ensuring good sales for e-singles is creating awareness among readers and advertising them well:

Right now, one of Kindle Singles' biggest benefits for authors – one that differentiates it from Nook Snaps and Apple Quick Reads – is the heavy promotion the list gets on the site (Owen, 2012).

This promotion, however, may become more difficult as more and more titles are released and have to compete for space. Through the exposure that Amazon gives its authors, Amazon:

[...] draws in authors who deem the program low-risk, because it's not in conflict with other publisher relationships they may have [...] those authors may then stick around, especially if

they believe that doing a full-length project with Amazon has the potential to be as lucrative as Kindle Singles have been for many of them (Owen, 2012).

Other companies may do well to follow Amazon's example when it comes to promotion for their e-singles because this not only encourages more readers to buy books but may ensure author loyalty and the promise of further projects, ensuring continued success. Mampoer is a standalone company only selling e-singles, while Tafelberg is part of a much larger company selling short books as an extra area of income. An author publishing a title with Mampoer is, thus, advertised as a main attraction and this promotion is not only important for the book's success but also to give the author exposure. On Tafelberg's Web site, the launch of Tafelberg Shorts is advertised on the home page and viewers need to click through to view a full list of the new titles. While Tafelberg surely hopes that the launch of Tafelberg Shorts will be a financially successful venture, it also changes their image: it indicates that they are up-to-date with new technology, aware of what their readers may want and, because the books are specifically about current issues in South Africa, shows that they care about what is happening in the country. At the time of writing, no fiction titles were available on Tafelberg or Mampoer's e-single lists. Digital short books may be prominently advertised on both South African companies' Web sites, but one has to be aware of the publishers and e-singles, and specifically searching for information on them, as it is not advertised much in any other way. This means public awareness of these short books is low.

Writers, whether publishing with Amazon or not, enjoy the freedom e-singles make possible. They can make commentary on current issues and have the title available in time for it still to be relevant. Short books have been popular among readers who have limited free time and enjoy reading as a leisure activity when and where they can fit it in. These books are good for keeping readers in the loop with what is going on in the world around them, and the low price keeps e-singles affordable and, thus, accessible. Short books may provide readers with unusual topics by favorite authors at a more frequent rate. There is also the possibility of selling chapters of books or parts of books as individual units, which may be beneficial to the reader who wants to test the water or only needs, for example, a specific set of recipes, and for the seller, it means possible continued sales as the readers buy more of what they like. An issue that may hamper the success of digital short books is the fact that readers may be used to accessing information for free online, and these e-singles are simply more elaborate pieces containing information that can be accessed for free, so paying for e-singles can encounter some resistance.

A summary of digital short book features focusing on Kindle Singles, Tafelberg short books and Mampoer shorts

In summary, the general features of digital short books and the effects they have on readers, writers and publishers can be outlined in a few points. Digital short books or e-singles:

- consist of 5,000-30,000 words;
- allow a writer to develop a topic in a format longer than a magazine article but shorter than a traditional printed book;

- allow readers to finish a book within a few train rides to work; in other words, it keeps their interest without requiring too much effort to finish;
- can be published very quickly which means current affairs can be investigated while they are still occurring and relevant; this is a benefit to readers, writers and authors;
- can be written about any subject matter, and it is easier to get certain subjects published than with print books; and
- are cheaper than print books.

The following table (Table I) shows a comparison between Amazon's Kindle Singles and the short books from Tafelberg and Mampoer.

The table shows that:

- e-singles are still new products in the book market, especially in South Africa;
- South African e-single prices are mostly on par with international prices;
- Amazon accepts only original works while the South African publishers are currently selling mostly reworked titles;
- digital short books can be written by anyone, but while unknown authors are finding success with Amazon, the South African publishers are wary of risk and focus on publishing well-known authors;
- Amazon publishes fiction and non-fiction titles while the South African publishers are currently publishing only non-fiction;
- Amazon provides heavy promotion for their titles, while the South African authors provide promotion for their titles, awareness among readers is still low;
- Amazon has achieved success with their Singles, while South African sales statistics are still unknown; and
- e-singles are available in a variety of formats with all the companies, which improves access.

The South African reading market

Globally, in first-world countries, the way information is accessed is moving almost completely to the digital sphere. In a third-world country, like South Africa, we may not be there yet, but the future is moving toward digital as well, even in rural areas where the

Table I. Comparison between Amazon's Kindle Singles to e-singles from Tafelberg shorts and Mampoer shorts

Comparison criteria	Amazon	Tafelberg short books	Mampoer shorts
Launched	2011	2012	2012
Price	\$0.99-\$4.99/R8.53-R25.77	\$3-\$4/R25.95-R35	\$2.99/R25.77
Stories	Original	Reworked titles	Reworked titles/original
Authors	Any author	Well-known authors only	
Author royalties	70 per cent	Not known	30 per cent
Subject matter	Fiction/non-fiction	Non-fiction only, focused mostly on current SA issues	
Promotion	Heavy	Advertised on home page	Heavy
Access	Available in a variety of formats	Difficult to find information, but seems to be available in a variety of formats	epub, mobi and PDF
Sales	> 4 million	Still unknown	

use of the Internet on cell phones is becoming more commonplace. However, South Africa has a unique set of challenges when it comes to accessing books and the success of short books is not guaranteed in this country. According to Amazon, > 4 million digital short books have already sold in America (Publishers Weekly, 2012), showing great success, and while South Africa lags behind international trends like this, Oosthuysen claims we are going the same way (Van der Merwe, 2012). Digital books require a new way of publishing from publishers, as it is a quicker way of getting books into the hands of readers and the size of the book is almost irrelevant. However, the success of e-singles in the South African context is still very uncertain.

Digital short books are part of the trade book sector where books are published for the general market for the purpose of leisure reading. The South African trade book sector is the second largest sector of the industry and produces 28.7 per cent of total turnover for the publishing industry according to the Publishers Association of South Africa (Galloway *et al.*, 2007). South Africa is a third-world country with many poor households where books for leisure reading are considered luxury items. Added to this is the fact that there is a poor reading culture among the South African population. This means there is a very small community of leisure book buyers and readers. More contributing factors to this fact being that traditional bookshops are only found in more affluent urbanized areas, and there are too few libraries to serve the country's population; there are many illiterate and functionally illiterate people; and while Internet bookshops are successful, they reach only a limited affluent market because Internet penetration in South Africa is low. According to Seeber (2000, p. 279), in a developing country like South Africa, access to published works is often difficult even for the literate, as libraries are usually understocked, and bookshops are rarely to be found outside the more affluent parts of urban areas.

The South African Book Development Council (SABDC) (2007, p. 29) reports that only about half of the South African population agree that everyone should be able to read, which indicates that reading is not a top priority for many South Africans. A love for reading needs to be cultivated from a young age and being exposed to reading books from early childhood in South Africa is not a given; parents who do not read will not pass on a love for reading to their children, there are other forms of entertainment, and many do not perceive reading books as a leisure activity. Many South African children's first experience with a book is a book they may receive at school. Studies concerning the small number of bookshops and libraries in the country again indicate that South Africa is not a country with a good reading culture – assuming there would be more if there was a bigger demand for books – and the role of libraries is not given enough credit. A survey by the SABDC found that, in fact, 88 per cent of South Africans enjoy reading as a leisure activity, of which 84 per cent of the reading materials is newspapers (SABDC, 2007). This indicates that South Africans do read, but do not often read books. Thus, South Africans are interested in news and current affairs, something for which the short book seems perfectly suited: longer-length in-depth newspaper articles. As Table I shows, South African e-single publishers are currently publishing only non-fiction titles focusing on South African affairs.

Another barrier to access of trade books and the pleasure of reading is language. South Africa has 11 official languages protected by the Constitution of South Africa. However, almost all books published are in English or Afrikaans, two of the official languages, with English representing 75.25 per cent of total production, Afrikaans at

15.25 per cent and the nine African languages together at 9.5 per cent of total production of all local book sales – this includes all three sectors: educational, trade and academic – with the majority of African language books being published in the educational sector (Galloway *et al.*, 2007). Census (2011) results show that only 29 per cent of adults over 20 years of age finish Matriculation and about 40 per cent only finish some of their secondary schooling. It is then almost impossible for people to find books to read in their mother tongues, which only adds to the problem, as struggling to read and then having to do it in a language not yet fully mastered is a battle already lost. This discourages people from reading. Tafelberg and Mampoer's e-singles have so far only been published in English and Afrikaans.

Only a small percentage of the South African population have all the resources to be able to read e-books: Internet access, a device on which to read an e-book and, in most cases, a credit card. Statistics from 2006 show that 28.5 per cent of the South African population live below the food poverty line of R148 (\$17.19) per month according to the Republic of South Africa's Millennium Development Goals and, thus, buying luxury items like books are not an option. The small book reading and book-buying market is loyal, and digital books have become a convenient form of access. The current more affluent book buyers, thus, have the necessary resources; however, leisure readers have not increased by any large amount because the advent of digital technologies, due in part to the issue of poverty. Census (2011) shows that 65.8 per cent of the South African population does not have any access to the Internet and that only 8.6 per cent have Internet at home (Republic of South Africa, 2012). According to a Mail & Guardian article reporting on a study commissioned by Google, South African Internet access figures lag significantly behind the biggest Internet users in Africa like Nigeria and Egypt (Mail and Guardian, 2012). Thus, the Internet penetration, even if it is growing, is still low, and access to books by downloading from a Web site seem to be reserved for those in urban areas who have the resources. Census (2011) also reports that 88.9 per cent of South African adults use cell phones and 16.3 per cent access the Internet using their cell phones (Republic of South Africa, 2012), showing much growth in mobile Internet access specifically. This means access to the Internet on cell phones is becoming more available, however what this means for the distribution of and access to books is still unknown, which leaves us with more uncertainty over the possible success of e-singles in South Africa. E-singles are short (easier to read on a cell phone, with a possible payment system built in) and cheaper than the traditional book which means some barriers to access have already been overcome. Awareness of digital technologies can be increased by a country's libraries, which can provide resources and knowledge.

In South Africa, not much research has been done on what the effect of digital short books may be on academic and/or public libraries, as this is such a new avenue of publishing. However, e-books have been around for a number of years now, and certain trends, from abroad and in South Africa, can be observed that may apply to digital short books as well. Some of the most important shortcomings of South Africa's public libraries, where one would go to find leisure books, are inappropriate (or no) training of library staff, deficiencies in determining specific needs of users (Mosterd, as quoted by Ngubeni, 2004, p. 46) and a lack of appropriate material. One has to consider the potential effect e-singles may have on public libraries while keeping these shortcomings in mind.

E-books have advantages and disadvantages for readers and for libraries. According to Bennet and Landoni (2005), the wide diversity of software and hardware products associated with e-books are a cause of confusion and therefore constitute a barrier to uptake, the awareness of e-books is low, few have access to computers and people complain that there is a lack of appropriate content available as e-books. Additional barriers to uptake include the need for supplementary equipment needed to read, there is not enough exposure and people do not have the knowledge of how to go about buying and reading e-books (Chu, 2003). These are big problems standing in the way of e-books' success, especially in South Africa. For those that use e-books, there are numerous advantages: they are searchable, available at any time, save space, provide easy navigation and are convenient to transport (Chu, 2003). Littman and Connaway (2004) and Rao (2003) claim e-books offer a number of advantages over their print counterparts for the library: there is the instant delivery of purchased books, adjustable fonts, lower prices, eco-friendliness, e-books require no shelf space or re-shelving and are never lost, damaged, stolen or overdue. "All of these factors have the potential to prove beneficial in the library context with multi-user access to titles likely to be the most advantageous of all" (Landoni and Hanlon, 2007, p. 600).

As a result of the changes technology has brought about, libraries are reconsidering their service offerings; for instance, the notion of embedded librarianship. The use of library spaces and the nature of library services are being reconsidered. Academic libraries, for example, have started using third parties such as overdrive to handle most aspects of their e-book collections, in the same way that they are already paying for online journal access.

According to Rao (2003), setting up virtual public libraries, especially for developing countries like South Africa, is an advantage of e-books. E-books can be used to raise national literacy standards and to aid publishers and authors along the way. A national library online could do this by offering a list of free downloadable readings and videos. However, e-book technology creates difficulties in circulation for libraries. When downloaded, e-books are locked onto a specific device and new users must be familiarized with how to download and use content (Rao, 2003). With a lack of trained staff members, this task will be doubly difficult. Being able to provide these electronic resources successfully to readers would be ideal and, while there may be plenty of potential, a lack of financial resources is the reality of many South African public libraries. The e-book market is also aimed at the individual user and is not developed for the library market where books are shared between multiple users (Rao, 2003). E-books are also difficult to share with friends and family, buying one print book to share with everyone in the household may make more sense than buying an e-book that can only be read on one person's device. In this area, there are various obstacles to overcome.

With the current low awareness of e-books, and more specifically e-singles, it is unlikely that they will decrease the number of people visiting libraries in South Africa already. However, in future, should e-singles become more popular and successful, more people may prefer to acquire these books of their own accord rather than visiting the library. If libraries could find a way of providing access to a large variety of e-books and e-singles, effectively, they may attract more people to the public libraries than before. E-singles can fill a gap with their topical issues and is a great way for South African libraries especially to provide more appropriate content. Some studies in the UK have shown that users of e-books in academic and school libraries use the libraries for their

studies rather than leisure reading, where the e-singles market is aimed. These studies also show that, while people do use the library's resources, they "often source the e-books on their own steam independent of library provision" (Rowlands *et al.*, 2007, p. 496). E-books are becoming popular in the academic library environment and may have similar effects on how people use the public library. Awareness and access may be approved if libraries could provide better access to computers and the Internet, which many people do not have access to at home.

Conclusions

The birth of the digital short book occurred because of the changing environment we find ourselves in. Writers have a platform to write about burning issues in an increasingly online and immediate communication world, while busy readers used to being constantly in the loop can appreciate good writing while reading on current issues, in a quick manner. In South Africa and abroad, short books seem to fill a gap that has opened up in the market for that space between a magazine article and a book; a gap that can be filled with quick-to-publish digital content. For writers (or journalists) short books provide more space to explore their topics than a normal article would and because writers often have to cut their articles to fit into predetermined article spaces, a lot of important information is omitted, information that can now be included in a short book (Van der Merwe, 2012).

The fact that short books have found a gap in the market can be proven by their success in the USA and the UK. However, these are traditionally book-reading nations with well-developed reading cultures, countries where people have more disposable income for luxury items. South Africa has a small book-reading community and an even smaller community with e-readers. Luckily, Internet penetration is increasing with almost all South Africans owning cell phones, many with Internet capabilities. The lower prices of short books also make them more accessible as a leisure activity. However, many people are still unaware of the availability of short books and what they are, and books have to compete with other leisure activities, such as movies on DVD and video games.

Short books have overcome some of the barriers to reading and book buying in South Africa: lower price, being able to be read on a cell phone and a shorter format means people get to read the books quickly without getting bored or losing interest. However, one still needs a computer with Internet access and a suitable payment method to buy and download the book. Unfortunately, books are currently only available in English and Afrikaans, making the market for African language books difficult to predict, and there does seem to be a focus on reaching an international audience as well, even though content is very locally based in terms of topics, so there are still some linguistic barriers to access. The shorter books and currency of the topics may encourage a better reading culture. The fact remains that for people to become aware of this new form of book, companies need to create more exposure, as currently those that are already readers may be aware of short books, but potential readers are not.

Writing short books has been financially rewarding for some authors overseas, but no sales figures have yet been made available in South Africa. It does not seem that authors get the same amount of royalties as has been reported for Amazon, but that they write short books for other reasons: the relative freedom, the immediacy and the exposure. Short books may give a wider variety of authors – known, unknown, male,

female, any age or race – the chance to have their voice heard. Writers get to explore a variety of topics and their books are quickly published; this attracts different authors which is great for encouraging author diversity. There are no fiction titles available on Mampoer or Tafelberg’s short book lists, as most of the titles are political in theme, with about four titles being of human interest and two are sport biographies. Thus, at the moment, short books in South Africa are more of an outlet for writers who want to make comments about current affairs and what is bothering them about the world around them more than writing fictional stories, as is the case with short books abroad, which covers a range of fiction and non-fiction titles. This may also be because of what South Africans like to read, as reported by the SABDC. Among the current top ten bestsellers of Kindle Singles are seven fiction titles and three non-fiction titles, seeming to indicate that fiction titles are more popular for general reading markets worldwide as opposed to South Africa’s current non-fiction focus. Thus, the content most-suited for e-singles depends very much on the market it is aimed at.

A huge benefit to publishing with Amazon, as mentioned previously, is the amount of promotion it receives on the Web site. Although the online culture is not as big in South Africa, Tafelberg does publish its new series on its Web site with good visibility. Unfortunately, the distribution strategy is poor, with no explanation or instructions as to how or where the books can be bought and downloaded. Mampoer’s site is completely devoted to short books, but no matter how compelling the Web site, one would not easily find it if you did not already know about or were searching for short books. Authors seeking international acclaim would probably prefer to publish with Amazon because of its proven success, better royalties and enormous online promotion, but writing about something you believe in about a country you love will find more readers locally.

The effect digital short books can have on stakeholders in the South African book market (including publishers, booksellers, libraries, authors and readers) is important and has strong implications for role players in this industry. It is important that research be used to see where and how new developments such as e-singles can improve the South African situation.

Currently, digital short books in South Africa are an experiment in a country where traditionally buying and reading books is not a priority or necessarily a popular leisure activity. It has advantages for readers in terms of price, content, currency and delivery. E-singles have advantages for writers in terms of freedom and exposure. However, digital books unintentionally cater to people who have the know-how and the means to access and buy books and to those who want to read for leisure and have the money to do so. This excludes a large part of the South African population. These short books will be no more successful than any book already a bestseller on South African shelves, as no effort is being made to attract more people to this interesting and new avenue of publishing.

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Further reading

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